

For Review Only

S. Mickey Lin

# UNCANNY VALLEY

A Collection of Short Stories



UNCANNY VALLEY

Marshall Cavendish Editions 

S. Mickey Lin

Questions of identity and humanity galvanise the twelve stories in this provocative and eclectic collection by S. Mickey Lin, an original new voice in speculative fiction. Using a wide range of characters, from the construction worker to the professor to the badminton star, the multi-layered stories explore identity and various aspects of the human psyche. *Uncanny Valley* will gnaw on the corners of your mind and challenge your ideas on society and what it means to be human.

“A collection of masterfully rendered portraits of our country and our people....Insightful, funny and definitely thought-stimulating.”

**Audrey Chin,**  
author of *As the Heart Bones Break*

“His is a fresh voice that provokes serious thinking and yet delights.”

**Josephine Chia,**  
author of *Kampung Spirit: Gotong Royong*

“S. Mickey Lin manages to unearth the anxieties of city life, and give it a grand cinema strung together by intriguing simulacra.”

**Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé,**  
author of *Singular Acts of Endearment*

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“The short story has a structure that appears to be deceptively simple but it requires a master to craft it to perfection. S. Mickey Lin’s insightful stories exhibit his mastery of the form. His is a fresh voice that provokes serious thinking and yet delights.”

**Josephine Chia,**

author of *Kampong Spirit: Gotong Royong*

“A lovely showcase. *Uncanny Valley* collects eclectic stories with great range—tender, funny, clever, moving. S. Mickey Lin manages to unearth the anxieties of city life, and give it a grand cinema strung together by intriguing simulacra. To take a leaf from one of his characters, it scarcely matters that the stories aren’t real, what matters is that we get to know how it all feels like.”

**Desmond Kon Zhicheng-Mingdé,**

author of *Singular Acts of Endearment*

“Each story in S. Mickey Lin’s *Uncanny Valley* has been crafted from a strong premise, then propelled into motion with a whipcord of wit, clever characterisation, and astute observation. A few cross the line into absurd comedy or futuristic farce and have great entertainment value. Other stories like ‘Right History’ and ‘Home Game’ spin their narratives from current issues like blinkered nationalism and ‘foreign talent’. After reading this collection, the twelve tales will keep turning in your mind like colourful tops.”

**Dr Chris Mooney-Singh,**

Artistic Director of The Writers Centre, Singapore

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“A collection of masterfully rendered portraits of our country and our people. Incisive and biting, S. Mickey Lin conveys our diversity, foibles, strengths and weaknesses in sharply observed stories of university professors and civil servants battling with political correctness; slyly witty accounts in the voice of egotistical food critics and horny masters of the financial universe; and sweetly understated paeans to arts and the home by a floundering Minister of Speculative Technology and an imported badminton player. Insightful, funny and definitely thought-stimulating.”

**Audrey Chin,**

author of *As the Heart Bones Break*

“‘The Man with the Golden Tongue’ is a deliciously wicked read: haute cuisine and celebrity chefs sautéed in satire and served with lashings of wit—S. Mickey Lin at his humourist best.”

**Verena Tay,**

editor of the *Balik Kampung* series

“He writes simply, beautifully, and in ‘The Apex’ expertly racks the tension as a high-rise crane driver reflects on life, his superiors and what to do as the wind buffets his potentially lethal load over a crowd. Lin also refreshingly spares the adjectives, cuts ponderous descriptions of every movement, and gets on with the story.”

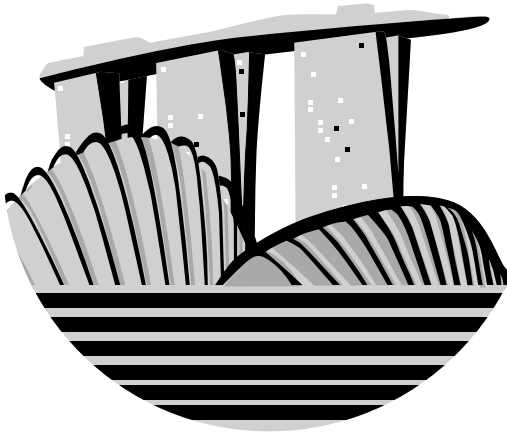
**South China Morning Post**

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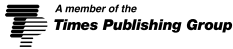
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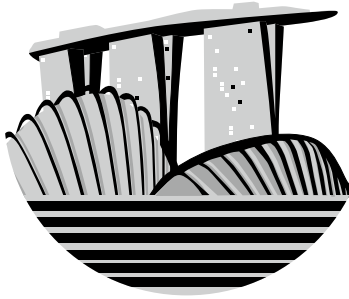
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# Contents

<b>PREFACE</b>	<b>9</b>
The Apex	11
The Man with the Golden Tongue	23
Merlion's Magic	39
Adrift	57
The Mentor	69
Right History	75
Moral Clarity in Small Numbers	91
Hunger	107
Sharks of Singapore	117
Uncanny Valley	127
Weapons of Mass Destruction	137
Home Game	147
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>156</b>
<b>NOTES</b>	<b>158</b>
<b>ABOUT THE AUTHOR</b>	<b>159</b>



## The Apex

Jian Guo tenses up as he grabs the railing of the open-air steel cage elevator travelling up the side of The Apex, a 1,088-foot tall building that is to be the newest addition to the city-state's skyline. It's expected to be the tallest building in Singapore. A morning breeze starts to blow and he tries to look anywhere but down. He reaches the top and puts on his fluorescent yellow hard hat. He waits for the breeze to subside and then crosses a narrow catwalk that extends about 40 feet from one corner of the building, to the cockpit of his climbing tower crane, a Tavco 1800 with a 500-horsepower diesel engine and a 135-foot boom, in the other corner.

Jian Guo sits in his cockpit and looks out of his floor-to-ceiling glass windshield, at what is arguably the best view of the city, and says his usual prayers. He has no idea why people would erect such tall buildings—monuments of dizzying heights that make one weak in the knees. He hates the high elevation, finding it a strange fascination, borderlining obsession, for some people. Human beings are meant to be on the ground, but yet they try to outdo one another in constructing architectural mastheads that reach for the heavens.

Still, this peculiarity has been fruitful for him and his family. He isn't much of a looker, having an indistinct face that reminds you of one billion other Chinese men. Jian Guo hasn't won the genetic lottery in the height department either, being only five feet six. When he was younger and still harbouring hope that he could transform himself, he tried to exercise, but that had no visible effect on his bearish frame. Certain then that he would not be able to find an agreeable spouse, he focused his attention on learning how to operate climbing tower cranes. It wasn't long before he excelled at handling the machine. He easily became the best crane operator in Xiamen because of his uncanny ability to 'hear' the wind.

People say that the wind carries certain memories and he has been listening to the wind for as long as he can



remember. The gentle sea breeze off the shores of Xiamen told him stories of lost glories and misplaced faiths. He was pleasantly surprised to discover that a great crane operator earns a respectable income, and that increased his marriageability immensely. It wasn't long after obtaining his operating license that he was able to marry Xiu Li, a pretty factory worker back home. Thinking of his pregnant wife, he touches a picture of her that he has placed on the Tavco dashboard.

A strong gust of wind rattles the cockpit and Jian Guo holds his breath. He waits for it to pass and for the silence to return. Although he hates the vertiginous view, he loves the quietude of the place. It was a refreshing revelation to unearth the noiselessness of the cabin when he operated a crane for the first time in Singapore. The buildings here are much taller than the ones in Xiamen and Jian Guo has grown accustomed to the noise from the hustling and jostling of city life—from the frantic office workers to the overbearing executives, to the obnoxious students. But it all quiets down when he enters the cockpit. He enjoys the stillness at this height more than anything else.

One time, he had to do a maintenance check on the rooftop of Marina Bay Sands. The 656-foot tall building is an iconic structure for the country and people flock to

swim in the infinity-edge swimming pool on the rooftop. Jian Guo was amazed by the size of the crowd and that people were willing to pay good money to travel up such heights when he was paid to do so on a regular basis.

“Crazy rich people,” Hu Li said to him when they walked past the scantily-clad women and the shirtless, hirsute men sipping drinks at the side of the swimming pool. It seemed that Hu Li, his balding, older colleague, shared his reservations about soaring elevation and couldn’t understand the desire to disrupt its tranquillity with cacophonous orgies.

“Maybe it’s different when you play than when you work up here,” Jian Guo said, hoping to lighten the mood.

Hu laughed. “It’s no different. Up here, you fall down, you die. Those people just forget it, that’s all. They think money can solve everything.” Hu pointed to the ground and nodded his head towards the carefree people lounging around. “Up here, the rich forget. People like us, we don’t forget. That’s the difference.”

Jian Guo didn’t argue with Hu because he had answered with such certainty, as though he had discovered the profound secret behind the meaning of life. After they had finished checking the maintenance records, Jian Guo took one last look at the people on the rooftop and reminded himself never to forget.

An energetic blast of wind jolts the cockpit and brings Jian Guo out of his time at Marina Bay Sands. He reminds himself of his present location, sitting inside the cockpit of the climbing tower crane atop the tallest building currently in construction in Singapore. He looks at his work schedule and notes that the steel beams need to be moved, but the capricious wind is misbehaving and he knows that the slightest breeze can change people's fortunes. The erratic wind flows are practically screaming for him to be cautious.

A red light blinks on his company-issued walkie-talkie. At such a towering height, there is no way for Jian Guo to communicate with others except through the walkie-talkie. Cell phones are inadequate because the signal is unreliable and they can become a major distraction. One time, a crane operator was lifting 2,000 kg of rebar when he stopped suddenly to complete an Angry Bird stage on his mobile phone. It wasn't a shock that the crane operator was fired the moment he successfully put down his load.

Jian Guo presses the talk button on the walkie-talkie.

"Jian Guo, are you moving the load yet?"

"I'm waiting until the wind passes, sir. It's very windy up here and I think it is best to wait."

He suspects that the new project manager thinks that

he is skiving. The man had parachuted in from another major project and made no secret about his ambitious target goals. And now, he thinks the delay of The Apex is due to the laziness of the workers, not realizing or purposely ignoring the fact that it lies with inadequate planning by the management.

“There was no warning advisory about the wind conditions. I need you to start moving the load, otherwise we’ll be delayed by another half-day.”

“The wind is very weird today, sir. More than usual. Based on my experience, it’s safer to wait.”

Jian Guo is hoping that the manager will trust his experience. After all, he has been a crane operator for ten years and renews his operating license regularly. He adds, “Please come up and see it for yourself if you don’t believe me.”

“I don’t have time to go up. I need to check things on the ground. I’ll go up when I can. In the meantime, start moving the load *now*. If nothing is moved by the time I get up there, I’ll look for a new crane operator. You know I’ll do it too.”

Jian Guo opens the cockpit door to get out but a burst of wind pushes the door back. He waits for it to wane and then crosses the catwalk. He’s stuck between the project manager and a high place. If he moves the

load and a strong wind happens to come by, there's a risk that the wind might destabilize the load and it'll drop. Best-case scenario, it drops on the completed section of the rooftop. Worst-case scenario is that it drops on the uncompleted section or elsewhere and gives someone a killer headache. But if he doesn't listen to the project manager, he will most likely lose his job and Jian Guo can't afford to lose his source of income. He thinks of Xiu Li and the upcoming baby expenses back in Xiamen.

Jian Guo takes a moment to steady himself. He's next to the open-air steel cage elevator and he looks down. People are barely visible, resembling ants in an ant farm and not educated, functioning adults struggling with life. It's strange how these people willingly give so much power to a guy like him. They hardly ever look up and yet he carries thousands of kilos of industrial material over their heads. Should he decide to let them drop, these people would never see it coming. He marvels at the oddity of these ants and their way of life.

Still, he's not in a position to disagree with them, no matter how strange they may be. He turns around and goes back into the cockpit. He turns the key to power it on. He puts his right hand firmly on the control stick. A video monitor to his left shows the two-inch-thick

steel cable unreeling from the drum behind his cabin. A second video monitor flickers both the weight of his load and the angle of the crane's boom, which are currently all at zero.

There's no guarantee that a wind will come and kill somebody, but there's a guarantee that he'll lose his job if he doesn't do anything. Jian Guo figures he might as well keep his job. If anything happens, he can always tell them that he's operating under the manager's directive. He pulls on the lever and lowers the boom. He moves the boom to the left and positions the hook over the load platform. He slowly swivels the toggle stick and the boom descends and lifts up the load. He turns it carefully, checking his video monitors, and the load is lifted above a spot on the street.

Jian Guo lets out a sigh, thankful for the windless moment. He's about to continue the turn when a powerful gale appears out of nowhere and rattles the load. The second video monitor flashes UNSTABLE and Jian Guo pauses. His worst fear is developing in front of his eyes. Another blast and the load vibrates some more. The red light from the walkie-talkie blinks. Jian Guo answers it.

“Jian Guo, don't move anything. A wind advisory just came.”

“I started to move it like you told me to, sir.”

“Stop for a moment and we’ll wait for the wind advisory to say that we can resume again.”

“I can’t, sir. The load is hanging in the air. I need to put it down safely.”

“Can’t you wait until it’s safe?”

“If I leave it, there’s a danger that it might drop. I warned you, sir.”

“Jian Guo, I’m going to clear the area, just in case... something *unforeseen* might happen. Tell me when it’s safe to return people back to their workstations. And just so we’re clear, you’re the expert. That’s what we pay you for. It was your judgment call, not mine.”

“他妈的!”<sup>1</sup> Jian Guo yells into the walkie-talkie without pressing the talk button. The project manager is going to pin it all on him if anything goes wrong and most likely will take all the credit for the speedy progress if he does succeed.

The wind picks up and the heavy load is shifting the boom on its own. It’s simple physics really. Newton’s first law—an object at rest stays at rest and an object in motion stays in motion unless acted upon by an unbalanced force. The strong wind just happens to be the unbalanced force and the 1,984 kg of steel beams on the loading platform are now in motion.

Jian Guo swivels the toggle stick, hoping to

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1 A derogatory term in Mandarin.

counterbalance the movement. The loading platform stays still and then another wind rattles it again. He feels like he's grasping at straws. He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and recalls his concentration exercise. Breathe in and out. He does that for a full two minutes, ignoring the flashing video monitors and the slight rattling of the cockpit. Jian Guo reminds himself to listen to the wind. He then opens his eyes, as though he has been privy to some divine counsel, and proceeds to manoeuvre the boom.

The load platform is still in the air, but has moved past the danger zone—no longer floating ominously above the heads of innocent passers-by. Unfortunately, Jian Guo has forgotten that memories, especially memories of the wind, can be inaccurate. A flurry of mighty wind knocks the loading platform and unbuckles the hook from the crane. The platform drops and Jian Guo sees a storm of steel beams raining down onto the ground below. He prays that the project manager has steered people away.

The project manager has not, at least not enough.

Later, the press will report it as 'work-incident related injuries' that resulted in the death of ten foreign workers. The company and the project manager will be heavily reprimanded by the press, but will return to do business



as usual within two months. The completion of the building, a future icon of the city, is too important to be delayed by such trivialities.<sup>2</sup> Due to conflicting reports from Jian Guo and the project manager, Jian Guo will not be fined or charged with negligence, but will almost surely get fired and relieved of his duty.

All of this flashes through his mind when Jian Guo hears the whisper of another wind. He recalls Hu Li's words.

*Up here, the rich forget.*

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<sup>2</sup> For more about the fate of the building, check out 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' on page 137.

## About the Author



S. Mickey Lin is a former Annenberg Fellow and graduate of the University Of Southern California School Of Cinematic Arts. His writings have been published in Hong Kong, Singapore, and the US. He co-edited *Tales of Two Cities*, an anthology of short stories by the Hong Kong Writers Circle and the Singapore Writers Group. He has over a million views on Quora, where he can be found musing during his spare time. *Uncanny Valley* is his first short story collection. For additional information, check out [www.mickeylin.com](http://www.mickeylin.com)