

## Hardcover: US

## CDs Taiwan

## Have no illusions

'Courtesans and Opium' is a salacious story masquerading as a cautionary tale

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

This classic novel's Chinese name means "romantic illusions," but the academic publishers of this new translation probably hope to catch the eye of a wider public than mere scholars with their more sensational title. It was written by someone who called himself only The Fool of Yangzhou and is dated 1848. Its first known publication was in 1883, though for all anyone knows it may have been published previously in another, lost edition.

It's about the brothels of Yangzhou, their residents and their patrons. It pre-dates two other remarkable East Asian novels on the same theme, Nagai Kafu's *Rivalry: A Geisha's Tale* [reviewed in *Taipei Times* March 2, 2008] and *The Sing-song Girls of Shanghai* by Han Banqing [reviewed in *Taipei Times* June 22, 2008].

The semi-anonymous author claims in a brief preface that he'd spent 30 years and all his money on the spurious pleasures of "false love and affection," and that he hopes by writing this book he can warn others off such a sorry lifestyle. But this, of course, is a very familiar form of disclaimer, offering a self-righteous moral purpose for what is in reality a salacious story that is far more likely to attract newcomers to the pleasures it describes than to put them off them. Sermons, after all, don't make much money, but *Sex and the City*-style narratives certainly do.

So, what does this literary trail-blazer have to offer? It's about the lovers and fortunes — often misfortunes too — of five married males who are all enthusiastic brothel-goers. Two things are clear about them, as Patrick Hanan, the book's highly accomplished translator, explains. First, they are by no means unhappy in the experiences they encounter, so that the novel's ostensible function as a warning to future customers is undermined from the very beginning. And second, the women they fall for are a long way from being only exploitative gold-diggers. They too have their feelings — their pride, their hopes and their affections.

As for the opium, it's in no way seen as the harmfully addictive substance it's nowadays routinely portrayed as in both official Western and Chinese thinking. The 19th-century brothels offered it to customers, in Hanan's words, "almost as readily as they offered them tea." Historian Frank Dikotter's argument in *Narcotic Culture* [reviewed in *Taipei Times* Dec. 12, 2004] that opium consumption in China was a largely harmless occupation until its use became politicized is in no way challenged by this old novel.

Nevertheless, there is a chapter in *Courtesans and Opium* where the call girl Phoenix is urged to give up smoking opium if she can, and an "antidote" is described in detail that will help her shake off the habit. (Elsewhere in the novel there's a detailed doctor's prescription as well, for "cold and hot elements blocking each other.") The possibility of opium addiction, in other words, isn't entirely outside the scope of this author's consciousness. But the reason why Phoenix is being urged to give it up is that the local prefect has announced a ban on the substance, along with prostitution itself. What's most significant, however, is that everyone believes neither ban will last very long, and that they were probably put in place to increase government revenues (in the form of

## PUBLICATION NOTES



## COURTESANS AND OPIUM

TRANSLATED BY PATRICK HANAN  
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bribes) in the first place. And both bans are indeed soon relaxed.

This is the traditional Chinese world of drinking contests, elaborate meals, dragon boats, financial deals, sworn brotherhoods, sentences of exile, auspicious dates, marriage brokers, ancestor worship, tea-drinking, exorcisms, rice-growing and fireworks. It probably hasn't changed that much in essence, though the opium has gone, being replaced by other substances. The massage girls are certainly back in business. And today Yangzhou itself, where Marco Polo once got a job, is an important tourist destination.

As for the sexual content of the book, it's of course not as explicit as we're used to today. Nevertheless, it's arguable that the old games continue unaltered — fully justified accusations of infidelity answered by unbelievable vows of constancy, demands for money answered by protestations of insolvency — jealousy and avarice, in other words, mixed in with a hunger for compliments (and a knowledge by the men of what their compliments might be rewarded with), and a fundamental female need for love — if only the partner really could be trusted.

There are various formal elements in the novel. There's a quaint summary introducing each chapter, a number of poems are introduced here and there, and every chapter ends by urging the reader to turn to the next one to find out what happens next, who's arrived, or even what a couple did in bed (though this particular expectation isn't in fact satisfied).

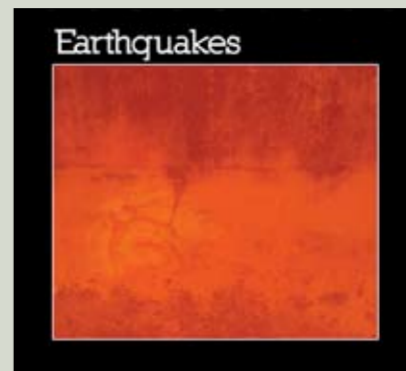
Patrick Hanan's translation of this book is exemplary. It's colloquial and up-to-date without being anywhere inappropriate — a difficult balancing act to achieve at the best of times. If forced to choose between the three East Asian brothel novels mentioned here I'd probably opt for Nagai Kafu's *Rivalry*, if only because the author's sardonic presence is so all-pervasive and so fascinating. But *Courtesans and Opium* has many virtues — it's nowhere dull, and probably surpasses the other two books in period detail. What is particularly significant, though, is that all three novels are published in English by Columbia University Press. The service Columbia is doing in making Chinese classics available to the West in strong translations is immeasurable.



Jane Zhang (張靚穎)  
**Believe in Jane (我相信)**  
Universal Music



**The Hindsight (光景消逝)**  
**From Dripping Tears, He Saw Hopes**  
(在眼淚中看見希望)  
Uloud Music



**The DoLittle's**  
**Earthquakes**  
Self-released



**Fire Ex (滅火器)**  
**Standing Here (海上的人)**  
Uloud Music

BY DAVID CHEN AND ANDREW C.C. HUANG  
STAFF REPORTER AND CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

While China's *Super Girl* champion Chris Lee (李宇春) has been grabbing the headlines of international media with her controversial androgynous look, second runner-up Jane Zhang (張靚穎) is slowly gaining popularity with her girl-next-door appeal and powerhouse delivery of meaty ballads. As China's answer to Mariah Carey (with multi-octave vocals, whistle register and long curly hair), Zhang just might be China's biggest music export since Na Ying (那英).

*Believe in Jane (我相信)*, Zhang's fourth studio album but her first to receive distribution in Taiwan, was co-written and produced by award-winning Taiwanese producer Adia (阿弟仔) and sees Zhang's diva prowess in full display with an abundance of power ballads. The title track *I Believe (我相信)* (with lyrics written by Zhang herself) is an uplifting anthem that proclaims unconditional love. *I Don't Want to Pray* is a jazz-influenced gem in which Zhang moans about love in laid-back vocals with improvisational verve. The unequivocal highlight, *I Need You (需要你)* is a grandiose, inspirational song with melodic chirps and soaring vocals reminiscent of Whitney Houston's classic *One Moment in Time*.

Other tracks attempt to establish Zhang as a multi-talented R 'n' B chanteuse. *Have Fun (快活)* is a disco-infused dance rouser that offers an infectious melody and convincing delivery of lyrics such as "let's have fun before the world ends." Another, *No Can Do (辦不到)*, features lines penned by rapper Da Mouth's (大嘴巴) lyricist MC 40.

Zhang is China's new queen of the theme song (she already has 11 TV, movie and theater theme songs under her belt), and *Believe in Jane* includes two of these as bonus tracks in the Taiwan version of the album. *Mulan Star (木蘭星)*, the theme song for the period movie *Mulan (花木蘭)*, is a gem that pitches Zhang's vocal against the classical accompaniment

of a *pipa* (琵琶). The true delight, however, is *Endless Longing (朝思暮想)*, the theme song to the costume comedy *Panda Express (熊貓大俠)*. With a nod to Theresa Teng's (鄧麗君) classic *A Thousand Words (千言萬語)*, the song embarks on a sonic journey that flaunts Zhang's command of understated singing with a poignant and intimate delivery.

— ANDREW C.C. HUANG

*The Hindsight (光景消逝)* is an "emo screamo" band with a polished sound that takes its cue from groups like Linkin Park and Green Day.

*From Dripping Tears, He Saw Hopes (在眼淚中看見希望)*, the four-member group's second album, brims with punk energy, emo angst and metal melodrama — a perfect sound track for angry and frustrated teenagers.

The CD packs a punch at the beginning with *Act I: Mirror of Mirth*, a song reminiscent of Taiwanese heavy metal stars Chthonic (閃靈), full of shrieking vocals and double-kick drum blasts. But the song doesn't celebrate the underworld as much as express a desire to escape it. On one line, lead singer and guitarist AJ (阿傑) sings, "I won't live in the dark side this time."

The album's lyrics, which were written and sung in English by AJ and bassist Rico, will sound either overly ambitious or just plain awkward to native English speakers. AJ manages to jam this obtuse line, "Trumpeting the outcome just like you trumpeting it before," into a melodic sounding snippet on *Act I*.

But the band rocks, and for many that's all that matters.

The Hindsight's best songs are the ones that keep it simple. On *Stitch It Up*, AJ and Rico scream: "Two hearts cannot be one anymore/This is hurt/ This is hurt." If this doesn't speak to a heartbroken high school rock fan held up in a bedroom, then nothing will.

The Hindsight wears Western rock influences on its sleeve, as the band has deep roots in the early days of the Taiwanese indie scene. AJ was

once a member of Anarchy (無政府), a Taichung band that was the ringleader of a group of punks in the early 2000s known as the Feirenbang (廢人幫). Now he is poised to be a star again, this time a little bit closer to the mainstream.

— DAVID CHEN

*Earthquakes* is the first full-length release by The DoLittle's, a Taichung-based band started in 2006 by British expat Andy Goode. This album will appeal most to the group's loyal fans from the expat pub circuit — Goode chose the album's nine tracks from a pool of his band's strongest live material.

The DoLittle's, armed with two electric guitarists, a bassist and drummer, play modern rock with a pop tilt. The sparse guitar riffs in *The Clocks* drive a groove that reminds me of early U2, while the revved-up electric guitars and engaging vocal duet on *Slow Down* fit the band's self-identification as "progressive alternative rock."

Above all, these songs are designed to rouse an audience. The frenetic *Stooge* is a crowd-pleaser that will especially resonate with expat English teachers tired of working for the boss: "You've been working for the man so long/she has sucked you dry/you're such a stooge."

The opening track *Sunshine* sports a hippie vibe, as Goode sings in the refrain, "Take a little piece of sunshine for your soul/maybe it'll pull you out of your hole."

This song felt a little bald after repeated listenings, as did the minor-key tune *Ghost at No. 31*, which is nicely orchestrated with spacey guitar sounds, eerie harmonies and dreamy piano sequences, but fell short on suspense — I wanted to be more scared of the ghost portrayed in the lyrics. The impact of this song is probably stronger when performed live.

All of the musicians on the CD offer solid performances and the production values are of good quality. The vocal harmonies are excellent throughout

and guitarist Chris Robison lays down a memorable acoustic guitar riff on the folk rock number *Daria Evil*, one of the album's stronger tracks.

*Earthquakes* is available online and at various outlets in Taiwan. Visit [www.dolittle.com](http://www.dolittle.com) for details.

— DAVID CHEN

*Fire Ex (滅火器)*, another band from the Feirenbang days, is back with its second full-length album, *Standing Here (海上的人)*. The four-piece Kaohsiung group, formed by lead singer and guitarist Sam Yang (楊大正) and bassist JC Chen (陳尊敬) in 2000, has come a long way from its days as a cover band.

Many of the pop punk numbers on this 12-track CD are primed for radio, with feel-good choruses, fat-sounding guitars and catchy melodies. The song *Days (日子)* would fit well on a TV sound track for a teen drama.

Yang mostly writes and sings in Hoklo (commonly known as Taiwanese) and shows that the language works well in modern genres, not just nakashi and old-fashioned pop. *Freedom (自由路)* and *Old Picture (舊照片)* are infectious numbers that beg you to sing along, if you're not already moshing. Yang sounds equally at home singing in Mandarin on *Dusk Freeway (黃昏公路)*, one of album's best tracks.

The band has also been tapping into mainstream sounds, and to good effect. *A Man on the Sea (海上的人)*, a wistful ballad, could be considered a homage to Taiwan's top rocker, Wu Bai (伍佰). Along with *Good Night, Formosa (晚安台灣)*, an acoustic number that also appeared on the band's 2008 EP *Where Am I? (我底明位)*, the song is one of the few instances where the band isn't driving at a slam-dance pace.

Fire Ex borrows from Western and Japanese rock like a lot of young and aspiring Taiwanese bands. But what sets this band apart is that it is honing an original sound from the genres it once emulated. *Standing Here* marks a new milestone for the band's songwriting.

— DAVID CHEN

## Softcover: UK

## In living memory

As the good times roll in Hugo Hamilton's tale of life in a prosperous Ireland, the past is brushed under the carpet

BY ANN ENRIGHT  
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Hugo Hamilton grew up in a Dublin household where the English language was forbidden, and he has delighted in its illicit and innocent pleasures ever since. In his memoir *A Speckled People* he wrote about speaking German to his mother and Irish to his nationalist father, while, beyond their front door, children played, mothers shopped, and rock bands sang in the former oppressors' tongue.

His most recent protagonist, Vid Cosic is a young Serb from Belgrade who has come to work on the building sites of the Irish boom. He falls in, by way of the easy kind

of accident that Dublin affords, with a lawyer, Kevin Concannon, and they become friends. Their relationship is drunken and aimless, but it is also bound by a high-minded, almost severe brand of male loyalty. "A friend is someone who would put his hand in the fire for you," says Concannon, who, we suspect, is better at dramatizing friendship than living it. Vid knows he is not the first person to find the Irish both urgent and irresponsible in these matters; in the way they confuse strangers with their great openness and their lack of follow through. Perhaps, he says, it is because of centuries of emigration, which made all connections temporary and turned every friend a man had into "a trapdoor opening

up underneath his feet."

Vid is slow to form opinions. An opinion is a form of ownership, and as a stranger, both in the country and in the language, he owns very little. He can read only the surface. Intentions, his own included, are not clear. Meanwhile, the past and the sins of the past refuse either to connect with the present or to go away.

After a violent incident that binds Vid and Kevin together for the course of the novel, they park on the quays looking out over the port of Dublin. "We waited for the future to come, wondering if he was going to drive over the edge. We might as well have gone underwater as it was, driving along the floor of the sea." The world

beneath the water haunts the book. A woman tells of how she reached down to pick up a starfish in the same waters, only to find "it was not a starfish she was holding at all, but the hand of a young man." Vid becomes interested in and then obsessed by one of Kevin's relatives, Maire Concannon, whose drowned body, shamefully pregnant, washed up on Inis Mor many years before.

Vid sees many islands, not just the Aran Islands in the west — the most iconic Irish landscape of them all — but also Dalkey Island in the east, and Dursley Island in the south, which is joined to the mainland by cable car. This is used to transport sheep as well as people, and in it Vid is overpowered "by the smell of sheep shit and sheep fear and possibly my own fear included." He imagines the "door opening and the sheep falling down into the sea, one by one," but that does not happen and he continues his journey across the landscape, from

beauty to beauty, without knowing what it means.

He travels west to investigate the death of Maire, a story that Kevin and his family are not interested in. The past is something all the characters try to put behind them. When their milder methods of forgetting — boredom, denial, snobbery — are not enough, they turn to more radical means, to anger, sex and drugs. "Junkies are the real exiles now," Vid says. Sex with his girlfriend "seems to prohibit all memory," making him "truly blank." Above all, the characters take refuge in drink. If this is an account of boom-time Ireland, a country where friendship is an ambush and no one in a supermarket ever says hello, the most telling moments happen during the furious late-night chaos that we, as a society, call "fun."

*Hand in the Fire* might be read as a conventional character-driven novel with a strong story. It could also be seen as a social novel, the

first in the Irish tradition that is written from an eastern European point of view. But sentence by sentence, it is also a refusal to fall through the open trapdoor. Hamilton loves the spaces between things: his characters live, not just between cultures or between languages, but between the past and the future; they stay suspended between innocence and guilt, between knowledge and the lack of it.

Language attaches itself to the world as though for the first time. The world itself is seen "in translation," and each thing he writes is playful and clear. It is as though his characters have shrugged off an extra skin — their cultural hides — and this makes them tender and new. A natural modernist, Hamilton is a great international writer who just happens to be Irish. His is the voice of the migrant, the mongrel, of the person who is neither one thing nor the other, of the stranger and the traveler in us all.

## PUBLICATION NOTES



## HAND IN THE FIRE

BY HUGO HAMILTON  
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