

On February 24, 2022, the world watched in horror as Russia invaded Ukraine. For Singaporean correspondent Ix Shen, the conflict hit much closer to home. With a Ukrainian wife and a community that was being torn apart, he witnessed the devastating impact of the invasion from his own balcony.

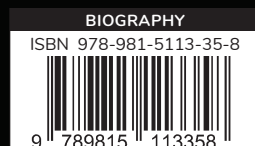
Set against the backdrop of an incredibly complex war, this gripping autobiography takes readers on his adventurous evacuation to Poland – a journey both physically demanding and emotionally exhausting.

Through this experience, Ix found himself transformed in profound ways, and this book is a testament to the power of personal growth and transformation even in the midst of chaos. He also provides a unique, Asian perspective on a topic that is often shrouded in propaganda and political spin.

Stunning photographs offer an additional visual window into the conflict and his journey, providing a visceral and haunting glimpse at what is now lost. This insightful memoir is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand the human cost of war and the power of the human spirit to endure.

visit our website at:  
[www.marshallcavendish.com](http://www.marshallcavendish.com)

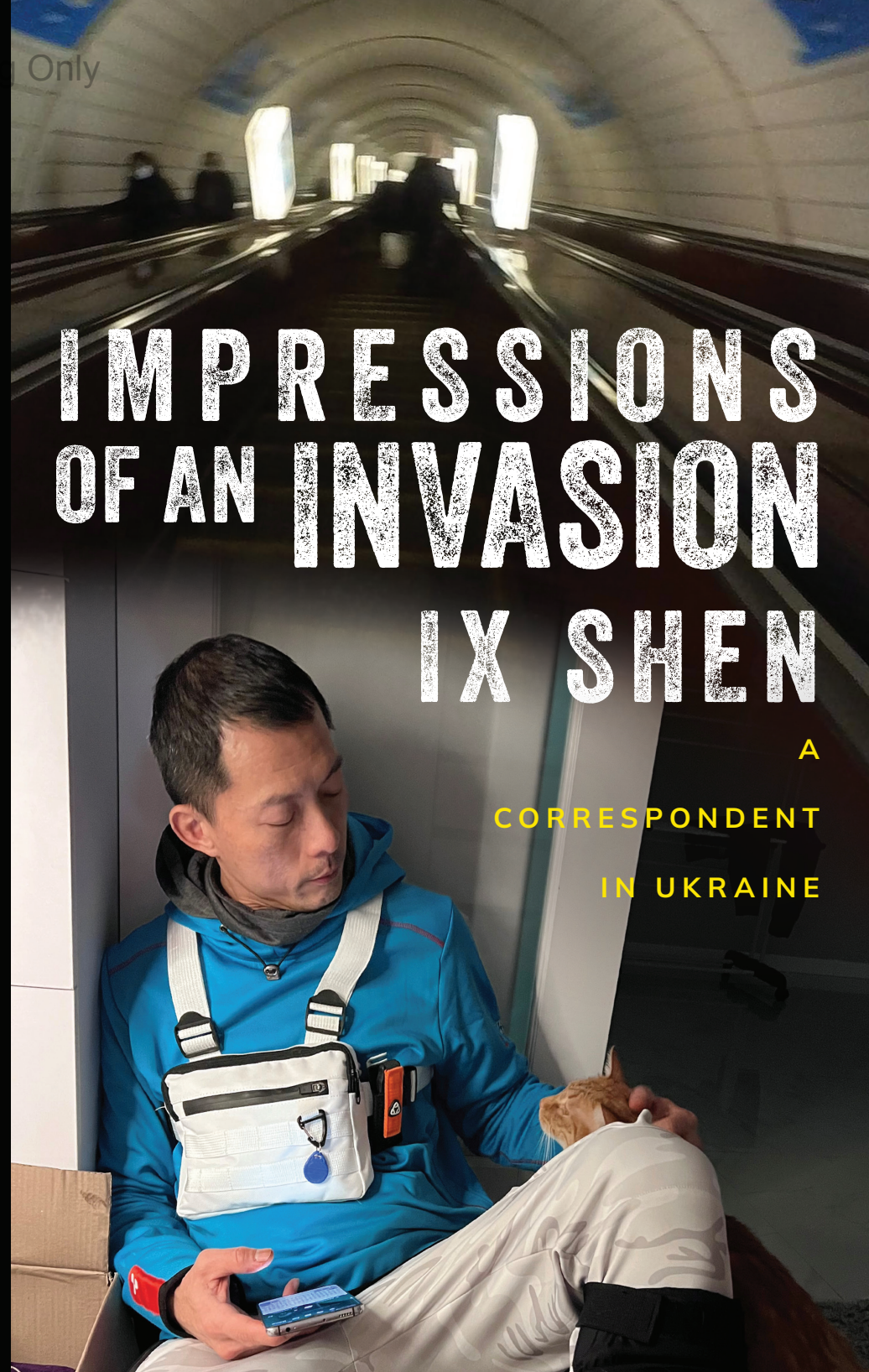
**mc** Marshall Cavendish  
Editions



**Ix Shen**

**IMPRESSIONS OF AN INVASION**  
A CORRESPONDENT IN UKRAINE

Marshall Cavendish  
Editions  
**mc**



For Viewing Only

# IMPRESSIONS OF AN INVASION

A CORRESPONDENT IN UKRAINE

Ix Shen

© 2023 Ix Shen

Published in 2023 by Marshall Cavendish Editions  
An imprint of Marshall Cavendish International



All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner. Requests for permission should be addressed to the Publisher, Marshall Cavendish International (Asia) Private Limited, 1 New Industrial Road, Singapore 536196. Tel: (65) 6213 9300 E-mail: [genref@sg.marshallcavendish.com](mailto:genref@sg.marshallcavendish.com) Website: [www.marshallcavendish.com](http://www.marshallcavendish.com)

The publisher makes no representation or warranties with respect to the contents of this book, and specifically disclaims any implied warranties or merchantability or fitness for any particular purpose, and shall in no event be liable for any loss of profit or any other commercial damage, including but not limited to special, incidental, consequential, or other damages.

Other Marshall Cavendish Offices:  
Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 800 Westchester Ave, Suite N-641, Rye Brook, NY 10573, USA • Marshall Cavendish International (Thailand) Co Ltd, 253 Asoke, 16th Floor, Sukhumvit 21 Road, Klongtoey Nua, Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand • Marshall Cavendish (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd, Times Subang, Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park, Batu Tiga, 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

Marshall Cavendish is a registered trademark of Times Publishing Limited

**National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing in Publication Data**

Name(s): Shen, Ix.

Title: Impressions of an invasion : a correspondent in Ukraine / Ix Shen.

Description: Singapore : Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2023.

Identifier(s): ISBN 978-981-5113-35-8

Subject(s): LCSH: Shen, Ix. | Ukraine--History--Russian Invasion, 2022---  
Personal narratives. | Singaporeans--Ukraine. | Kyiv (Ukraine)--  
History--21st century. | Kyiv (Ukraine)--Biography.

Classification: DDC 947.7086092--dc23

Printed in Singapore

## CONTENTS

A Note from the Author	7
<b>The First Week</b>	9
<b>The Second Week</b>	71
<b>The Third Week</b>	129
Afterword	221
About the Author	231



## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I finally understood what it meant to be shell-shocked when I was immobilised while in midstride by the shock wave of an artillery blast that swept past me.

Although my body remained unharmed, my sense of logic and reasoning went offline. My fight or flight response was triggered with adrenaline charged in all cylinders. But the nearest bunker was too far away for a flight and the attackers were not in visual range for a fight. I was mind-blown by the shock of the shelling.

The only respite for me was to switch into metacognition mode by mentally escaping elsewhere, while my body behaved like a statue.

I had hoped to record everything I was seeing, hearing, smelling and feeling – each thought that flashed through my mind and the consequential imagination that had been spurred.

Being caught up by the invasion of Kyiv is what we call in the film-making business, a fish out of water scenario. Other than using the phrase as an expression, we tend to overlook how traumatic it was for the fish as it tries to survive. How much effort and hope are placed into each flip or the despair and fear overcome with every flop.



We can detect the trembling in the voice of a nervous speaker or the stuttering of a panicking person. But having a tremor or stutter in a form of writing is difficult to enact. Because some of the errors which were typed out rapidly when I recalled the accompanying emotions of that particular moment would be corrected as a typo or adjusted for better reading. With nostalgia, I yearn for those ribbon typewriters which captures the reality of each moment, as the varied inked intensities of the typefaces would fluctuate in parallel with my anxiety.

There were many moments that we survived through the invasion that I am unable to rank them in any ascending or descending order. I dread answering questions that asks what I felt was the “most” about anything – for at every moment, I was just grateful to have survived.

So I decided that writing my experience in chronological order, and as realistic to my emotions during each moment, would be the fairest manner for me to recount the chain of events.

Like Homer Simpson facing the anxiety of death, I was constantly pin-balling through the stages of denial, anger, fear, bargaining and acceptance. The writing is honest to the experience and will at times behave like a pinball trapped among bumpsters, rattling to reflect the excitement of the narrative.

For when normalcy is ambiguous, sanity becomes subjective.

# THE FIRST WEEK

# Starting with Many Bangs

BY THE TIME the sun rose, the influx of new messages had already surpassed our ability to read the earlier ones. The constant barrage of incoming information inundated us from every available media source, further fuelling our overflowing anxiety.

My thumb was shaking uncontrollably either from the non-stop scrolling of messages or surge of adrenaline from the accelerated heart beats, or both.

The possibility that Kyiv might fall had materialised into a reality.

Every airport around Kyiv has been struck by missiles, the invading Russians had opened up three fronts with attacks in the north, east and south of Ukraine, with their elite airborne units attempting a decapitation strike on the capital.

It made me wonder how people coped with panic attacks during the Second World War when all they had were short-wave radios and newspapers. In those days, being panic-stricken during such do or die situations really meant do or die.

Looking from our balcony I could see some of our neighbours quickly stuffing as many bags as possible into their cars

which were parked by the side of the road with their engines running.

We scanned the news trying to understand the scale of attack being waged on the city of Kyiv. I knew the distance from Kyiv to the Belarus border was over a hundred kilometres. As long as there were no reported sightings of Russian troops around the north of Kyiv, we would have time to re-examine our plans before executing them. So we focused on collecting and prioritising information from areas north of Kyiv such as Chernihiv, Chornobyl, Ivankiv, Kozelets, Borodyanka and Vyshhorod in case of any amphibious assault.

Assuming that the Russian troops were mostly mechanized, they could cover the distance within a day if unchallenged. If challenged, it would give us more time to plan and manoeuvre.

If they remain unchallenged, I wondered how ready the citizens of the city were to face them.

President Zelensky of Ukraine had already declared martial law. All men between the ages of 18 and 60 were banned from leaving the country. A curfew would be imposed at 22:00 hours that night. All non-official traffic would be ordered off the roads. The call to take up arms and defend the country had already been issued. Ukrainians with military experience were requested to join the army or form militia groups.

There was an open invitation for foreigners with combat experience to join the foreign legion of the Ukrainian army. I have to confess that during moments like these, it required efforts to leash my temptation of answering the call to the wild.

We knew that contrary to what many people expected, President Zelensky did not flee. This meant that we had

to ask ourselves if we were in the invaders line of attack for their decapitation strike on Ukraine. I quickly scanned my surrounding area on Google Maps to identify potential choke points for fighting and made mental notes of those locations in case of any breaches along the Northern or Eastern fronts. Looking at the possibility of aerial attacks, I was then no longer envious of my neighbours on the top floor with their airy roof terraces and sky gardens.

After establishing the pecking order in terms of anxiety for all incoming news, we decided our first task was to contact our immediate family before having breakfast.

While I beat the eggs for an omelette, my mind was busy filtering as much information as possible. Perhaps it was my experience with unexpected surprises while participating extreme sports, but I knew that accurate assessments were paramount. There are always a variety of options, each choices shrouded in doubt and accompanied by parameters beyond our ability to alter.

Since martial law had been declared, we hoped that there would still be law and order.

Weeks before the invasion, many embassies had been issuing warnings for their respective citizens to flee Ukraine by commercial means while it was still possible to do so. Back then I did a quick check online regarding the COVID travel restrictions into Singapore and realised that my wife Natalia together with our cats would not be able to get the vaccinations and documentation in time.

Catching an international flight during the COVID endemic was really challenging too. Many airport terminals

had closed or were reduced to minimum operations, with the frequencies of flight routes getting scaled down or terminated. Booking these flights, paying the high costs and the hassle of quarantines made it impossible for us to make hasty arrangements.

At that time, the only country we could travel together without COVID restrictions was Egypt. We tried searching for apartments to rent along the coast of the Red Sea before the fighting broke out as it was a mecca for free diving.

However the moment those air strikes began over the capital, all airspace was closed by Ukraine with desperate calls to NATO to help with the enforcement of a no-fly zone. Our exodus was no longer an option. This meant that in order to maximise our odds of surviving the invasion, we had to break our limitations of ingenuity bounded by rationality during normal times.

We needed to stock up on food, water and necessities, which meant we needed cash. The day before, we had ordered three 40-litre barrels used for water dispensers in anticipation of any escalations. But that morning, the water delivery company announced that they were halting all operations because of the invasion.

So after breakfast we dressed up and we headed straight for our bank with empty backpacks. It was not that we had a lot of money but with the Ukrainian currency in free-fall of forty hryvnas to one US dollar, it would be more practical that we to use a large carrier for our cash, food and supplies. Besides if the attacks intensified, it would be easier to run with backpacks on our shoulders than with shopping bags in our hands.

We climbed down the flights of stairs, avoiding the lift in fear for being struck by a missile in mid-descent. Along the way, we passed another family engaging in nervous conversation with the security guard as we exited the safety of our apartment building.

With exposure to too many apocalyptic movies, we anticipated to meet with scenes of looting and robbery or to see civilization regress to the law of the jungle where the strong prey upon the weak. We had absolutely no idea how people were going to behave.

While there was palpable tension in the air, it did not feel like a lit fuse burning towards chaos. More like a boundless apprehension of solemnness.

Approaching the bank from across the street, we noticed a long queue of people already waiting outside, the queue winded all the way around the block. As we debated whether it was worth our time to wait in line, a man emerged from the bank to announce that the branch had ran out of cash.

Without a car or available drivers on any ride hailing apps because making money had become less important than running for one's life, we concluded that it would not be an effective use of time for us to walk to the main branch and wait in another line for the chance to withdraw cash.

In war, our concept of time morphs differently, it was no longer about hours, minutes, appointments or schedules. All we cared about was when the current attack will stop and how long that pause going to last.

Natalia said that there was still money inside the petty cash drawer at the clinic where she was practicing traditional

Chinese medicine. We could use that to buy food and supplies since the clinic would not be operating for the time being. So we headed towards her clinic, which was a 30-minute walk away.

As we strained our thumbs scrolling through endless pages of information while walking towards the clinic, a sight caught my eye which was quite remarkable to say the least. In the midst of everyone trying to navigate their way out of the dire situation, I noticed an elderly lady in a yellow headscarf bending over with a poop bag.

She was walking her beagle.

The first thought that came to me was, "Is she out of her mind?"

The Russians troops had entered Kyiv and missiles were falling over our heads. The city might be in shambles, with food, water, electricity and communications facing jeopardy, and she was walking her dog.

But the very moment I completed that thought, it dawned upon me that she might be thinking that we were the ones who were out of our minds and overreacting. Spanning from under-reacting to overreaction was the vastness of normalcy during times of war.



## AFTERWORD



**Drawings from pediatric patients of the Chernihiv Regional Children's Hospital while hiding underground.**

By the time the manuscript was ready for publication, the invasion of Ukraine had been going on for almost a year.

Having established ourselves into a place of safety in Poland, we started to receive pleas of assistance from several of our friends who were still working inside the hospitals in Ukraine. Supplies and medication were getting increasingly difficult to come by as stockpiles were diminishing at an alarming rate and supply routes were under bombardments.

We began asking around and one introduction led to another. What started out as enquiries about how we might be able to obtain the requested supplies ended up with me inside a truck heading back into Kyiv stocked with humanitarian reliefs while wearing a bullet proof vest. That kick-started my desire to continue helping the Ukrainian hospitals with their struggle.

I hope to be able use part of the proceeds from the sale of this book to provide medical assistance to those affected by the invasion.



**Adjusting the bulletproof vest for better breathing  
during long drives**

### **Ambiguity of Normalcy**

Living in peaceful environments far away from life threatening conflicts, it is quite reasonable to look at the behaviour of someone who just came from a war zone and assume he or she is demented.

But I know now that during those times when life or death becomes an uncertainty, normalcy is ambiguous.

Is it normal to factor in the texture of a cat litter as a purchasing decision? Because when I am dumbstruck by the variety of clay, gel, pine, wheat, grass, corn, paper and tofu cat litter available in a pet store, I will now choose the one that can stop a bullet. Similarly, the housewives in Kyiv today would so

naturally discuss whether asphalt or tar made a better Molotov cocktail when thrown.

When the situation gets ever more dire. Our ability to adapt driven by the will to survive will allow us to morph the ambiguity of what used to be normal. Any inability to adapt would just be viewed by the others as abnormal.

### **Safe and Sound**

Coming from a background in media industry, whenever I hear anyone being referred to as a sound person. I would assume by default that the person is from the audio department.

In this internet age of information overload, it becomes very challenging to process and prioritise the bulk of ever changing updates under the intermittent pounding of overhead explosions.

One of the clearest takeaways from my experience during the early days of the invasion is that being safe and sound is more important than food and water.

‘Sound’ as in ‘sound of mind’.

Without being sound of mind, one will not even recognise the body signals for thirst and hunger. When the possibility of not seeing another sunrise becomes real, not going berserk can consume a lot of one cognitive abilities, and that overcomes the primal ones.

As we try to remain in one piece, the absurdism of a war zone will try to amplify the rifts within the conflicts of our conscious, unconscious and preconscious minds.



Natalia at her hometown – Odesa, Pearl of the Black Sea

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

IX SHEN has had an impressive career spanning across different fields. After serving his national service in 1992, he began his career as a photojournalist with Singapore Press Holdings, capturing stunning visuals that told stories from Singapore and around the world.

He had his debut as an actor in 1995 and was a rising star in the entertainment industry, working on numerous key productions that showcased his versatility and range.

After more than a decade in front of the camera, he switched gears in 2008 to pursue his passion for screenplay writing and quickly found success as a screenwriter, crafting compelling narratives that captivated audiences. This led to him being first Assistant Director on major movie productions in China until the pandemic put a temporary halt to his work.

Ix continues to make a positive impact today – facilitating non-profit medical supplies for hospitals within Ukraine and freelancing as a wartime correspondent, reporting on the invasion of Ukraine and shining a light on the plight of those affected by war.

His determination, dedication, and spirit make him an empathetic and intuitive storyteller with an inspiring experience.

For Viewing Only

