

FICTION

# LITTLE GREY



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

**Xiaohui is sitting on the concrete floor. He has been in this corner for as long as he can remember clearly. For some time, he had memories of another place, and of playing with his siblings, chasing them around tea bushes with their distinct sweet aroma that was most prominent in the early morning.**

RAINER EBERT

It is a winter day in a small town at the far eastern edge of the Himalaya, in the Chinese province of Yunnan. The province is known for its mild climate. Though snowy days are not uncommon, especially in January, if they do occur they are few. Some years go by without any snow reaching the ground at all. On this January day, temperatures are low, but not low enough for snow. It is cold, if one asks the people living here, or cool, if one were to ask people accustomed to harsher climates.

Xiaohui is in his usual place: the corner of the inner courtyard of a walled compound that includes a three-story house and a few sheds. To his left, there is the big gate that separates the courtyard from a small alley. The alley leads to the main road, where buses on their way to Qujing pass a few times a day. Qujing is home to more people than dozens of countries, and yet in China it is not a very big city. The most imposing part of the whole compound is the gate through which one enters. Its sheer size alone makes it an impressive structure. It is covered in gold-coloured ornaments in the forms of dragons, large Chinese letters, and elaborate patterns. The pillars that carry the gate are red and golden and

have wishes for prosperity and wealth written on them in red letters. No practical purpose is served by a gate this large and extravagant. If one was a burglar, one would simply climb one of the walls that extend from its sides and are noticeably lower. The gate was not chosen for reasons of security. It is the most visible feature from the vantage point of passersby, and what others think is important. After all, this small town is not so much a town as it is a village, and certain village norms are universal.

To Xiaohui's right, there is an open shed with a corrugated metal roof. The shed stores corn. Some of the corn is packed in red mesh bags, the rest is piled up loosely, waiting to be bagged, or fed to the animals of the household. Across the courtyard, a lone water buffalo rests on dried corn stalks and husks in an enclosure behind yet another wall. Entertainment is provided by geese and chicken who share the same space. The far end of the enclosure is formed by the wall of another shed, which houses two or three pigs. From time to time, their snouts can be seen peeking through the shed's little windows. Carefully laid out to dry on the concrete floor of the courtyard, there are different kinds of chilli peppers. One batch is green, two dark red, two earthy yellow, and several

batches are red. While food in Yunnan may not match the fiery intensity of the famed Sichuan cuisine, spice is a vital element of the local culinary identity.

Xiaohui is sitting on the concrete floor. He has been in this corner for as long as he can remember clearly. For some time, he had memories of another place, and of playing with his siblings, chasing them around tea bushes with their distinct sweet aroma that was most prominent in the early morning. These memories have since dissolved into a distant blur. It has been eight years perhaps, more likely 10. His fur is grey in colour, and it is rugged and unkempt, like an old hairy carpet. The elements have done quite a bit of damage over the years. The colour, however, is neither a sign of time, nor of exposure to the forces of nature. Xiaohui has always been grey. In fact, that is how he got his name. In Chinese characters, the first character of his name means "little" and the second "grey" words that describe Xiaohui rather bluntly. Xiaohui himself prefers to think of his name as "little wisdom", in Pinyin the transliteration of the characters becomes "Xiaohui," and he carries it with a certain sense of pride. Though he has not seen much of the village, let alone the world, every day he watches the people passing through

the gate and coming in and out of the house, and he rightly believes that this has allowed him to achieve some degree of wisdom. Observing people's actions tells you more about humans, and humanity, than listening to their words. It does not matter much that Xiaohui only understands fragments of their language.

At this moment, Xiaohui is watching a small boy in a winter jacket. The boy is holding a toy truck in his hands. He seems excited. He just got the truck from the oldest daughter of the house, his mother's cousin. She is visiting from Kunming, the capital and only "big city" of Yunnan. Kunming has a population larger than Sydney's, yet-like many big cities in China, and unlike Sydney-it is mostly unheard of in other parts of the world. The boy is inspecting his new acquisition. He has figured out some of its functions already. Others are still a mystery. How can he extend the truck's loading ramp so that he can drive one of his other toy cars onto it? He has curated quite a collection, by specifically asking for a different kind of car whenever a relative comes to visit. The boy is one of rural China's tens of millions of "left-behind children," as they are called in Chinese. His parents have gone to a faraway city to work in a factory, leaving him in the care of his grandmother and extended family who remain in the village. It is one of the costs of the country's rapid economic rise.

The boy's grandmother is somewhere around the compound as well, busy like everyone in the village at this time of the year. A flurry of preparations has been underway for days now. The household is preparing for the upcoming Spring Festival, which marks the beginning of a new year on the traditional Chinese calendar and is China's most important holiday. It is tradition that families come together during this time. Hundreds of millions of people travel to their hometowns to celebrate, making this the largest annual human migration in the world. The Spring Festival is still a few weeks away, but the elder daughter and her sister, the only other sibling, have come home early to help with the preparations. Custom demands that the house be cleaned thoroughly, to clear away any bad luck and make room for the good things the New Year may bring. Xiaohui is amused to see the sister cleaning the window bars on the ground floor with much fervour. The courtyard is his territory and he knows it better than anybody else. He knows that the bars will again be covered by the dust that lies in a thin layer on top of the concrete before the Year of the Dragon comes to an end. All it takes is a

small gust of wind. Two red lanterns are installed on each side of the main door, as is custom too. Below the lanterns, banners are being affixed to the wall with red tape. They contain wishes for the New Year, the Year of the Snake, similar to the ones on the pillars of the gate. People here want what all people want: health, money, and generally a good life.

Xiaohui watches the cheerful bustle. His role in the household is simple: make noise if a stranger approaches the gate. He is getting old and cannot see very well anymore, but he can still count on his nose to distinguish between people he knows and strangers. The day before, an unfamiliar smell had alerted him to a newcomer who arrived with the two sisters. He did his duty. It should have become obvious quickly that the newcomer was a guest rather than a threat, but he kept making noise, as if to convince himself and the universe that he is still useful. The guest was brought to the kitchen across the courtyard. Food was served: rice, tofu, vegetables. Xiaohui watched the guest through the open door of the kitchen and noticed the focused strain on his face as he used chopsticks to clumsily navigate pieces of tofu and vegetable from the bowl to his mouth. He must have come from far.

When Xiaohui first got here, he would have tried to walk over to have a closer look at the newcomer, but now he just sits and observes from a distance. He understands the restrictions imposed by the chain connecting his collar to a short metal pole set into the ground. It allows him to make it about halfway across the courtyard. These days, he rarely leaves his corner. Looking at Xiaohui from the outside, one may be tempted to think of him as having resigned to his fate. He himself likes to think that he has merely gotten used to his circumstances. The chain has become his companion, in fact, and he can no longer imagine life without its faithful presence. The same holds true for the gate, the corn, the concrete floor. Calling Xiaohui happy would go too far, but for the most part, he is content.

**This is the first of two parts of the short story "Little Grey."**

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## REFLECTIONS

# Bangladesh Theater Archives: Transforming history into a 40-year legacy

TUSAR TALUKDER

In a small room in 50 Purana Paltan line, shelves groan under the weight of posters, photographs, tickets, flyers, souvenirs, folders, books, and fading documents. Each item tells a story—of performances applauded and forgotten, of actors who once lit the stage, of movements that shaped the cultural conscience of a nation. This is the Bangladesh Theater Archives, a quiet yet powerful institution that has been safeguarding the memory of Bangladeshi theater for nearly four decades.

The Bangladesh Theater Archives began its journey in 1986, long before "archiving" became a familiar cultural practice in the country. It started simply—with theater posters. At the heart of this effort was Dr Babul Biswas, whose passion for the theatre and a sense of responsibility towards history pushed him to take on a task few could imagine sustaining alone. The idea was inspired by one legendary Indian dramatist Utpal Dutt, whose advice encouraged Biswas to collect and preserve theatrical materials systematically. What began as a personal initiative soon turned into a historic expedition—the first of its kind in Bangladesh. There was no institutional framework, no assured funding, only emotion, dedication, and an unshakeable belief that theater history must not be allowed to disappear.

The Archives survived its fragile early years through collective goodwill. Eminent actor, director, and playwright Mamunur Rashid played a pivotal mentoring role, guiding the collection of data and even offering space in his office at 26 Bangabandhu Avenue. Members of Aranyak Theater Group provided what could be called the "postnatal care" of the Archives, helping it grow beyond a solitary effort. Soon, prominent theatre personality Ramendu Majumdar and critic

Mofidul Haque extended their support and advice, recognising the cultural necessity of such an initiative. Over time, countless theatre activists, workers, and enthusiasts across the country contributed materials, information, and labour, transforming the Archives into a shared national endeavour.

For years, the initiative operated under various names—Poster Museum, Poster Gallery, Theater Museum, and even Babul Biswas' Collection. The shifting identities reflected its organic growth. Finally, in 2011, it was formally named Bangladesh Theater Archives—a title that acknowledged both its scope and national significance. By then, its mission had expanded far beyond posters. Souvenirs, tickets, handbills, brochures, books, still photographs, official

documents, and video recordings found their way into the collection. Today, the Archives hold more than one hundred thousand items—an unparalleled reservoir of theatrical history.

The Archives has become a lifeline for researchers, students, teachers, playwrights, and theatre practitioners. From undergraduate dissertations to doctoral research, its materials have supported countless academic works in Bangladesh and abroad. Notably, researchers pursuing PhDs on Bangladeshi drama are given access to data completely free of charge—a rare gesture in an age of commercialised knowledge. In this sense, Bangladesh Theater Archives is not merely a storage space; it is a living academic institution. It



PHOTO: COLLECTED

**Pictured are celebrated Bangladeshi playwright and actor Mamunur Rashid, the esteemed actor Utpal Dutt, his wife and renowned actress Shobha Sen, their daughter Bishnupriya Dutt, and Babul Biswas, the founder of the Bangladesh Theater Archives.**



PHOTO: SHEKH MEHEDI MORSHED

embodies the spirit of Bangladesh's independence by asserting that cultural history belongs to the people.

One of the most visible achievements of the Archives has been its exhibitions. Between 1988 and June 2025, it organised 52 exhibitions, both nationally and internationally. These exhibitions—sometimes focused on posters, sometimes on photographs or archival data—were inaugurated by distinguished theater personalities, academics, and civil servants. The first-ever theater poster exhibition in Bangladesh, "World Drama", took place in 1988 at Dhaka University, with Vice Chancellor Dr Abdul Mannan inaugurating the event. In 1989, another landmark exhibition organised by the Dhaka University Central Students Union (DUCSU) on World Theater Day at the university's TSC sparked tremendous enthusiasm. Supported by international cultural organisations and foreign embassies, it established Bangladesh Theater Archives as a prominent player on the global theater scene. Subsequent exhibitions in India, Japan, and the United States further

showcased that Bangladeshi theatre history resonates well beyond the country's borders.

Since 2020, renowned theatre translator Professor Abdus Selim has been actively engaged with the Bangladesh Theatre Archives, where he currently serves as president. Joining him is Dr Babul Biswas, the founder and current Secretary General of the institution. Together, through their unwavering commitment, they are propelling the institution forward at full speed.

As Bangladesh Theater Archives marks another anniversary, it stands as a testament to what sustained passion, collective effort, and cultural responsibility can achieve. In preserving the theatre's past, it safeguards the creative memory of the nation—and ensures that future generations will know not only how Bangladesh performed on stage, but who it was, and who it aspired to be.

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