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**Chinese Texts, Western Analysis:  
From Film to Novel**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for  
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The Department of English Literature  
and  
The Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies  
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### Abstract

This study explores perceptions of Chinese texts by Western audiences while looking into the interrelation between film and literature. This is done by two means: firstly, through a detailed discussion of film adaptations with the focus on Chinese cinema, and secondly, through a practical demonstration of a filmic style in prose fiction in the form of an original book-length piece of fiction. The ‘content’ and ‘technique’ of presentations are studied in both approaches.

Using Bakhtin’s ‘dialogism’ as the point of departure, the research on adaptations— ‘Adapting Chinese Fictions for Western Audiences’—adopts an intertextual approach of adaptation theory as developed by Robert Stam, looking into the intertextual relationship between a hypotext (a source text) and a hypertext (film adaptation). The analysis of Raise the Red Lantern by Zhang Yimou (1991) and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon by Ang Lee (2001) concludes that both films contain elements of familiarity and strangeness for Western audiences, an uneasy mix of intimacy and exoticism which underpins their appeal. However, this phenomenon is unintended by the filmmakers themselves, chiefly because, firstly, the directors’ exposure to Western film art has contributed to the use of techniques that are familiar to Western audiences in the making of their films, and, secondly, the elements of strangeness are related to the natures of the films, the cultural elements involved and the locations in which the films are made, which are unfamiliar to a Western audience. The lack of relevant cultural knowledge among Western audiences can easily lead to the misreading of these cinematic texts.

The writing of the novel, **Little Hut of Leaping Fishes**, reveals the necessity of incorporating cultural elements into a narrative that is set in a time and place where the culture is deeply rooted. My background as a fourth-generation Chinese in Malaysia informs my urge as an artist and critic to explore aspects of my own cultural identity. This resonates to some extent with Ang Lee's childhood dream of a lost China.

The adoption of film techniques in prose fiction to create filmic effects equivalent to those created by *mise-en-scene* elements, like lighting, editing, framing, costumes, music and props, indicates the feasibility of presenting a film in fiction. Although 'telling' and 'interior monologue', and the existence of an 'omniscient observer' are inevitable, they can be kept to a minimum and used only to ease the flow of the narrative, speeding it up and not delaying it. The main concern, which is the key discovery of this experiment, is that once a writer understands the shared creative mechanism between film and literature, he can place a camera before his pages to capture the scenes he carefully arranged, making the page a screen onto which images as well as words can be projected.

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## Chinese Texts, Western Analysis: From Film to Novel

### Introduction

Imagine a person, tall, lean and feline, high-shouldered, with a brow like Shakespeare and a face like Satan, a close-shaven skull, and long, magnetic eyes of the true cat-green. Invest him with all the cruel cunning of an entire Eastern face, accumulated in one giant intellect, with all the resources of science past and present... Imagine that awful being, and you have a mental picture of Dr. Fu Manchu, the yellow peril incarnate in one man. (Rohmer, 1997)

The creation of the evil character Fu Manchu by British author Sax Rohmer in the early twentieth century is just one of the examples of the Western obsession with Chinese culture, which has always resulted in misrepresentation and stereotyping of the people and their culture. The Fu Manchu character has since appeared in literature, film, radio and television<sup>1</sup>, indicating the Western attraction to the mysterious Land of the Dragon.

Following the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1977, China opened its doors not only to economic reform but also to the flow of cultural products in and out of the country, be it legally or otherwise. Among them are films and literature produced by mainland artists who deal with their experiences of the Cultural Revolution and its repercussions in their work, including films such as The Blue Kite (dir: Tian

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<sup>1</sup> There have been more than 20 short stories and novels, at least 15 feature films and 2 film serials, television series and radio plays featuring Fu Manchu. Nicolas Cage plays Fu Manchu in Werewolf Women of the SS in Grindhouse (Dir. Rob Zombie, 2007). See [http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Fu\\_Manchu](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Fu_Manchu) (accessed 14 March 2007).

Zhuangzhuang, 1993). At the same time, overseas Chinese dwell on migration tales and stories of that cultural dark era, or reminisce about their lost homeland, in works such as *The Wild Swans: Three Daughters of China* (Jung Chang, 1991). The films and literature produced are always filled with descriptions of cultural elements that invite comments such as, among others, ‘colourful’, ‘beautiful’ and ‘exotic.’

Is it the filmmakers and writers’ intention to exploit the interests of the West in an alien culture through the exotic elements in their work? This is the major question that underpins my study, which focuses on the study of ‘content’ and ‘technique’ in creative writing and film studies. ‘Content’ refers to genre, narrative, characters and the settings around them; while ‘technique’ relates to issues concerning style and presentation. This study sets out to: (a) examine Western perceptions of Chinese texts, specifically literature and films; (b) study the necessity of involving cultural elements in the adaptations and writing of Chinese fictions; and (c) experiment with a ‘filmic’ style of writing in prose fiction.

To achieve the above objectives, I shall begin by researching and writing a dissertation on film adaptations in Chinese Cinema entitled ‘Adapting Chinese Fictions for Western Audiences’, and secondly, write a novel set in late nineteenth-century China entitled ‘Little Hut of Leaping Fishes’.

‘Little Hut of Leaping Fishes’ tells the story of a young man’s passage through privileged education to rebellious manhood at a time of astonishing social upheaval, from the late nineteenth century, when Western powers invaded China with forces it could no longer resist, to the beginning of the twentieth century, when the many Chinese fled their homeland looking for a better life in foreign lands. As it is a story with a historical

setting, the writing of it will allow me to embark on a journey of discovering for myself the necessity of including cultural elements, landscape, geography and other ethnic-emblematic elements in the novel. I will experience for myself around the construction of the content: the choice of settings, materials and the methods of presenting them, which will influence the reader's perception of the text.

Meanwhile, I will utilise my understanding of film language and theories to experiment with a 'filmic' style in writing the novel. The interrelation between literature and film can be traced back to the end of the nineteenth-century when writers such as Joseph Conrad and Gustave Flaubert, followed by James Joyce and Henry James, began to lay the 'stress on "showing" rather than "telling"' by 'supplying a great deal of visual information' in their writings and 'reducing the element of authorial intervention' (MacFarlane, 1996:4). However, the works of these writers still involve interior monologue. Through the process of writing the novel, I will be able to discover the degree to which the cinematic mechanism can be realised in literature, and the ways to maximise cinematic effects in literature.

For the dissertation, I plan to carry out a content analysis of two films: Raise the Red Lantern (dir: Zhang Yimou, 1991) and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (dir: Ang Lee, 2001). I shall focus on the aspects of genre convention, narrative, characters, cultural codes and cinematic codes, discussing them thoroughly from the perspectives of the filmmakers and the public, analysing the films referring to theories, and academic and non-academic sources. A detailed discussion of the methodology can be referred to in Section One.

Both the dissertation and the novel have dual functions. While I examine the content of the films selected for the purpose of the dissertation, careful analysis of them will enhance my knowledge of film style and techniques. This knowledge will then be utilised in my experiment of 'filmic' style in writing my novel.

## **Section One: From Novel to Film**

### **1. Adapting Chinese Fictions for Western Audiences**

#### **1.1 Introduction and background**

As film ‘remains of exceptional importance’ as one of the major mediums of mass communication and ‘has been simply a political tool’ (Clark, 1991:1) in China, the study of adaptations in Chinese cinema involves the interrelations between literature, film, and social and political development in China. In view of this, although the focus of my study is on literature and film, in order to provide a clear picture of the relationship between them, I shall outline here the social and political situations affecting film adaptations in the following section.

On the one hand, filmmaking relies heavily on literary materials, and writers use film to deliver their social ideologies; on the other hand, tight control of the Party on film productions ultimately affects screen adaptations in favour of Party ideology. Literature has been an important component in Chinese cinema since film was introduced into China in the early twentieth century. The May Fourth New Literature movement in 1919 by the elites for social and political reformation resulted in works influenced by western style and ideology. Film as a modern medium attracted the involvement of May Fourth writers in their attempt to distribute new ideas to the public. These resulted in the adaptations of Spring Silkworm (dir. Cheng Bugao, 1933), Sister Flowers (dir. Zheng Zhengqiu, 1933), The Spring River Flows East (dir. Cai Chusheng, Zheng Junli, 1947 and 1948, 2 parts) and Spring in a Small Town (dir. Fei Mu, 1948) to name a few. The first May Fourth adaptation, Spring Silkworm, for example - which is a reworking of

Mao Dun's short story of the same title - expresses the writer's anti-Japanese sentiment, arousing patriotic consciousness and social awareness among the Chinese.

However, for the Party Leaders film was a tool for instilling and affirming party ideology. This was made obvious when, in his Yan'an Talks in 1942, Mao Zedong announced that 'literature and art should serve political purposes' (Clark, 1991:27). Tight control was since imposed on filmmaking. May Fourth literature was adapted with a change of theme, a twist of ending or with a clear and positive statement from the narrator to suit this purpose. For instance, The New Year's Sacrifice (dir. Sang Hu, 1956) adapted from the greatest May Fourth writer Lu Xun ends with a narration that indicates the promise of a better life under the Communist Party.<sup>2</sup> Other examples include The Lin Family Shop (dir. Shui Hua, 1959) and Early Spring in February (dir. Xie Tieli, 1963). The ideology and spirit of the May Fourth reformers were lost under the Party control which was further tightened during the Cultural Revolution in 1964-1976. During this period, filmmaking almost came to a halt, for film as a western art form was classified as a cultural weed by the Party leaders.<sup>3</sup>

The situation took a fresh turn after the Cultural Revolution with the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers, the Fifth Generation, who are the first batch of graduates after the Beijing Film Academy reopened in 1978. They developed a new approach to filmmaking distinguished from their predecessors whose techniques were largely influenced by the static elements of stage opera. Using Yellow Earth (dir. Chen

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<sup>2</sup> Lu Xun's story is a 'poignant and an indirect, though powerful, indictment of the society in which she [the protagonist] lived and suffered' (Clark, 1991:110); but the director Xia Yan adds an off-screen narration: 'This happened more than forty years ago. Yes, this is a thing of the past. What we should celebrate is that times like these finally passed on. They are over and will not return' (from the shooting script in Zhufu: Cong Xiaoshuo Dao Dianying, quoted in Clark, 1991:201), which is a promise of a better future.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Clark notes that fiction filmmaking in China stopped completely in 1966 and only films of "model performances" were made in the 1970s (1991:127).

Kaige, 1984) as a point of departure, the Fifth Generation declares their version of cinema that 'relies less on melodrama, dialogue, and didacticism and more on profound use of image and sound and their concealed subtleties' (Kuoshu, 2002:11). However, like their predecessors, this new generation of filmmakers sourced their materials from literature. For instance, Chen Kaige adapted A-Cheng's King of the Children (1987), while Zhang Yimou based his trilogy – Red Sorghum (1987), Judou (1989) and Raise the Red Lantern (1991) - on works of prominent Chinese writers, namely Mo Yan, Liu Heng and Su Tong. These films received international acclaim for their experiments with *mise-en-scene* elements in delivering the narrative. In the meantime, the previously untouchable subject matters concerning sexuality and political resentment were exposed, transgressing the traditional values based on the Confucian teachings guarding traditional Chinese society.

This new wave evidently transformed the filmmaking scene on the mainland in terms of narrative mode, cinematic and cultural codes. However, these contemporary Chinese films have been criticised for abandoning the needs of the Chinese audience 'for the demands of the international film markets' (Kuoshu, 2002:12) and embracing 'Western forms' (Rayns, 1991:111). This phenomenon has inspired my study of adaptations in contemporary Chinese cinema in relation to Western influence. I am intrigued to find out answers to questions such as: How are these adaptations of Chinese fictions different from their predecessors, i.e. the conventional adaptations and traditional Chinese cinema? Are they influenced by Western values and film form? If so, in what way and to what extent are they being affected? What is the intention of the filmmakers

behind this kind of adaptation? And what is the resulting ideological impact and its implications?

### 1.1.1 Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis

Based on the above discussion, I shall position my study on adaptations in Chinese cinema within the context of western influence. I am therefore making the assumption that adaptations in contemporary Chinese cinema are influenced by Western social, cultural and artistic values, for the pleasure of Western audiences.

I do not attempt to compare the source text with the film adaptation as does the comparative theory for two major reasons. First of all, pursuing the notion of fidelity—be it to the ‘letter’, the ‘spirit’ or the ‘essence’ of the work (McFarlane, 1996:8-9)—by evaluating the relation between a film and its source text is in itself problematic, as Christian Metz notes: the reader ‘will not always find his film, since what *he* has before him in the actual film is now somebody else’s phantasy’ (1977:12). Each individual reader has his/her interpretation of the source literature, creating visual images in his/her mind based on personal knowledge and experiences; so too with the filmmakers. When literature is made into a film, it is the filmmakers’ interpretation of the material. Henceforth, it would be in vain to attempt to compare the film with its source text. Secondly, Brian McFarlane’s suggestion of studying ‘the process of transposition from novel to film, with a view not to evaluating one in relation to the other but to establishing the kind of relation a film might bear to the novel it is based on’ (1996:vii) means a strong emphasis on the transferability and adaptability of the narrative and signifiers. This approach, with its focus on the adaptation process, neglects the more important issue of the existence of certain cultural codes, narrative modes, generic traits and artistic

presentations in the adaptations, and the reasons for their presence. In short, pursuing the question of faithfulness and the study of the process in achieving this does not lead to the development of a clear picture of the relation between the film text and its contexts.

Similarly, the medium-specific theory which highlights the uniqueness of each medium that gives rise to forms of artistic expression distinct from those in other media will not satisfy my purpose.<sup>4</sup> Firstly, theorists of this approach are inclined to compare the adapted film against the source novel with a prior perception of the superiority of the source novel over its adapted version. As George Bluestone remarks, '[the process] begins by finding resemblances between novel and film [and] ends by loudly proclaiming their differences' (1957:ix). Secondly, stressing the technicality of film as a medium and film language as the answer to literary language undermines the textual features of adaptation. Over-emphasis on the medium leaves no room for the study of the content: the film text and its contexts, just as in the comparative approach.

My study of adaptations in Chinese cinema within the context of Western influence involves the examination of the interrelation between the adapted film (hypertext) and other texts that contributed to the resulting film. This is most adequately looked at from the perspective of the intertextual approach to adaptation theory suggested by Robert Stam. Stam argues that film adaptation shall be looked at as a special kind of intertextual relationship between a hypotext (a source text) and a hypertext (film adaptation). I shall use Mikhail Bakhtin's 'dialogism' as the point of departure for my discussion. Stam explains that 'intertextual dialogism refers to the infinite and open-ended possibilities generated by all the discursive practices of a culture, the entire matrix

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<sup>4</sup> As Noel Carroll notes, the medium specific theorist believes that 'each art form has its own domain of expression and exploration... determined by the nature of the medium' (1996:26).

of communicative utterances within which the artistic text is situated, and which reach the text not only through recognisable influences but through a subtle process of dissemination' (1992:204). However, as my study involves cross-cultural textual referencing, I would like to testify that the ongoing dissemination process of communicative utterances happens not only within the culture in which the artistic text is situated, but also across different cultures. With this as the platform, my study aims to show that contemporary Chinese directors make reference to western filmmaking in the process of creating their own. In doing so, they inevitably reinvent cultural codes which transgress traditional Chinese values and these appeal to the taste of Western audiences.

### 1.1.2 Methodology

The above discussion indicates that an intertextual study of adaptations in contemporary Chinese cinema requires a detailed content analysis of the films. I shall refer to Roland Barthes' explanation with regard to the relationship between reading text and writing text, there he lists five codes that are necessary to the production of the classical 'reading' text: hermeneutic codes, proairectic codes, semic codes, cultural codes and symbolic codes (1975:18-20). As the hermeneutic codes are the inculcation of the enigma which is the question to be pursued throughout the text and proairectic codes refer to the actions, both of the codes relate to the narrative of the text. On the other hand, the semic, cultural and symbolic codes contribute to the cultural elements of the text. These five codes can be presented stylistically – in the context of film, these can be referred to as cinematic codes - to provide the meanings intended. Referring to the above discussion, my study shall be based on textual and contextual analysis drawing on the narrative elements of the text, namely **narrative structure**, **narrative functions** and **character functions**, as well

as **cultural codes** and **cinematic codes**. I will also look into the consequences of intertextuality relating to the **genre conventions** of the adaptations, for which I will focus on melodrama and martial arts movies as the main genres.

I have chosen two films as the subjects of my study: Raise the Red Lantern by Zhang Yimou and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2001) by Ang Lee. These choices are made on the basis of three major criteria: the background of the films, the background of the directors, and genre. Firstly, I want to study films from different backgrounds in terms of region and financial support for the purpose of comparison. Raise the Red Lantern is a mainland Chinese film funded by Era International, a Taiwanese production company (Glaessner, 1992:41); while Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is a multinational co-production chiefly financed by Hollywood (Rayns, 2001:45). Secondly, choosing the films with reference to the background of the directors allows me to examine films of different styles. Zhang Yimou is a Fifth Generation filmmaker renowned internationally for his stylistic presentation and boldness in breaking conventional taboos. His cinematography in Yellow Earth won him the Best Cinematographer award in Hawaii, while Red Sorghum (dir: Zhang Yimou, 1987) was awarded a Golden Bear in Berlin. By contrast, currently based in California, Ang Lee is a versatile Taiwanese director who has enjoyed not only artistic success but also box office profits with his films such as The Wedding Banquet (1993), Sense and Sensibility (1995) and more recently, Brokeback Mountain (2005). While Zhang is praised by art-house audiences and his films have been classified as art-cinema, 'a type of cinema differing from an assumed form – that is, the Hollywood studio system' (Pearson and Simpson ed, 2001:21), Lee is much celebrated in Hollywood. As Bordwell notes, 'The art cinema developed a range of *mise-en-scene*

cues for expressing character mood: static posture, covert glances, smiles that fade, aimless walk, emotion-filled landscapes and associated objects' (1985:208). This is in contrast with the classical Hollywood movies which have '[formulated] narrative strategies and accessible themes', and are 'backed by superior marketing and distribution', proposing 'a universality which [is] commercially successful' (Pearson and Simpson ed., 2001:21). How does this difference affect their film adaptations? Thirdly, choosing two films from different genres will help to avoid one-dimensional analysis and overly neat conclusions. Zhang's film, an adaptation of Su Tong's *Wives and Concubines*, is a melodrama, whereas Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is adapted from a martial arts novel of the same title by Wang Dulu. The contrast between these two adaptations allows me to look beyond the production systems, styles and genres and thus provides an opportunity to draw more representative generalisations.

## 1.2 Raise the Red Lantern

Adapted from renowned novelist Su Tong's *Wives and Concubines*, Raise the Red Lantern completes Zhang Yimou's trilogy of films in similar styles which began with Red Sorghum and Judou. In the late 80s and early 90s, Zhang rose in international film festivals alongside other Fifth Generation directors as his films won prestigious awards across the globe.<sup>5</sup> While Zhang's films were acclaimed by Western audiences for their distinctive visual storytelling, in his homeland, Judou and Raise the Red Lantern were banned until he made The Story of Qiu Ju (1992) which was approved by the Communist Party for its contemporary theme. However, Zhang continues to receive criticism from within Chinese society and he is accused of making films for Westerners.<sup>6</sup> To examine the reasons behind this claim, I will study Raise the Red Lantern from the perspectives of genre conventions, narrative structure, narrative functions, character functions, cinematic codes and cultural codes.

### 1.2.1 Genre conventions

Raise the Red Lantern is a melodrama with a difference. While the classical melodrama 'subordinates virtually everything to broad emotional impact' (Bordwell, 1985:70), Zhang's adaptation, by contrast, reduces emotional expressiveness through cinematic devices, creating a sense of coldness throughout the film. Apart from the scene in which second wife Zhuoyun's ear is hurt by Songlian, Zhang avoids big emotional moments. This difference is stark when we compare it with the Chinese drama of the early and mid-twentieth century, such as The Goddess (dir: Wu Yonggang, 1934) and The Spring River

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<sup>5</sup> See list of awards won by Zhang Yimou in <<http://www.senseofcinema.com/contents/directors/02/zhang.html>> [accessed 1 December 2005].

<sup>6</sup> Rey Chow lists examples of criticism against Zhang. See Chow, 1995:151.

Flows East,<sup>7</sup> in which pain and suffering are demonstrated expressively by means of tears and verbal declarations.

In addition, Raise the Red Lantern moves away from the classic themes of love, betrayal and sacrifice. Although it is a story about women's fates, the struggle in the film is driven by jealousy, which is in turn driven by the craze for power and authority but not love. Songlian's action against the teenage maid Yan'er after her lanterns are sealed is to demonstrate that she is still in command. Feigning pregnancy in order to have Chen spend time with her doesn't mean she loves him. It is her way of regaining her position in the household. Having this distinctive theme, Raise the Red Lantern disassociates itself from the 'three-location movies' (*santing dianying*), the Taiwanese drama popularised in the mid twentieth century which depicts romantic love stories between beautiful characters who face obstacles in their relationships.<sup>8</sup> Again, unlike Zhang's film, laughter for happiness and tears for sadness are essential elements in these films.

Furthermore, Raise the Red Lantern as a melodrama in itself entails a shift of cultural perspective, as this category is not part of the Chinese genre system. In his discussion of the political economy of Chinese melodrama, Nick Browne argues that originating in the West, melodrama is 'the most complex and compelling popular film form that embodies the negotiation between the traditional ethical system and the new state ideology, one that articulates the range and force of the emotional contradictions between them' (Browne, 1994:40). The subtext in Raise the Red Lantern resembles

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<sup>7</sup> The Goddess tells the story of a mother who prostitutes herself to raise her son, while The Spring River Flows East is a tale of a wife who sacrifices herself for her husband. See Clark, 1991:13, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Parental opposition is the usual obstacle in these fairy-tale love stories. See Zhang and Xiao, 1998:53.

those of the adaptations of the May Fourth literature, such as The New Year's Sacrifice.<sup>9</sup> Like his predecessors, Zhang denounces the feudal family system and society as a whole, which is governed by the Confucian order. While the filmmakers of the twentieth century subtly condemn the early era of the Communist Party, Zhang's film can be seen as being critical of the iron policies of the contemporary Chinese government. In view of this, Raise the Red Lantern fits into the category of films which give 'an account of action and subjectivity in the social formation from the standpoint of loss and from the point of view of its victims' (Browne, 1994:40).

Meanwhile, despite the atmospheric coldness displayed in the film, the characters' emotions are depicted in a subtle way. For instance, the film begins with a full-screen shot of Songlian answering to her stepmother's demand that she be married off following her father's death. Songlian's expressionless face shows a kind of emotional numbness, indicating her submission to fate. Gestures are widely used to communicate the characters' emotional states; these include Songlian's looks of rapture as she enjoys the foot-massage and third wife Meishan's stares of contempt at Songlian, while Yan'er's jealousy is shown by her pulling away washing water from Songlian and spitting onto her clothes. These emotional displays coincide with Bordwell's claim that 'the narration [in the melodrama] will be highly communicative about fabula information - special information pertaining to characters' emotional states' (1985:70).

In general, Raise the Red Lantern tells the story of the fates of women within the framework of melodrama by using unconventional filming devices. It also marks a twist to conventional tales of romance and the sufferings due to the loss of love.

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<sup>9</sup> The New Year's Sacrifice condemns the feudal landlord and society through the fate of an unfortunate servant maid; while Family tells the story of the decaying feudal familial system. See Clark, 1998:111

### 1.2.2 Narrative structure

The film adopts the narrative structure of Hollywood melodrama which ‘relies on a firm primacy effect, plays down curiosity about the past, and maximises what will happen next—and, especially, how any given character will react to what has happened’ (Bordwell, 1985:70). The cause-effect chain of the film’s fabula centres on Songlian. In the opening scene of the film we are informed indirectly that Songlian will be married off by her stepmother to a rich man. This arouses the audience’s curiosity as to ‘what will happen next’. Songlian’s reply (‘Isn’t it a woman’s fate to be married off?’) plays down our curiosity about her past as a student, the cause of her father’s death and her willingness to give up her student life. At the same time, it arouses our anticipation of her ability to adapt to her married life (the primacy effect). In fact the timescale of the film falls within a year – from summer to the following summer; it begins with Songlian’s marrying into the Chen household and ends with her becoming insane and being replaced by the fifth wife, indicating the end of her marriage. Within this timescale, events revolve around Songlian and we follow her from the moment she steps into the household throughout her power struggle in the family.

As in classical melodrama, in Raise the Red Lantern the gaps in the causality chain are few. Actions are followed closely by reactions. During their first encounter Songlian realises Yan’er dislikes her and two scenes later she punishes Yan’er for being rude to her. Songlian’s jealousy prompts her to hurt Zhuoyun, who, in revenge, persuades Chen to be distant to Songlian. Most causal actions are planted to invite expectations. We find out at the same time as Songlian does about the affair between Meishan and Dr Gao; and questions such as ‘when and how will they be discovered,’ and

‘what will be the consequences, especially for Songlian, when they are discovered,’ drive us forward. However, these expectations are held to a later sequence, as there is a gap of five sequences between Songlian’s discovery of Meishan’s affair and the disclosure of it. In doing so, the film maintains the audience’s interest ‘by retardation and carefully timed coincidences that produce surprise’ (Bordwell, 1985:70) as in classical melodrama. Songlian discovers Meishan’s affair when she picks up a *mahjong* piece from the floor and exposes it when she is drunk. These are the coincidences carefully planned by Zhang.

In the meantime, though, Zhang gives a twist to the melodrama of the May Fourth adaptations or the Taiwanese ‘three-location movies’ by introducing the element of suspense into his film. Although suspense is common in Hollywood melodrama, it is not in both the genre varieties in Chinese cinema. Songlian’s first visit to the small room on the rooftop and her questions to Chen and Meishan about it build up the suspense. It helps to create a thriller-like atmosphere as we are constantly reminded of the room through the *mise-en-scene* elements which will be discussed in detail later.

### 1.2.3 Narrative functions

The overall meanings of Raise the Red Lantern can be read at two levels: firstly, the story portrays the fate of women in a feudal family and society as a whole, which is critical of Chinese culture and Confucianism; and secondly, the subtext of this narrative, which is Zhang’s critique of the Communist Party from a broader perspective.

At the first level, through the journey of Songlian in the Chen household the film portrays the vulnerability of women as an object in a male-dominant society. According to Confucian codes, women are obliged to obey their fathers as children do; to obey their

husbands when married; and to obey their eldest sons when widowed.<sup>10</sup> This is evident in the first sequence when Songlian is forced to marry a rich man. Because men are the masters and financial backbones of a family, her father's death leaves Songlian with no other choice in life. Despite being a college student, she needs a man to support her. Her willingness to be a concubine and her stepmother's arrangement for it in exchange for financial stability demonstrates the acceptance of women themselves of their lowly status in patriarchal society. Zhang conveys criticism of the corrupt values which are so deep-rooted that they become unquestionable. These are the values he challenges throughout the film. Furthermore, Zhang imposes a spatial and temporal restriction on the narrative, having the story happen in a mansion within the span of a year which indicates its normality – a common tale that can happen anytime and anywhere.

At the second level, the Chen family's patriarchal system alludes to the control of the Communist Party on its grassroots. Zhang, like most other Fifth Generation directors, belongs to the generation which suffered the trauma of the Cultural Revolution. This haunting experience is the driving force of his filmmaking, in which he subtly displays his discontentment concerning issues of politics, history and culture, as in Red Sorghum and Judou. In Raise the Red Lantern, the trivial and sometimes seemingly absurd rules of the Chen family reflect those of the State. In the film, the characters – the four wives and the servants - who are governed by the rules understand their absurdity and unfairness but can only quietly bear it, resembling the Chinese people who are oppressed by the Party's strict policies.

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<sup>10</sup> From the famous Three Obediences and the Four Virtues which guard a woman's conducts in a feudal society. The Four Virtues are morality, proper speech, modest manner and diligent work.

Despite this, Zhang allows his characters to break the rules: Songlian feigns pregnancy to get Chen's attention and her lying is an intolerable act as it challenges his authority; Yan'er keeps old lanterns in her room, stepping beyond the boundary of a maid; and Meishan keeps a lover, an act against the traditional practice that only men can have more than one sexual partner. While the household rules represent the power and authority of the State which are not to be challenged, the actions of Songlian, Yan'er and Meishan to break them can be viewed as the Chinese people's reaction to the governing power. However, Zhang does not hesitate to show us that the consequences of defiance are deadly: Songlian is distanced by Chen – the sealing of the lanterns means the end of her marriage, the degrading of her status and functionality in the family; Yan'er dies as a result of punishment 'according to the old rules' (in the first wife's words); and Meishan is killed for her unlawful affair with Dr Gao. Together they constitute a strong condemnation of the Party's aggressive actions against the protesting students who tried to defy the authority at Tiananmen Square in June 1989.

In short, Raise the Red Lantern has a deeper meaning underneath the story of a power struggle between the wives and concubines in a feudal family. This is confirmed by the director himself as he remarks that 'beyond the relationship among the characters I want to show the deep humanity of Chinese culture and society' (Reynaud, 1991:27). As Zhang is 'a director noted for his *mise en scene*, colour and form' (Glaessner, 1991:42), these narrative functions are enhanced by his techniques which will be discussed later.

#### **1.2.4 Character functions**

The major function of the women characters in Raise the Red Lantern is to demonstrate that regardless of their background they all share the same fate – being the victims of a

feudal family/society. Whoever becomes the winner of their power struggle, she remains just a plaything of the feudal family. Songlian, who is fortunate enough to have received a college education, is reduced to the same level as the other wives in the Chen family. Whether a student, a singer, a maid or merely an obedient wife, they represent Chinese women who, for generations, have been victimised by the patriarchal system. The power struggle among them can be read as the class struggle within the Party itself.

However, the fact that Songlian - the student - is the first to break the rules (as she insists on having dinner in her room with Chen only) seems to indicate that education can make a difference. Songlian's challenging the rules alludes to the quest for social reformation by the students in the late 80s which culminated in the protest at Tiananmen Square. In this respect, as stated in the earlier section, Chen represents not only the masters of feudal households and society, but also the Party which imposes tight control on its people.

In the meantime, although Zhang plants the possibility of a romance between Songlian and Feipu, the eldest son of Chen, it doesn't materialise. Feipu represents the possible hope for Songlian to escape from her trauma and similarly the hope of the Chinese people for a more liberal future. There is no rescuer to release the women/the Chinese people from their sufferings.

The character functions are enhanced by the choice of actors. The casting of Gong Li - who plays the lead in Zhang's previous films, Red Sorghum and Judou - as Songlian inevitably invites the audiences to associate her with the characters and the meanings they represent in the earlier films. As Mary Farquhar notes, 'The Gong Li heroines in the trilogy are more than erotic images of beautiful brides sold to old men.'

They are, of course, looked at with pleasure but these women also look back and in actively looking they also choose their destinies'.<sup>10</sup> As these first two films of the trilogy depict female desire and the transgression of the Confucian moral order,<sup>11</sup> the characters in the films embody cultural oppression which is the result of repression. As such, Gong Li as Songlian reactivates this perception and encourages us to explore the social and cultural meanings it conveys.

### 1.2.5 Cinematic codes

Since his role as the cinematographer for Yellow Earth and after directing Red Sorghum and Judou, Zhang has established his trademark of authorship with his distinctive filmic style. He frequently uses 'immobile camera and striking framing of nature scenes' (Berry, 1991:201) to present visual storytelling which provides meanings that are opposed to certain historical, cultural and political issues. In Raise the Red Lantern, Zhang continues to experiment with these techniques, using colours, space and form to enhance atmosphere and character psychology.

First of all, the film utilises camera angle and framing to maximise effect and intensify the audiences' emotional response to the characters. The opening scene of a full-screen close-up shot of Songlian telling about her fate invites us to feel for her emotional numbness. As this is the only full-screen close-up shot in the film, it highlights the contents of Songlian's speech (that she is being forced to be a concubine to a rich man) and creates a powerful effect in regard to her feelings and her helplessness as a woman. In doing so, Zhang delivers his authorial comment from the start. This is more evident in the scene after Songlian's first night with Chen, in which she looks at herself

<sup>10</sup> See <<http://www.senseofcinema.com/contents/directors/02/zhang.html>> [accessed 1 December 2005].

<sup>11</sup> Yuejin Wang notes on Red Sorghum, 'For a Chinese film, a narrative blatantly addressing issues of desire, sexuality and transgression is itself already a transgression.' (1991:81)

in the mirror, looking lost and disgusted. This coincides with Bordwell's remarks on the psychology of the characters in art-cinema: 'Even if a character remains unaware of or inarticulate about his or her mental state, the viewer must be prepared to notice how behaviour and setting give the character away' (1985:208). Songlian's static glance at herself in a dream-like setting created with faint lighting is filmed from her point-of-view. As such, Zhang invites the audience to identify and sympathise with her situation. As this is the first and last time she looks back at herself, it seemingly indicates that she is no longer her true self as she is being pushed into the power struggle among the women in the household and lost in it from then on.

Zhang also uses his framing skills to assert his authorial comments. In the scene where Songlian enters the Chen mansion, she is framed against a background of a wall of calligraphic writings, presumably the teachings guarding the household. We see Songlian walk into the background of the writings as if she is being caged in the rules and the house itself. This is further augmented by the framing of Songlian's living quarters. The four walls of the square courtyard always fit into the frame like a prison in which Songlian is caged. In the meantime, it is interesting to note that Zhang avoids a direct shot of Chen, the master of the house. He is always being taken in long shots, side views, or being cut off from the frame. The absence of Chen, however, doesn't eliminate the patriarchal authority he represents. By avoiding direct shots of him, Zhang actually delivers his comment that the corrupt familial and social systems are so powerful that their existence is predestined and indisputable.

In addition, Zhang uses framing and camera angles as part of his narration. At Songlian's wedding night, we see Chen sitting in the chair at a distance from his bride,

taken in a long shot, making the distance between him and Songlian look even greater. This camera angle is used in most of the shots involving Chen in Songlian's room as an indication of their loveless relationship. A shot of a similar angle and distance is used in the dining hall when the wives and husband are having meals which establishes the distant relationship among the characters. Their physical closeness of sitting together is cancelled out by the distance created by the camera. Furthermore, the use of immobile camera and long shots add to the emotional coldness exuded throughout the film. Zhang distances his characters from the audience by avoiding close-ups, encouraging an emotional disassociation which is consistent with the atmospheric coldness displayed in the film.

In the meantime, the setting of the film in an 18th-century three-courtyard mansion (*sanhe yuan*) coupled with the immobile shots maximises the atmospheric coldness and enhances the narrative. The courtyards are shown layer upon layer and wall after wall, inviting an effective reading of the complicated and distant relationships among the characters within the walls and courtyards. The confined space of the mansion establishes a prison-like environment out of which the women are forbidden to step. Meishan, the only wife who attempts to cross the boundary in the film – leaving the house to meet her lover – has a tragic end. However, the rooftop becomes the only space in which Songlian is 'free' from captivity, where she is able to roam about without restriction. In this space also she has a romantic encounter with Feipu, the eldest son of Chen. This freedom, though, is short-lived. First of all, the possible romance between them is immediately cancelled out by the distance between them at the moment when they stand apart at the far end of the rooftop corridor. Secondly, the little room at the end

of the rooftop is a misery that restricts Songlian from enjoying her space. The remoteness of its location coupled with the long shots creates a thriller-like atmosphere and arouses suspense.

In addition, as in his earlier films, Zhang's artistic presentation extends to the use of colour. The blue background in the overview of the multi-courtyard mansion and on the morning when Meishan is executed adds to the icy-cool bleakness. The red lanterns represent not only the women's passion and sexual desire but also their jealousy. They are a symbol of Chen's status, as he has the authority to light them and thus, metaphorically, to govern the households according to the rules. As such, when Songlian's feigned pregnancy is exposed, the lanterns are sealed in black, indicating the degrading of her status in the family. The contrast of black lanterns against the earlier red ones in her room augments the sense of atmospheric bleakness and psychological deterioration.

Another example of Zhang's subtle use of colour is in Songlian's costumes. She enters the mansion in her black-and-white student uniform which is immediately changed into a red bridal costume and other bright, colourful attire. The change of her costumes implies the transition from an innocent college girl who lives a simple life to a calculating concubine who is involved in a complicated power struggle in a feudal family. In the final sequence, however, Songlian returns to her innocent self when she becomes insane and we see her wandering round the courtyard in her student uniform.

To summarise, Raise the Red Lantern demonstrates Zhang's artistic vision, which combines Chinese art and philosophy in his filmmaking. As Esther Yau remarks, 'Consistent with Chinese art, Zhang Yimou's cinematography works with a limited range

of colours, natural lighting, and a non-perspectival use of filmic space that aspires to a Taoist thought: “Silent is the Roaring Sound, Formless is the Image Grand” (1991:64-5).

### 1.2.6 Cultural codes

Culture is an important issue in Raise the Red Lantern. Through his stylistic presentation of cultural elements, Zhang asserts his authorial comments and criticism of Confucianism in a feudal society. This is achieved by two means: firstly, the daily practices in the Chen household, and secondly, the physical settings in the film.

First of all, the film emphasises the setting and observation of rules and rituals in a family which is a common practice across Chinese society. As David Neo notes, ‘The family situation is central to Chinese culture, as according to Confucian philosophy, it is believed that only when families are well run, will the state also be well governed’.<sup>13</sup>

Rules are important in ensuring the proper running of a household. According to Thomas Kennedy, ‘[Ritual] was an important cultural force guiding not only official conduct but family life and individual behaviour as well’ (1993:xxvii). The ancestors’ rules’ are repeatedly mentioned in the film, reminding us of the importance of abiding by them. They include: having family dinner together, the selection of a favoured wife to spend the night with, and showing respect to the master of the house for his decisions in all contexts.

To dramatise and highlight the importance of the game of rules, Zhang recreates cultural codes by devising rituals such as the lighting of lanterns as a means of selecting a favoured wife to spend a night with, and the sealing of them as a punishment for a rule-breaking wife; foot-massage as a privilege for the chosen wife, as well as the privilege of

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<sup>13</sup> See <[http://www.senseofcinema.com/contents/cteq/04/33/raise\\_red\\_lantern.html](http://www.senseofcinema.com/contents/cteq/04/33/raise_red_lantern.html)> [accessed 1 December 2005].

deciding what is laid on the dinner table. This treatment attracts criticism from within Chinese society, including that of the writer and cultural commentator Dai Qing, who charges that ‘this kind of film is really shot for the casual pleasures of foreigners’ (Chow, 1995:151). However, referring to Bazin’s conception of the phenomenology of realism in cinema, Zhang actually creates a ‘realism’ within the world of the film which, although it doesn’t reflect actual phenomena, delivers his intended message in the manner of the directors of art cinema who create ‘the artifice to construct a realist image’ (quoted in Stam, 2000:77). Stam points out that Bazin believes ‘the automatising of the cinematic apparatus is a necessary but not sufficient condition for realism,’ and that ‘he cannot be reduced to being a “naïve realist”’ (2000:77). To criticise Zhang for reconstructing a “fake realism” means falling into the category of pursuing “total reality” and undermining filmic art.

In the meantime, through the practice of foot-massage the film overtly displays women’s sexual desire. Songlian’s looks of rapture as she enjoys the massage can be associated with sexual pleasure or the longing of it following the massage. Exposing women’s sexuality delivers yet another message from Zhang as he points out, ‘Woman is very much a typical sexual body that is bound by social chains and that needs to be liberated’ (Chow, 1995:143). However, as foot-massage is a procedure prior to ‘serving’ the master, it implies that the presumed pleasure for Songlian and other wives from foot-massage is ultimately for the sexual enjoyment of Chen. Again, the status of women is reduced to a plaything. Portraying Yan’er imagining herself enjoying the massage furthers Zhang’s comment that the women servants are even more worthless. As the Confucian Analects explains, ‘Of all people, girls and servants are the most difficult to

behave to. If you are familiar with them, they lose their humility. If you maintain a reserve towards them, they are discontented' (Ledge, 1966:163).

Secondly, in terms of physical settings, the film uses unrealistic props to maximise visual pleasure. The lighting of red lanterns in the serenity of the old courtyard and in Songlian's room is unusual and impractical though visually stunning. This also applies to the gigantic opera masks in Meishan's room. In addition, having meals in front of the enormous portraits of the ancestors in the dining hall is a display of disrespect as by tradition they are placed in the sacred ancestral hall. Furthermore, the spectacular architecture of the three-courtyard mansion is repeatedly captured from different angles and overviews, seemingly inviting the audiences to appreciate its beauty. All these displays have invited Rey Chow's comment that 'the use of appealing visual qualities exoticises China and that it is such exoticism, rather than the genuine complexities of Chinese society, that accounts for the success of such films in the West' (1995:151).

### 1.2.7 Conclusion

Taking the form of melodrama - a genre originating in the West - Raise the Red Lantern by itself provides easy reading for Western audiences, inviting them to interpret the subtext of class struggle within an oppressive social order and the ideological critique of the representation of sexual difference.<sup>13</sup> To achieve his motif of social criticism, Zhang endorses his trademark of authorship<sup>14</sup> in Raise the Red Lantern as in the earlier two films of his trilogy which David Neo describes as 'deeply critical of Confucianism and

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<sup>13</sup> Browne notes, 'For contemporary film studies, melodrama indicates a site of ideological critique centred on the representation of sexual difference' (1994:41).

<sup>14</sup> Chow writes in detail on Zhang's trademark style in Red Sorghum, Judou and Raise the Red Lantern (1995:143).

Chinese culture'.<sup>16</sup> As with the directors of art-cinema, this authorial signature encourages Western audiences who are familiar with Zhang's internationally successful Red Sorghum and Judou to have certain expectations of his third film. In fact, Zhang not only makes reference to the thematic message of criticising cultural values, but also refers to the stylistic presentation in his previous films, continuing to experiment with form, colour and framing. The artistic use of *mise-en-scene* elements to enhance character psychology, atmosphere and narrative are new perspectives in Chinese cinema brought forward by Zhang and his fellow Fifth Generation filmmakers as the result of exposure to Western filmmaking during his days in the Beijing Film Academy.<sup>17</sup>

Zhang's understanding of Western film art has provided him with a platform for intertextual references in terms of traditional intertextuality and postmodern intertextuality. The difference between traditional intertextuality and postmodern intertextuality, as Cardwell points out, lies in the fact that 'the former aims to express or enhance meaning, whereas the latter is merely a superficial pastiche of images and references' (2002:92). In the first instance, it is evident that Zhang uses traditional intertextuality in the aspects of historical and temporal settings to provide meanings. For instance, Songlian's student costume and the hairstyle of the men (without a plait) indicate that the film is set in the post-Qing Dynasty era. In the second instance, the device of lighting lanterns as a means of selecting a favoured wife and the ritual of foot-massage are signs that are created which are 'not an index of an underlying reality, but merely of other signs' (Cardwell, 2002:92). These signs refer to the wider meanings

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<sup>16</sup> See <[http://www.senseofcinema.com/contents/cteq/04/33/raise\\_red\\_lantern.html](http://www.senseofcinema.com/contents/cteq/04/33/raise_red_lantern.html)> [accessed 1 December 2005].

<sup>17</sup> Clark remarks (on Yellow Earth) that the Fifth Generation, represented to such dazzling effect, 'was trained by exposure to a wider range of world cinema than its predecessors.' (1991:180)

intended, as Verina Glaessner suggests that '[the] red lanterns symbolise not passion but only status' (1991:42).

By making such intertextual references in the production of Raise the Red Lantern, Zhang rearticulates the cultural past and values that are corrupted, while in the meantime appropriating cultural codes to encourage a better understanding of the overall meanings he intended. In doing so, the signs he designed and invented are dismissed by audiences from within his culture as an absurdity and 'specially made to cater to those who are familiar with the established rules of American film culture' (Chow, 1995:151), whereas for the Western audience, it is praised for creating 'a sense of space, of ritual, of utopia' which 'has generated religious, political and domestic architecture in China' (Rayns, 1991:27).

### 1.3 Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is an adaptation of one of the five volumes of Wang Du Lu's nineteenth century martial arts novel. Since the rise of *wuxia pian* (martial arts movies) in Chinese cinema in the 1920s, filmmakers have been sourcing materials from popular plays and novels, building their stories around the theme of vengeance resulting in the struggle between social loyalty and personal desires. In the early days, with linear narrative structure, sketchy plots and crude special effects, the emphasis was on magic and fantasy, creating supernatural films, until realism was intensified and the lyrical style of filming was introduced in King Hu's films in the late 1960s (Bordwell, 2001:16-7). In A Touch of Zen (1971), Hu breaks the tradition of the genre, using a poetic style of filming to portray a deeper level of human values, contributing to the emergence of the "new *wuxia pian*," which is much praised among art-house audiences in the West for its artistic presentation.<sup>18</sup> Ang Lee's adaptation of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, also well-received in the West, moves a step further, combining the elements of old and new *wuxia pian*.<sup>19</sup> The result is a widely successful film, not only across Asia (Kemp, 2000:15), but also in the West.<sup>20</sup> The success of the film in the West raises a few questions: What are the elements in the film that have appealed to the Western audiences? How do the audiences interpret the cultural codes in the film that are alien to them? Did the filmmaker purposefully reinvent the codes to please Western audiences? Referring to the earlier discussion on the focus of my study, I would like to ask whether the filmmaker had intentionally appealed to Western audiences in his adaptation. I will

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<sup>18</sup> 'For a time, King Hu was the only director from Hong Kong to be taken seriously by Western critics' since his films first graced the screens of the Western art-cinemas (Teo, 1997:87).

<sup>19</sup> Bordwell comments on Ang Lee 'blending everything, ... fully aware of the landmarks of the genre he's working in, ... reworks them to new effect.' (2001:21).

<sup>20</sup> The film was greeted with applause at its screening at Cannes in 2000 (Corliss, 2001:10).

study the film from five major aspects: genre conventions, narrative structure, narrative functions, character functions, cinematic codes and cultural codes.

### 1.3.1 Genre conventions

As a film of the martial arts genre, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon inevitably invites viewers to have certain expectations: goal-oriented swordsmen and women, usually driven by vowing revenge, after struggling through a series of obstacles and a climactic fight scene, achieve their goal - the final resolution.<sup>21</sup> As an Ang Lee martial arts movie, the viewers' expectations extend to complexity in plots and characterisation, and subtlety in terms of cinematic presentation.<sup>22</sup> In general, the film follows the conventions of the martial arts genre in terms of themes, motifs, settings and the lead characters' gender.

Lee's adoption of the classical theme can be seen in the first few minutes of the film, at the scene of Li Mu Bai's first meeting with Yu Shu Lien. We find out that Li intends to retire from the Jiang Hu world once he has succeeded in avenging his master's death. This genre convention on the subject of revenge is repeated later when Tsai and his daughter, May, are also looking for Jade Fox to avenge their wife/mother's death.

Despite this, Lee plants a different motif in his film as he gives a twist to the conventional story of revenge by basing its main story on the love affair between Jen and Lo, and contrasts their passion with the repression between the older couple, Li and Yu. Romance is not a focus in classical martial arts movies. In Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, the love story theme is carefully crafted in such a way that Jen and Lo seem to represent the twenty-first century young generation who express their feelings directly

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<sup>21</sup> See Bordwell's analysis on the Mandarin *wuxia pian* (2001:19).

<sup>22</sup> Lee is much praised for his 'most lively and cinematic Austen adaptation yet screened' [Sense and Sensibility] and 'beautifully crafted version of novelist Rick Moody's psychological study of lust and parental responsibilities' in the 70s [Ice Storm] (Francke, 2000:13).

and physically. At the same time, Li and Yu's regret for repressing their feelings for each other seems to be the filmmaker's condemnation of the old Confucian codes.

This love story theme is augmented by the title of the film, a direct translation of that of the novel which refers to the young lovers. Lo is the tiger in hibernation while he waits for his lover, Jen, the dragon who keeps her mighty power a secret. To the director, the hidden dragon also represents 'hidden desire' (Kemp, 2000:14). With the two symbolically aggressive animals in mind, the romance Lee portrays is far from the classical 'butterfly and mandarin ducks' melodrama in Chinese cinema. Although the spectacular Gobi Desert which serves as the background for the couple's romance offers a poetic quality to enhance the beauty of the young couple's relationship, this affair begins with a long, fierce fight. In addition, unlike the characters in the melodramas, their love is expressive and passionate.

However, this unconventional love story has the traditional settings of a martial arts movie. The fight scenes, with the aid of special effects that allow the fighters to jump (almost like flying) and run on rooftops, above the water and on tree tops, are essential elements of classical martial arts movies. Yu's pursuit of the masked thief on rooftops in the first fight sequence resembles The Jade Bow (Tang Jia and Lau Kar-leong, 1966). Scenes similar to Jen's defeating challengers in an inn are common in classical martial arts movies. Li and Jen's bamboo forest sequence shows the influence of King Hu's A Touch of Zen. However, with the aid of modern technology, Lee is able to achieve more sophisticated effects and give more focus to characters' expressions, so as to prominently show their feelings and emotions during the fights.

Another martial arts movie tradition of having a female lead character<sup>23</sup> is adopted too, with Jen as the central character, and Yu the older swordswoman who is as tough as a man and actively carries out her duty in the Giang Hu world. In addition, casting Cheng Pei Pei (*Come Drink With Me*, dir: King Hu, 1965; *Golden Swallow*, dir: Zhang Che, 1968), the Queen of *Wuxia Pian* of the 60s, as Jade Fox seems to indicate the positioning of the film within the genre peaks of the 60s.

Nevertheless, the film's interest in 'character' rather than 'plot' is a contrast to the classical martial arts movies tradition. In the latter, the theme centres on the subject of revenge, and the protagonists are 'tormented heroes and heroines driven by ambition or revenge or devotion to justice and undergoing extreme physical suffering' (Bordwell, 2001:19). In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, although the desire for vengeance against Jade Fox is voiced by Li, Tsai and his daughter, it is not the central focus. While in classical martial arts movies the causality chain comes to a full cycle and resolution is achieved when the villain is killed (the revenge is successfully accomplished and justice done), in Lee's film, the killing of Jade Fox doesn't resolve the problems faced by the four major characters. Their emotional sufferings – unable to be with their lover (Jen and Lo), to be free (Jen) and to express their feelings for each other (Li and Yu), failing to let go and retire from the Giang Hu world (Li) - are intense, and are highlighted without emphasising their physical sufferings. This will be discussed further in **1.3.3 Narrative functions** and **1.3.4 Character functions**.

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<sup>23</sup> Bordwell notes that 'women warriors remained central to the tradition' of the martial arts movies (2001:17).

### 1.3.2 Narrative structure

With prior knowledge of the martial arts genre in mind, viewers might expect a narrative convention similar to that of classical Hollywood in which ‘causality is defined around traits and goals, conflicts lead to consequences, time is motivated by plot necessity, and narration is objective, mixing restricted and unrestricted passages’ (Bordwell and Thompson, 2001:78). Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon adopts cause-effect narrative conventions in most places. The major causality chain begins with the Green Destiny which is the agent of catalyst. It motivates Jen to steal it and a series of conflicts occurs because of this, including the disclosure of her secret mastery of martial arts and Jade Fox’s identity. In addition, because of the stolen sword, Li and Yu have to take quick action to find the sword and right the path of Jen, who they think is going astray.

However, in his adaptation, Lee has chosen to switch the focus of the film from being object motivated (the Green Destiny) to character motivated (Jen). At the stage when Jen steals the sword the audience builds more general expectations on questions such as: Why does she steal it? Who and where has she learned her skills from? What will happen to her? Two scenes after the Green Destiny is stolen we learn about Jen’s reason for stealing the sword (that she thinks it a toy) and that Jade Fox, her governor, has taught her martial arts in secret. “What will happen to Jen” becomes the most interesting and important question which turns into the central storyline, taking over the question of “what will happen to the Green Destiny.” The story becomes Jen’s story as the narration now centres on Jen. It is her goal, her destiny and the conflicts she faces that pull other characters into the central causality chain. We learn about “what will happen to her” towards the end of the film, when she is drugged by Jade Fox and then

rescued by Li before being reunited with Lo. With this switch, the film changes from being object motivated to character motivated as in the classical Hollywood films. This coincides with Bordwell's conception of classical Hollywood's narrative which 'depends on the assumption that the action will spring primarily from individual characters as causal agents' (Bordwell and Thompson, 2001:76). In the film, the major plots and actions are constructed around the central character Jen, with only two subplots that do not directly concern her: Li's avenging his master and his relationship with Yu.

As in classical Hollywood cinema too, elements of suspense (why does Jen steal the Green Destiny? who is Jade Fox? what will happen to Jen after she runs away?) and surprise (the appearance of Lo and the Gobi Desert sequence halfway through the film) are used to arouse curiosity. These hermeneutic codes are the enigma the audience pursues throughout the film and there are chance events that work to delay revelation.

Unlike classical Hollywood narrative, though, the main causality chain is loosened up in places and expositions are delayed, holding viewers' expectations over into later sequences. As this is Jen's story, the love affair between Jen and Lo is an important plot in the film. At the scene of Jen and Yu's second meeting, we are informed that Jen adores Yu for being able to travel freely in the Giang Hu world, which reflects her unhappiness, especially at the arranged marriage. She yearns for the freedom to 'live my own life, to choose who I love...' Nonetheless, the information about Lo and his relationship with Jen is disclosed only halfway through the film. Although there is a flashback to the desert 30 minutes into the film, in which Jen is staring at her ivory comb in the sedan, we are made aware of Lo and his love affair with Jen only 30 minutes later when he sneaks into Jen's room at night. This information is delayed by the subplots

following the search for and fighting of Jade Fox, the quest for the stolen sword, Li's intention to teach and discipline the masked thief (Jen), the relationship between Jen and Jade Fox, and the relationship between Li and Yu.

Similarly, we recognise the tension between Jen and Jade Fox after their first fight sequence with Li, when Jade Fox finds out that Jen has been deceiving her by hiding the details from the manual; but the effect of it is delayed until towards the end of the film, when Jade Fox drugs Jen for her ungratefulness. Again, the causality chain is loosened up by the flashback of Jen and Lo's love affair in the desert, the chaos at Jen's wedding procession, Jen's running away and her encounter in the Giang Hu world, the breakdown of her friendship with Yu, and the fight sequence with Li.

Although flashback is one of the narrative techniques in classical Hollywood cinema, it is uncommon in classical martial arts movies which mostly adopt a chronological narrative structure. In the adaptation of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, there are two flashback sequences of the Gobi Desert: the first is Jen's memory of the journey across the desert with her mother prior to Lo's appearance, and this creates suspense among the audiences concerning "what happens in the desert?"; the second is Jen's encounter with Lo and the beginning of their love affair, which is the answer to the earlier question. This carefully crafted plot contrasts with the classical martial arts movies which Bordwell and Thompson describe as having 'sketchy plots' (2001:16).

### **1.3.3 Narrative functions**

Martial arts novels of the early days are the results of political turmoil and social injustice. The writers imagine a world in which swordsmen and women have an obligation to right wrongs in society, fighting villains and rescuing victims from

suffering. The perilous Giang Hu world itself represents the unsettled social situations. Martial arts films serve the function of escapism just as the novels of the same kind do, as Yingjin Zhang notes: ‘The effect of these martial arts films was to transport the audience to another time and space, where justice could be done and evil avenged. They provided a kind of escape from the oppressive political climate in real life’ (1998:53).

Cinema with its apparatus makes this fantasised world appear “real” in front of the audience. Set in a time and space unfamiliar to a western audience, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is adapted by creating a distinctive world with subtle characterisation and a complex plot development. The *mise-en-scene* elements such as props - the costumes and hairpieces of the Qing Dynasty, the weapons, buildings and furniture, and the landscape – contribute to bringing the reality alive.

Although set in the nineteenth century, Lee’s adaptation reflects issues still occurring in the twenty-first century: women’s position in society (Jen’s status in her family as an object of display), parental control over their children’s welfare (Jen’s being forced to marry a “noble” man), and social prejudice against a former criminal (Lo’s attempt to reinvent himself as a noble man due to social prejudice); while the unspoken rules of the Giang Hu World and the Confucian codes of practice guarding Jen allude to the social values and judiciary system of the modern society. Jen’s reaction to the social constraints she experiences is the response of the rebellious teenagers of the twenty-first century to the restrictions imposed on them. Her passion represents the liberal spirit of contemporary youngsters. As Lee explains, he uses ‘the language of the genre to tell something that is internal; [he is] making a martial arts picture, but what [he is] really

hidden dragon'.<sup>23</sup> He further stresses that 'the film is not crafted in the realistic style, as my earlier films have been, but the emotions it conveys are real' (Lee, 2001:7), providing meanings with reference to the society in which it is made. To present a film that is realistic in terms of social reflections and character psychology, Lee uses a combination of classical Hollywood and art-cinema narration devices to achieve his purpose.

#### 1.3.4 Character functions

The film compares the two couples' attitudes to love to highlight the difference in cultural values between them. The older couple, Li and Yu, are mature and reserved. They represent the generation which abide by the Confucian codes of practice. Strict moral codes restrain them from showing their feelings to each other. By contrast, Jen and Lo, the younger couple, symbolise the younger generation who transgress social values. They are passionate, ignoring the Confucian codes that forbid physical contact between the opposite sexes and having a sexual relationship outwith a formal marital engagement.

This moral/immoral phenomenon fits into the classical film's binary system.

Other examples of character binarism are: Good (Li and Yu) versus Evil (Jade Fox), Mature (Li and Yu) versus Immature (Jen and Lo), Repressed Feeling (Li and Yu) versus Passion (Jen and Lo), Control (Jen's Father) versus Freedom (Jen at a later stage), Social Values (the feudal society where Jen belongs) versus Individual Desire (Jen and Lo).

However, on some occasions, this binary structure appears to be incoherent, countering the classical martial arts movies. For instance, in classical films the hero-villain opposition is clear-cut and character functions are coherent and consistent. The hero, *xia* (the knight-errant) will fight the villains. In Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, Li and Yu are seemingly the law guardians of the society, the heroes who '[fight] for *yi*,

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<sup>23</sup> Lee explains this in an interview. See Kemp, 2000:14.

hero, *xia* (the knight-errant) will fight the villains. In Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, Li and Yu are seemingly the law guardians of the society, the heroes who '[fight] for *yi*, or the righteousness' (Bordwell, 2001:15). It is their responsibility to bring Jen back to the right path. By contrast, Jen is the villain who acts against the Confucian codes: she steals the Green Destiny, has a bandit for a lover and ignores her filial duty. However, Jen is also a victim. Like other daughters of a middle class family, her function is to be nothing but an object of display and she is forced to marry a man she does not love. She is the victim of the class difference between herself and Lo, an important issue in a feudal society, which means they can never be together.

Similarly, Lo's status changes as the film progresses. Starting as a bandit who robs and murders (a villain), he later falls victim to social codes because of his love affair with Jen, which is intolerable to society. No matter how hard he tries, he is only recognised as 'Dark Cloud The Bandit.' The unspoken social rules prevent him from reinventing himself to achieve a position parallel with Jen's. Is he a villain when he tries to stop Jen from marrying Guo? Can this effort be viewed as a heroic act to release Jen from her suffering? There isn't a clear definition.

On the other hand, in Li and Yu's effort to right Jen's wrongs, they in fact become villains who press Jen into a deeper quandary. The blurring of the hero/villain boundary is most significant in Yu in three situations: Firstly, Yu protects Jen, trying to correct her at the beginning (hero); secondly, Yu later detests Jen, and selfishly urges Li to give up his intention to nurture Jen and help her to return to the right path (villain); and thirdly, upon finding out Jen's relationship with Lo, she encourages them to live together (hero/villain).

On the third occasion, Yu's function is equivocal. By allowing the young couple freedom, she intends to relieve their pains (a heroic act to the victimised couple). On the other hand, by doing so she breaks the Confucian codes she has been upholding (an evil act against society).

Although the film is set in the nineteenth century, Lee's characters have characteristics of the twenty-first century. Jen is an unconventional woman who 'wants to love a fighter and fights her lover' (Corliss, 2001:11). She is determined and does not give up easily. When she first meets Lo, she chases after him through the desert for her comb. Zhang Ziyi who plays Jen has the charisma that 'allows the audience to pour themselves into her imagination' (Lee, 2001:39), and so 'the character of Jen dominates the film' (Rayns, 2001:46). Because of Zhang's charisma, Lee has to work the film around her.<sup>25</sup> Because there is either Jen in Zhang or Zhang in Jen, Zhang's successful portrayal of the character inevitably invites the audience to associate her, a twenty-first century young liberal woman, with Jen, the fearless woman fighter of the nineteenth century.

### 1.3.5 Cinematic codes

Lee uses *mise-en-scene* elements - space and landscape, lighting, props, costumes and music – to express the mood of the characters and contribute to the narrative.

First of all, landscape and space are used to portray a character's emotional and psychological state. Jen's unhappiness is shown by confined indoor space while the world she longs for is outdoors, the wild wide world of Giang Hu and the desert.

Metaphorically, as she walks into the outdoor world, she is in fact walking out of the

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<sup>25</sup> Lee comments that because he and his team realised that Zhang 'is very sexy', they 'veered the movie toward her.' See Corliss, 2001:12.

and Yu's repressed feelings are shown by a confined space. They are trapped in a secluded teahouse when Li reveals his feelings for Yu for the first time. The window of the teahouse opens onto a luxurious bamboo forest, indicating their relationship is not to be observed by the outside world and that they are confined in a conservative society.

The use of lighting highlights a character's emotional conflicts. In the scene when Jen hides in the darkness in her room, being upset about her arranged marriage, there is then a cut to the bright desert. The switch from darkness to the clear, yellowish desert implies that Jen has been longing for, not only the physical place, the desert, but also freedom and passion. As such, when, seconds later, we cut back to the darkness of the room, we realise Jen's unhappiness because of her confinement in her family.

In addition, the contrast of brightness and darkness enhances the binary opposition of Good/Evil. Almost all evil activities happen in the dark, including the stealing of the Green Destiny, the killing of Tsai and the death of Li. Most interestingly, the lovemaking between Jen and Lo takes place in the dark, an indication of a love affair disapproved of by society. Similarly, it is in dim surroundings that Yu finally breaks the taboo and kisses Li who is dying, which is against the moral code they are meant to abide by.

Props are carefully used to convey particular meanings. In terms of weaponry, the harmful Green Destiny represents the perilous world of Giang Hu. It is also an object through which Jen 'feels' her existence and worthiness; and this is presented through her determination to possess it despite the difficulties she faces. The weapons used by different individuals indicate the owners' character. Li, with his broad experience and skills, is competent with or without a weapon. Jen insists on using the Green Destiny, a

determination to possess it despite the difficulties she faces. The weapons used by different individuals indicate the owners' character. Li, with his broad experience and skills, is competent with or without a weapon. Jen insists on using the Green Destiny, a delicate weapon with a hidden danger which represents Jen's secret skills in martial arts under her fragile exterior; while Yu's twin broad swords symbolise her toughness. The contrast between them is prominent during the courtyard fight scene, in which Yu uses various heavy weapons against Jen, which again augment her tough character, while Jen's skilful and calculating moves reflect the cunning side of her. As Lee notes, 'the fighting is never just kicking and punching, but also a way for the characters to express their unique situation and feelings' (Lee, 2001:1). Unlike classical Chinese martial arts movies which emphasise Shaolin practices,<sup>26</sup> *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* 'draws on the more subtle practices of Wudan' (Kemp, 2000:14) and this lends the film's fight scenes a soaring, balletic grace. The most prominent example of this is the climactic fight scene between Li and Jen in the bamboo forest. The effort to achieve balance on a treetop alludes to the characters' struggle to achieve an internal balance: Jen wishes to have freedom and love and acceptance by society while Li strives to maintain his worldly duty while pursuing his desire to avenge his master's death and be with Yu.

Similarly, the costumes of individual characters also contribute to the enhancement of his or her functions and psychology. Li and Yu are always in white, portraying the righteousness they represent. The colour scheme for Jen changes according to her situation: white as an obedient daughter at home, black as a masked thief, and a darker colour (purple) when she runs away from home as a disobedient daughter. On the

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<sup>26</sup> '... the great majority of the [martial arts] genre are based on Shaolin, the more violent, external-strength style of classic martial arts, from which kung fu is derived' (Kemp, 2000:14).

other hand, Lo is always in brownish red, because according to the film's director of photography, Peter Pau, Lo is 'the tiger in the desert, out in the open, obviously red' (Kemp, 2000:14). It is interesting to note that when Jen goes to Yu for help after the fight with Li in the bamboo forest, Yu hands her a white costume, indicating that she, as the guardian of social justice and moral values, is trying to correct Jen from her wrong doings. Another function of costume is to accentuate the characters' position; for example, the fighters who challenge Jen in the inn are all in black, indicating their anonymity and unimportance; while Jen is dressed in a lighter colour (faint purple), highlighting her dominant position over the fighters.

In addition, the film adopts classical Hollywood camera and framing techniques as vehicles for the transmission of information, such as closing on a portion of space before making the transition to the next scene. In the first sequence after Yu and Li make an arrangement to meet in Beijing, the camera freezes on Yu before moving on to the next scene. The framing of the characters in this scene as in other scenes is mostly done with *plan américain* (the knees-up) framing and medium close-up (the chest-up framing) and the camera angles are straight on at shoulder or chin level. This coincides with Bordwell's description of the classical Hollywood technique, by which a film is organised into a stable paradigm.<sup>27</sup> Another technique of having the centre of interest near the centre of the frame is widely adopted too. For instance, Jen's first appearance in the film is with the Green Destiny, in which both are in the centre of the frame, indicating the central importance of the object and character. Also, Lee uses wide angle on the

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<sup>27</sup> Bordwell points out that 'classical style consists of a strictly limited number of particular technical devices organised into a stable paradigm and ranked probabilistically according to syuzhet [plot] demands' (1985:163).

linguistic sound code for fight sequences, in Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, it is only used on one occasion as the traditional time-reminder at night. On the contrary, the film deploys Tan Dun's composition which 'blends traditional Chinese instruments with lush Hollywood strings to lift Lee's film to the emotional intensity of grand opera' (Kemp, 2000:15). Atmosphere is heightened in any given sequence with appropriate musical instruments. The drum is used to create excitement in the sequence when Yu chases Jen over the rooftops, as Yu is determined to catch the thief and the fight between them is intense. However, when Li goes after Jen in the later sequence when she tries to return the Green Destiny, Yo-yo Ma's fluid cello solo indicates Li's calmness, as he is confident and more skilful, and doesn't intend to punish Jen. This light and romantic music fills all the desert sequences despite the fight between the bandits and the officials, planting the feelings of joy and freedom in the borderless desert and leading to the romance between Jen and Lo.

### **1.3.6 Cultural codes**

The cultural codes in the film can be looked at from two points of view: firstly, in terms of the social values portrayed through the behaviour of the characters, and secondly, the cultural artefacts and settings that establish the world of the film.

In the first instance, the film breaks the convention of the classical martial arts movies by showing sequences of kissing and lovemaking. In early nineteenth-century Chinese society which was strictly governed by the Confucian codes of practice, physical contact between persons of the opposite sex, especially unmarried couples, was taboo. It is a western response when Yu kisses Li when he declares his feelings for her. It falls into the Hollywood cliché of "the kiss" as a resolution towards the end of the film. In

Chinese society which was strictly governed by the Confucian codes of practice, physical contact between persons of the opposite sex, especially unmarried couples, was taboo. It is a western response when Yu kisses Li when he declares his feelings for her. It falls into the Hollywood cliché of “the kiss” as a resolution towards the end of the film. In addition, a sexual relationship outside formal marital bonds was a deadly sin in feudal society. The film moves a step further by showing a passionate lovemaking sequence between Jen and Lo, which is a common scene in western films but an unfamiliar one to the classical martial arts audiences.

Furthermore, through the relationship between Jen and Lo, the film subverts the binary opposition of the conventional male (dominant)/female (submissive) power relationship in a traditional Chinese society. In the desert scene, Jen fights Lo with great determination and does not submit even during their lovemaking as she insists on being on top, symbolically portraying her power over Lo. In addition, Yu, and later Jen too, are able to travel alone in the Giang Hu world, which resembles the independent women of modern society. Yu even runs the security service bequeathed her by her father to much acclaim, seemingly as a successful businesswoman.

On the other hand, Jen’s disrespect for her master/governess, Jade Fox, is an attitude disapproved of by Confucian values, which stress the importance of respect for one’s master. The issue of filial duty, too, is highlighted in the desert scene when Jen seems to rather enjoy her time with Lo, regardless of the fact that her mother will certainly be worrying about her. Lo’s advice to Jen to return home to her mother is a reminder to the audience of Jen’s ungratefulness as she acts against her father’s will and runs away from the arranged marriage, abandoning her duty as a daughter.

In the second instance, Lee creates an exotic world of the orient with exquisite cultural artefacts and settings. The film opens with a landscape containing mountain and water, a synonym of Chinese painting (*shansui hua*, 'mountain and water painting'). Such enchanting landscapes are shown frequently throughout the film, as well as settings such as the multiple-courtyard mansions, the inns, the fairyland-like headquarters of Wudan and the hidden place of Jade Fox and Jen. The scene of a busy street where buskers perform exotic acrobatics is first shown in the sequence when Yu trots along the streets of Beijing and is repeated in a later sequence. These elements invite audiences to immerse themselves in a world outside their imagination. In addition, artefacts such as calligraphy and costumes are used to enhance the same effect. We find scrolls of calligraphy in Yu's security compound and Sir Te's study. Also, Jen practises calligraphy when Yu visits her. The camera follows every stroke as Jen writes, leading the audiences to admire the beauty of Chinese writing.

In short, through its settings and props, the film creates an exotic world unfamiliar yet attractive to western audiences. A viewer from Illinois, Lawrence Santoro, writes lengthily of his appreciation of the Forbidden City scene and the 'wild and mythic landscapes',<sup>28</sup> while another American viewer praises the film for its 'magical settings'.<sup>29</sup> The film presents a world rich in 'the mythology of the mysterious East, notions of Asian inscrutability' (Said, 1995:52). In fact, a Canadian audience member agrees with one of the general comments that 'China is the real star of this film'.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See review by Lawrence Santoro, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0190332/usercomments>> [accessed 21 December 2005].

<sup>29</sup> See review by columbia2453, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0190332/usercomments>> [accessed 21 December 2005].

<sup>30</sup> See review by Richard French, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0190332/usercomments>> [accessed 21 December 2005].

### 1.3.7 Conclusion

Although the adaptation of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is overtly being positioned within the generic microcosm of martial arts movies in view of its content, style, moods and settings, the director Ang Lee has obviously rewritten the rules of the genre. Not only does he refer to the two preceding eras of the martial arts genre in his filmmaking,<sup>31</sup> but he also utilises Western filmmaking techniques and mixes Western cultural values in his film which Richard Corliss describes it as a ‘blending, not a collision, of Eastern physical grace and Western intensity of performance, of Hong Kong kung-fu directness and British attention to behavioural nuance’ (Corliss, 2001:9). In other words, Lee uses expectations of the genre to reactivate and reconfigure the audience’s relationship with its genre and cultural perspective. This results in a film that combines familiarity and strangeness for a western audience.

With regard to the former, the portrayal of romance and sexual relationships between the characters and the approval of it by means of authorial endorsement fosters its familiarity among Western audiences. The emphasis on youthful rebellion against Confucian moral order resembles a coming of age story in the West and resentment of the establishment. In addition, the dialogue which is in poetic classic Mandarin are translated into modern vernacular, such as ‘This spells trouble’ and ‘Someone set him up’ in order to encourage better understanding among Western audiences. Although the film adopts certain elements of art-cinema narration, such as the device of ‘chance’, in general it perpetuates the Hollywood tradition.<sup>32</sup> The use of classical Hollywood devices in

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<sup>31</sup> Bordwell remarks that the story of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, which involves two generations, ‘recapitulates elements from the greatest of the Chinese swordplay films (2001:20).’

<sup>32</sup> Lee admits that ‘in this film I could probably decide I wanted to despise the artistic side [of filmmaking]’ (Kemp, 2000:13).

narrative structure and functions which are enhanced by the cinematic techniques makes the film comprehensible to a Western audience.

On the other hand, some of the classical elements of the genre, especially the 'weightless leap' and the 'running' on the lake surface, become a marvel to Western audiences who describe it as 'flying'. Also, exotic elements such as the landscapes, settings, props and costumes belong to a time and space that are alien to Western audiences. However, because Lee has established a real world within a genre which is meant to be 'a fantasy of power, romance and moral duty' (Lee, 2001:113), audiences who are unfamiliar with Chinese cultural and social settings are persuaded into believing its realism.<sup>33</sup>

To summarise, the adaptation of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is a 'new, exotic strain' (Corliss, 2001:10) which appeals to Western audiences. It makes references not only to the classical martial arts genre itself but also melodrama, as well as historical texts on early nineteenth-century China, the social and cultural values of Western society and the twenty-first century, and also European art-cinema and classical Hollywood cinema. Referring to Stam's definition, the adaptation makes intertextual references across genres and forms (Stam, 2003:25). In doing so, the film encourages Western audiences' acceptance and appreciation of exoticism by coherently using elements that are familiar to them such as cinematic codes and cultural codes. Consequently, a new breed of martial arts genre is created, with subsequent follow-ups such as Hero (2002) and The House of Flying Daggers (2004), both directed by Zhang

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<sup>33</sup> A viewer from Canada remarks, 'This is the story of a legend that we enter into as though it's our world.' See <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0190332/usercomments>> [accessed 21 December 2005].

Yimou. These films have some similarity to Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon in their shared elements that appeal to Western audiences.

#### 1.4 Summary and Conclusion

One of the prominent findings in my examination of the adaptations of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon and Raise the Red Lantern is the occurrence of the phenomena of ‘strangeness’ and ‘familiarity’ in all the five selected areas of study: genre conventions, narrative elements, character functions, cultural codes and cinematic codes in both of the films. However, is it the intention of the filmmakers to create the elements of strangeness and familiarity in their films in order to appeal to Western audiences? This question forms the focus of the following discussion.

A study of generic microcosm highlights the two films’ differences from their respective generic conventions – while Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon combines the generic traits of martial arts movies of two eras, Raise the Red Lantern displays emotional coldness in contrast to the expressive nature of Chinese drama. These differences, I shall argue, should be viewed as the filmmakers’ artistic experiments within the existing generic framework. Generic development is an on-going process which forms part of the history of cinema. In the case of martial arts movies, the inclusion of comic elements in Jackie Chan’s Drunken Master (1979) and Dragon Fist (1980), and of patriotism in Bruce Lee’s The Chinese Connection (1972) and Return of the Dragon (1973) are examples to note. Similarly, Wong Kar-Wai (Chungking Express, 1995; In the Mood for Love, 2000) and Tsai Ming-Liang (Vive L’Amour, 1994; The River, 1996) open a new dimension in Chinese drama by exploring contemporary city life through stylistic postmodern presentation and emotional aloofness between the characters.

The above phenomenon is supported by Cardwell’s call, in her discussion of generic approaches to the study of television classic-novel adaptations, for ‘recognising

the specialities of their [the adaptations'] historical context and their place in a trajectory of generic development' (2002:77). Generic development is a natural process, as the progress of time brings with it social transformation, and cinema reflects the changing trends in social aspirations, political ideology and scientific and technological progress. A rigid framework will undermine the inevitable process of generic development in response to these changes. For instance, the focus on magic and fantasy in the first era of martial arts films is closely related to social instability in China towards the mid-twentieth century, just as the emphasis on realism in King Hu's second era films of the same genre tie in with the pragmatic, fast developing Hong Kong society in the 60s and 70s. Similarly, filmmakers of the twenty-first century such as Ang Lee and Zhang Yimou, with ideologies that oppose traditional values and the dominant political establishment (in the case of Zhang), a wider knowledge of filmmaking and access to new technology, create variations within the genres. It is these variations that contribute to the elements of strangeness and familiarity discussed above.

Since it is the filmmakers who have created the variations, it is clear that the occurrence of strangeness and familiarity in the adaptations studied and the degree of it very much rely on the filmmakers' approach to adaptation and filmmaking as a whole, i.e. artistic style and ideology which can be summed up as a trademark of authorship. My analysis of the two adaptations identifies the cinematic and cultural codes used by the filmmakers to achieve their aesthetic and ideological purposes. This leads to my argument that the adoption of particular cinematic styles and ideological concerns chiefly arise from the filmmakers' backgrounds, whether intentionally or otherwise. The endorsement of the filmmakers' trademarks in their adaptations, discussed below, is best

explained by the auteurist approach which ‘relies on a metaphor of performance ... [and] emphasises difference rather than similarity, individual styles rather than formal systems’ (Naremore, 2000:8).

First of all, taking Zhang as an example, references to his past experience in still photography play a significant part in his trademark style of visual formalism<sup>34</sup> through static camera-work and framings. On the other hand, a victim of the Cultural Revolution<sup>35</sup>, Zhang overtly urges his audience to condemn and depart from corrupt cultural values: ‘people should realise that a life which is free and unrestrained is in itself the beauty of life. We cannot again let ourselves be forced to live within any sort of artificial restrictions and conventionality’.<sup>36</sup> As he views his films as agents of change for the Chinese, he ‘has consistently insisted since the 1980s that, despite his international success, his target audience in all his films is Chinese’.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, Lee’s attention to detail is well known from his previous films such as The Wedding Banquet and Sense and Sensibility. It seems unjustified that the landscape shots in Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon shall be branded as exotic, while the shots of country locations in Sense and Sensibility are described as ‘breathtaking’.<sup>38</sup> As a Chinese born and raised outside the mainland who lived his childhood in the fantasy of mainland

<sup>34</sup> Clark notes that the formalistic visual impact of Zhang’s films is repeated in Raise the Red Lantern. (2005:177)

<sup>35</sup> Not only was Zhang born to parents of ‘bad’ class background, he had been an officer in the Nationalist KMT army. He was sent to farms and factories during the Cultural Revolutions. See Berry and Clark, 1991:201 and Farquhar, Mary <<http://www.senseofcinema.com/contents/directors/02/zhang.html>> [accessed 1 December 2005].

<sup>36</sup> Zhang voices his ideological concerns as he comments on Red Sorghum in an interview in *Dianying Yishu Cankao Ziliao*, 1998, no.4, February, p.18, quoted in Clark, 2005:170.

<sup>37</sup> See an interview with Zhang Yimou by Beijing Film Academy professor Huang Shixian, ‘Yi “xiao” bo “da”, jianshou yi fang jingtu’ (Using the “small” to combat the “large”: Sticking to the Pure Land [of China]), *Dianying Yishu*, 2000, No. 1(January), p. 10-17, quoted in Clark, 2005:183.

<sup>38</sup> Louis B. Park praises Lee and cinematographer Michael Coulter’s effort in making ‘an absolutely beautiful film,’ for which ‘they excel with breathtaking views that gloriously capture and enhance the country’s pastoral beauty’. See <<http://www.chron.com/cgi-bin/auth/story/content/chronicle/features/95/12/13/sense/html>> [accessed 7 January 2007].

martial arts stories, Lee declares that ‘the China he envisioned is a fantasy China of his boyhood dreams’ (2000:7). As such, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon aims more at self-fulfilment for the director than purposefully pleasing the audience. On the other hand, Lee’s earlier films, Pushing Hands (1992), The Wedding Banquet and Eat Drink Man Woman (1994) – the ‘father’ trilogy – are very much the director’s critique of the values of his own society from the perspective of someone who has moved from the East to the West.

Naremore further points out that ‘they [the auteurs] are more apt to consider such things as audiences, historical situations, and cultural politics’ (2000:8) and this coincides with my discussion of the consequences of filmmakers’ trademarks of authorship as the result of their individual purposes influenced by their social, cultural and political backgrounds. To bring forward the meanings they intend to their audiences, both Zhang and Lee create intertextual links between the past and the present, reality and imaginative truths – with the portrayals of a lost China (Lee), symbolic cultural signs (Zhang) and the blurring of the boundaries between text and context (for instance, the roles/representations of the female characters in both of the films). Reconstructions of the past and of cultural codes inevitably result in symbols that are deemed to invite critical interpretations by the audiences; and reconstructions of the past and of the cultural codes of a society that are alien to certain audiences mean extra efforts are needed to decode the meanings intended. This leads us to the discourse of cultural migrancy and translatability.

The term ‘cultural migrancy’ is introduced by Felicia Chan in her discussion of the overwhelming reception of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon in the West before its

subsequent success in the East. Chan uses the term to explain the phenomenon caused by the exporting of Chinese films to the West:

In the current technological environment, physical movement is no longer necessary to effect cultural change as ideas, cultures and ideologies are now brought in closer contact on a wider scale than ever before. The rate and reach of its impact on individuals and cultures is of an extent that one needs to speak of it as a state of cultural *migrancy* rather than an act of cultural migration. (2005:56)

In view of this, showing Chinese films in the West not only means transferring a set of symbols that are unfamiliar to Western audiences, but also ideas, cultures and ideologies represented by these symbols. Whether these symbols can be rightly interpreted by the audiences and whether the meanings intended by the filmmakers are correctly perceived are two major issues in the discourse of adaptation in Chinese Cinema. Clearly, reading foreign language texts requires translations. However, the migration of Chinese films to the West ‘necessitates a translation, not simply of language, but of culture as well, [including] the culture of the medium itself,’ which, as Chan suggests, is ‘the culture of film developed over its history, and the culture of reading that has developed out of that history’ (2005:59).

Referring to the above, the first element - the culture of film as a medium - refers to the process of making the film; while the second element - the culture of reading - points to the ability of the audience to understand the ideas, cultures and ideologies that are alien to them. In the first instance, cinema of a different culture with its unique

characteristics is already hard to read for a foreign audience. In the case of adapted films, the filmmaking process involves the adaptation process whereby cultural texts and meanings are reconstructed for aesthetic or practical purposes. The lack of knowledge of cultural meanings and familiarity will easily invite misreading. For example, without contextual knowledge of Chinese martial arts, especially *qigong* – the foundation of any Chinese martial arts practices – one will undoubtedly marvel at the ‘weightless leaps’ (*qinggong*) and ‘freezing the enemy with two pointing fingers’ (*dianxie*) in Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon. In another instance, ignorance of Chinese culture and history may prompt one to believe that the rituals of lantern-lighting as a way of choosing the most favoured wife and foot-massage as a reward and preparation for sexual pleasure in Raise the Red Lantern are actual customs practised by the Chinese. The fact that the film directors have chosen to create and highlight these cultural codes in their adaptations is concealed from the audience. Consequently, the unintended effects of strangeness produced by these codes become attractions to Western audiences.

In addition to cultural and historical codes, as ‘every film is political, inasmuch as it is determined by the ideology which produces it’ (Comolli and Narboni, 1977:3), the text shall preferably be read with a knowledge of the filmmakers’ political standpoints and the political situation in China in order to interpret the hidden message sent through the narrative. This is particularly necessary in the case of Raise the Red Lantern which was made after the June 4th democracy movement in 1989. As Clark observes:

Raise the Red Lantern is as much about collaboration in oppression as about the withering of the human spirit under the oppressive system. Assessment of the

student movement in China and abroad focused particularly on the failure of the protesters and their supporters to achieve unity of purpose and effort and on the relative ease with which the old men [in Raise the Red Lantern] in power asserted their control. (2005:178)

Without prior knowledge that the novel was published in June 1989<sup>39</sup> - the right timing for the director Zhang Yimou to adapt it and further explore the meanings of oppression in the political environment he lived in – the audience will not be able to discover the political significance it contains. This political significance, as Zhang stresses, is directed to the Chinese audiences to arouse their awareness against political oppression in their society instead of purposefully appealing to Western audiences.<sup>40</sup>

On the other hand, reading Chinese texts by means of Western analysis – imposing Western cultural texts onto the films - may result in misreading. As Chan suggests:

[Some] of the gaps in the narrative can only be filled by a knowledge of the cultural context within which the film operates. When that knowledge is absent, and the narrative gaps are filled by signs from a different cultural system, the context for the narrative could be altered to the extent that meaning in the narrative is also altered. (2005:60)

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<sup>39</sup> Su Tong's novella 'Wives and concubines' was published in the literary journal *Harvest* (*Shouhuo*) after the June 4<sup>th</sup> incident.

<sup>40</sup> See an interview with Zhang Yimou by Beijing Film Academy professor Huang Shixian, 'Yi "xiao" bo "da", jianshou yi fang jingtu' ('Using the "small" to combat the "large": Sticking to the Pure Land [of China]'), *Dianying Yishu*, 2000, No. 1(January), p. 10-17, quoted in Clark, 2005:183.

Most prominent examples are the representations of women in Chinese cinema. In her discussion of the difference of perspective in representations of gender politics in Chinese and Western texts on Chinese cinema, Yau points out: ‘Inasmuch as the sense of social identity defines the person within Chinese society, individuals in Chinese films are cast as non-autonomous entities within determining familiar, social and national frameworks’ (1991:69). The roles of women are determined by the family, social and national system to which they belong. Hence, they are unable to decide their fates however strong their images as projected in the films. In the case of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, however heroic Yu is, she is part of the Jiang Hu world with rules governing her like those of a family or society; and however mighty Jen is, she is part of a society in which women play a minor role. The imposition of Western cultural texts results in reading the film as a feminist text and associating the female roles with characters in Western media such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer.<sup>41</sup>

However, due to contemporary Chinese filmmakers’ exposure to Western film arts, the application of a Western approach to filmmaking is evident in modern Chinese cinema. In both of the adaptations of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon and Raise the Red Lantern, female sexual desire is expressed through Jen (in Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon) and Songlian (in Raise the Red Lantern). In the source texts lovemaking between Jen and Lo does not exist, just as Songlian’s longing for sexual pleasure is not shown; however, in the screen adaptations, Jen is depicted as enjoying lovemaking with Lo and Songlian’s sexual repression is highlighted by her longing for a foot-massage.

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<sup>41</sup> Elvis Mitchell describes Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon as ‘just the film for an audience transfixed by the weekly girl-power cool and soap-opera bloodshed of ‘Buffy, the Vampire Slayer’. See Mitchell, Elvis, ‘“Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon”: Be Prepared for Heart and Feminism’, *New York Times* on the web, 9 October 2000 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/10/09/arts/09TIGE.html>> [accessed 20 July 2006].

Presentations of this kind, which reconstruct female desire, contrast with Yau's opinion on women in Chinese cinema:

Unlike the classical Hollywood style, homogeneity is not restored through the reconstruction of female desires with male ones, and the ways of looking are not structured according to manipulations of visual pleasure (coding the erotic, specifically) in the language of the 'Western patriarchal order.' (1991:70)

As one of the new generation of filmmakers, Zhang Yimou especially reconstructs female desire in many of his films, most prominently in his 'Red Trilogy' – Red Sorghum, Judou and Raise the Red Lantern – which are all adapted from literary texts. The roles played by Gong Li in these films significantly portray women's visual pleasure as against that of the opposite sex.<sup>42</sup> In his adaptations, Laura Mulvey's gaze of visual pleasure<sup>43</sup> is applied to the female characters as well as male. This could easily invite misreading among Western audiences as the more important subtext of social oppression may be overshadowed by an interpretation that focuses on female sexual liberation and/or repression. In addition, the state of 'presumed familiarity' arises which may encourage easier acceptance of the adaptations among Western audiences.

Furthermore, this notion of 'presumed familiarity' is instilled and augmented through vigorous marketing campaigns for the films. For instance, Crouching Tiger,

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<sup>42</sup> In Red Sorghum, as Yuejin Wang notes: 'It is the woman's point-of-view shot 'fetishing', or rather exploring and sizing up the man which is highly unexpected in such a situation. See Wang, 1991:94.

<sup>43</sup> Mulvey explains that 'pleasure in looking has been split between active/man and passive/female. ... In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness' (1992:750).

Hidden Dragon is positioned as an action film which highlights martial arts, which is an international language that 'translates well in foreign markets' (Biers, 2001:67). Western audiences who are familiar with the films of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, and the action choreographer Yuen Wo-ping – who choreographed the action in The Matrix (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 1999) - will easily associate with the film. In addition, the film 'was not only marketed as a *Matrix*-type film, but also as an art film, a woman's film, as well as a combination of all these (Chan, 2005:57).' On the other hand, Zhang's adaptations are claimed to be "'a photographer's film", with lush images and minimal plot' as in Red Sorghum (Rayns, 1989:49), a display of 'the seductive, the forbidden and the female as "bearers of his filmic ethnography"' (Chow, 1995:147-49) and the sexual liberation of Chinese women. All these selling points would further enhance the familiarity and increase the attractions of the films among Western audiences.

So far I have argued that the elements of strangeness and familiarity are not intended by the Chinese filmmakers in their adaptations. The nature of generic development, the distinctive trademarks of authorship of the filmmakers, the phenomena of cultural migrancy and translatability and the external issues – the marketing of the films – play vital roles in whipping up the interest of Western audiences who would find out and identify with elements they are familiar with, while at the same time marvelling at and attracted to the cultural codes and texts that are alien to them. Hence, while I conclude that contemporary Chinese directors do make references to Western filmmaking in the process of creating their own movies and hence reinvent certain cultural codes which transgress traditional Chinese values, I shall stress that the elements of strangeness and familiarity are not intended by the directors for the purpose of appealing to Western

audiences. An intertextual text requires intertextual references for correct readings. The lack of knowledge of historical and cultural contexts will lead to misreading, though in some cases this kind of misreading surprisingly contributes to the films' success.

## Section Two: From Film to Novel

### 2.1 Little Hut of Leaping Fishes

#### *Chapter One*

##### **Chai Mansion, 1875**

Autumn in Plum Blossom Village is a season of sweat and laughter. Of acres and acres of golden fields. Of paddy-reaping and threshing. Naked stalks and plump-eared rice. Merry faces, exhausted bodies. Bare-footed children run wild in the open, chasing after dogs who chase them. Mothers prepare meals for fathers busy in the fields.

Crickets hide in the bushes; their noises crackle over the sky. Chrysanthemums smile a bright yellow. Snakes lurk in the mangroves, waiting patiently for toads and frogs that wait patiently for mosquitoes and flies.

At night, as soon as the last streaks of evening fade, chimneys stop smoking, doors are shut tight. Under the thatched roofs, contented children wander in the dreamlands, smiles on their faces, saliva at the corners of their mouths. Mothers darn shoes and shirts for fathers who enjoy a last puff of the pipe before bed. Before the day starts again.

So it is tonight.

In the distance, dilapidated shacks are reduced to ambiguous specks, dotted around the western hillside, shadowed under a canopy of clouds lingering on the hilltop. The wind rises, sweeping the giant shelter of cloud eastwards, past the hills, the peasants'

huts, past the winding Plum River and the paddy fields, before planting it right above the mansion by the eastern slope.

The Chai Mansion.

All of its four courtyards are engulfed in the dark shadow of the autumn cloud. During the day, activities centre on the east court where Master Chai resides, where servants wait reverently for orders, to fetch their demanding master this and that. To obey his endless requests. Opposite, in the west court, lives Likang, the master's eldest son, and his wives. Their rooms are carefully arranged: while Likang enjoys the comfort of the centre room, his first wife Da Niang is assigned to the room on the right, confirming her superior status over the second wife Er Niang who always grumbles about being placed in the room to the less prestigious left. Likang's brother, Liwei, is content with the south court, which is as quiet as the vacant guestrooms in the north court.

Now all the courtyards rest in silence.

But not for long.

The first cries pierce the darkness, travel to the east court and drill into Master Chai's ears. He freezes to listen, then springs up, choking on the last puff of his pipe. He nods and nods, and grins. *There he comes, the eldest son of my eldest son.* His teenage maid steps back, frightened by his sudden movement, awkwardly holding the fan she has been flapping, and waits.

Butler Fong bursts in: 'A boy! It's a boy!'

His master glances up. Butler Fong stops and drops his smile. He bows and stands in reverence.

Master Chai sits back, signals the servant girl to light his pipe, and howls: 'Go get Likang!'

The girl drops the pipe. Butler Fong says yes and leaves.

*He must be somewhere enjoying himself.* Master Chai sighs, watching the young girl hurriedly pick up the pipe and light it.

Outside, the servants buzz with excitement, busily disseminating the news in the suddenly lit courtyards. They trace the infant's cries to the west court, hushing each other to keep their voices down. Passing by, Butler Fong knits his brows tight, ordering the servants to disperse. Their whispers fill the courtyard as they leave.

Behind the closed door of Da Niang's room, the baby boy finally stops crying as he grows accustomed to his new world. Frail and pale, his mother takes a last look at his little face before the midwife takes him away. He starts crying again, missing the warmth of his mother's bosom.

After waiting so long, his sisters - Meilian, eight, and Meifong, five - spring forward, surround the midwife, eager to look at him, their little brother. They touch his little pink face, tiny fingers. Da Niang looks on, lets them, too weak to intervene. She watches him carried to the adjoining room. Her maid pours her a cup of warm ginger tea, but Da Niang sends her off to attend to her infant master instead.

Though tired, his mother struggles to stay awake, listens, and is glad when his cry ceases. *Sleep well, son.*

Moments later he wakes and cries again, but stops as soon as his hungry lips reach Mama Wang's nipple. Milk is plentiful from the enormous breasts of the nursemaid. Mama Wang, after being forced by her husband to sell her newborn baby for an ox to

work the field, has seized the opportunity to serve this child. But she misses her own. *My Doggie*. She smiles, remembering the moment she first caught sight of her child. *A lovely boy like him, naming him after an animal will blind the jealous evil spirits, stopping them from taking him away.* But then, her smile turns bitter. *Yet he was taken.* The pain penetrates her heart, deepening, vibrating. Her body trembles. The infant's mouth loses hold of her nipple. He wails.

Now that the servant girl has left the room to take the two sisters to bed, Mama Wang is all by herself with the baby. *Someone else's*. She takes a closer look at the newborn as she guides him to her nipple again. Eyes closed, tears hanging at the corners, he enjoys his meal, sucking quietly, red-faced, smelling the sweet scent of milk. *As lovely as my Doggie*. Mama Wang's eyes turn soft. She holds him closer to her, caresses his little arms, little legs and creased face. *Yes, you are my Doggie*.

Next door, his mother quietly listens to his yawns and breathings, so close yet distant, separated by the wooden wall. *If only I could feed him with my own milk*. All alone, she sighs, her tears well up.

'A girl factory no longer,' she murmurs.

*Where is his father? Where is he?* She stares up. A column of ants marches along the wooden beam, too busy to give an answer. And soon tiredness drowns her. She sleeps.

Two doors away, a teacup smashes to pieces on the floor. Er Niang stands, one hand on the table, the other on her protruding belly, puffing and trembling with rage.

'Why should she be first?' She cries, cupping the baby inside her. 'You will be a boy! You must be a boy! You will not lose out.'

Cowering in a corner, her maid presses her lean body hard against the wall, shivering as she stares into her mistress's blazing eyes.

At midnight, the newborn's father is dragged home by Butler Fong from a brothel in Pindong Town ten miles away. Half-drunk, Likang rushes through Da Niang's room to his child's little bed, hurriedly pulls aside the white cotton covering the baby's tiny body. And he sees it, the little streak of manhood, resting quietly like the infant himself. *It's real.* He hums a snatch of opera as he leaves.

Awake since his return, Da Niang glances up as her husband passes by. Likang pauses, then forces a smile, nods, and retreats to his residence.

Da Niang shuts her eyes tight, tears streaming.

\*

Early in the morning on the seventh day after the birth, Master Chai sends Butler Fong for Old Scholar Yan, the only scholar in Plum Blossom Village.

Arriving back in the west court at the threshold of the newborn's room, Butler Fong tugs aside a corner of the door curtain for Old Scholar Yan to peer in. Fed and content, and resting comfortably at Mama Wang's bosom, the baby seems to smile at the old man with umps and ahs. His eyes brighten, his cheeks flush pink, his forehead gleams in the morning rays that slip through the raised curtain. He smiles as if he knows him already, the scrawny old man. Squinting, Old Scholar Yan steps forward. Butler Fong holds out his hand.

'No.'

The curtain drops. Behind it the baby wails, loud and piercing.

Returning to Master Chai's study, Old Scholar Yan sits at the table before a piece of red paper and a plateful of ink, and frowns, for a long time. And writes nothing. Although there is more ink than needed, the scholar's teenage disciple keeps grinding the inkstick hard against the inkstone and peeping at Master Chai, who locks his wrinkled face tight. The young man watches, sweat streaming on his clean-shaven head. He tries to shut his ears, expecting a roar, but the master says nothing. The disciple is too young to know that Old Scholar Yan is the only person in Plum Blossom Village Master Chai would never roar at. The old scholar knows things that the master does not know. He can read and write.

Still, there are many more things Master Chai does not know about the scrawny old man. He does not know the many nights the scholar has spent studying *I-Ching*, the Book of Changes, horoscopes and face-reading. He does not know that this most knowledgeable man in Plum Blossom Village sees something in his grandson's little face and eyes.

The scholar searches his old brain for names: to match that face, those eyes and the *something* inside them. Master Chai beckons to his maid to replace the untouched tea with a fresh cup of warm *o-long*.

Taking a sip of the tea, Old Scholar Yan finally writes on the red paper, boldly, in *lishu*, the ancient calligraphy of the Han Dynasty.

Holding the piece of writing, Master Chai rushes through the corridor to the ancestral hall. Butler Fong tags along and helps his master to set the precious names nicely on the prayer table in front of the ancestors' memorial plates. Master Chai throws

a pair of *bagua*, the divinatory blocks, onto the floor. Both fall open, face up, smiling.

*Approved.*

So Master Chai announces his grandson's name: Mingzhi; his scholar name is to be Ziwen, which means intelligent and knowledgeable. A literate man.

*No more illiterates.* The Master has decided. For generations his ancestors have spent their entire lives managing thousands of acres of land in and around Plum Blossom Village. None of them, except his second son, knows anything more than basic reading. This eldest son of the eldest son of Chai is to be different: an educated *shenshi*, a member of the gentry, who will be eligible for public office. His grandfather is determined; his father nods, and his mother smiles quietly.

Mama Wang provides sufficient milk for his enormous appetite. He needs to be fed every two hours or more. Always, he buries his head in Mama Wang's breasts after his meal, dozes off soundly in the sweet and sour scents of milk and sweat. His mother watches, her heart contracting.

She is already weak from two earlier miscarriages, and the delivery drains her further. Taking care of her little boy becomes impossible, as she is able to sit up only for meals in her first month after her confinement.

In the morning, when he is fed and dressed, Mama Wang takes him to his mother, lays him beside her. Pleased and thrilled, she caresses him and kisses him. Feels his little fingers, soft, chubby cheeks. Happy to hear his umps and ahs, to watch his lips twitching and his mouth opening as if talking to her, responding to her loving and caring words, which are only noises to him.

Sometimes she struggles to sit up, to cradle and hold him tight in her bosom. His pulse feels vibrant. *An active life.* She can almost see what lies ahead of him. Hope. That she has ceased to see in herself long before his birth.

His sisters come after breakfast. They gather round their mother's bed and play with their little brother. Meilian pinches his cheeks and calls him little *bao*, steamed bun with filling, while Meifong holds his hands and sings the folk songs she has learned from their maid.

He shares smiles with them, giggles and gurgles as they sing and gesture.

\*

His father sometimes visits, to see if he has grown. When he comes the two sisters crouch in a corner and watch their father looking down at the cradle, observing him.

'He is too weak. You should feed him more often.'

He always makes the same remarks. And Mama Wang always stares at the baby's well-fleshed-out limbs and round body and nods in silence, not wishing to argue. Then he leaves, without holding the child or glancing at his daughters in the corner.

\*

A month after Mingzhi's birth, Master Chai proudly holds a ceremony to celebrate his first grandson's Full Moon.

Early in the morning Mama Wang feeds Mingzhi his first meal of the day, bathes him and dresses him in his little red shirt, red swaddle cloth, red gloves and red socks.

'May all good fortune fall on you,' Mama Wang whispers to the red baby in her arms.

His hands, enveloped in cotton gloves, move along his face, his nose and his mouth. His little fingers fidget in the tightly tied gloves, unable to touch his face or his nose, and unable to taste his soft, fleshy, delicious thumb. Frustrated, his face turns red too, and his legs keep kicking.

‘Shh,’ Mama Wang cradles him and calms him. ‘This is the rule. You have to behave yourself from now on.’

In the ancestral hall Master Chai paces up and down tapping his dragonhead walking stick, giving orders to Butler Fong to give orders, checking the prayer table: a pair of red candles on glittering brass holders, a double lion brass joss stick pot with new fillings of sand, fresh with the green smell of Plum River, a full bunch of joss sticks and a pair of divinatory blocks. All must be in order. And the offerings are lined up: a whole roasted pig sits in the middle, surrounded by braised duck, boiled chicken, meaty spring rolls, mushroom and vegetable platters and herbal chicken soup. And the red rice cakes and red boiled eggs, of course. Not one thing must be missed. And seven small cups of rice wine and seven big bowls of plain rice with seven pairs of chopsticks and seven soup spoons for seven generations of ancestors.

Bracing himself with his brass stick, Master Chai stoops and counts carefully with his shrivelled fingers, making sure that no ancestor lacks anything. For if one is mislaid, Master Chai will have to carry the sin of being disrespectful not only through the whole of this life, but also the next.

Finally candles are lit and joss sticks burnt. Blazing flames dance high, burning red, flashing on the floor and pillars. Smoke puffs up, joining the sweet and sour, and

herbal smells of the offerings, running wild between the beams and the pillars, brooding over the old man, his ancestors, his offerings and his servants.

Butler Fong drags Likang out of bed. Still yawning, Likang almost sleepwalks through the courtyard past the many servants shuffling around cleaning the floor and the pillars, or bringing in offerings. He nearly collides with the prayer table.

Master Chai roars: 'Try to make yourself useful, will you?'

The sharp tail of the dragon stick points at Likang's face, and he is fully awake now. Butler Fong pulls him away instantly to avoid further rebukes.

Mama Wang, guarded by the two girls, stops at the threshold of the ancestral hall. *Neither women nor other clans are allowed in the ancestral hall.* Likang goes to take Mingzhi from the nursemaid, holding him for the first time, awkwardly. In his father's arms the child fidgets and sneezes. His mouth twitches and his face crumples. The air is smoky and stuffy, rich with smells, the swaddling clothes too warm.

Grandfather Master Chai grins and welcomes his beloved grandson: 'Come here, my little precious pearl!'

Thunder howls in the baby's fragile eardrums, triggering his wails, an outburst only to be expected against the noise, the smoke, the flame, the heat and smells. He shifts in his red swaddling. Red-faced.

News of the wailing eldest son of Master Chai's eldest son in the ancestral hall travels fast. In the west court, Er Niang sniggers in her room while Da Niang frowns in hers. *What an unlucky omen.* Da Niang repeatedly reads the lines from the *Dabei* scriptures, chants for the blessing of Buddha. *Please protect my Mingzhi from all evil spirits. Please.*

The divinatory blocks will not smile until the fifth fall. The ancestors seem to be displeased with their red-swaddled, wailing descendant. But Master Chai is pleased. He is pleased to see his grandson for the first time. Happy to touch his chubby cheeks. *He is a real Chai boy, the heir to the Chai clan.*

The kitchen has been busy since dawn. Thousands of rice cakes have been baked, thousands of eggs boiled and dyed red and carefully wrapped, three cakes and three eggs in each packet. Taking the pronunciation of *san* (three) to represent *sheng* (life), the master plants the good omens of ‘alive’ and ‘active’.

Butler Fong instructs his servants to give packets to every family in Plum Blossom Village. Surprised peasants come from the village and nearby quarters, waiting patiently in two long queues at the main entrance until near dark. *Heavenly God has changed at last, beginning to take care of us.* For years they have almost forgotten the taste of rice cake. Smiling, they spread the word: ‘He certainly is our lucky star.’

It is the first time Master Chai has given them such a treat.

At dusk, Liwei, Likang’s younger brother, returns, exhausted but pleased to be home from a two-month rent-collection trip to distant villages. Entering the village, he stares around in disbelief: smiling faces everywhere, everyone holding a red handful, laughing and chattering excitedly.

A rare scene since the Taiping rebels’ dream of a peasant-ruled China burst like a bubble. Years of war coupled with drought left the lands almost barren. Poverty and hunger long ago ripped the smiles off the peasants’ faces. Land rents are high, can hardly be covered by the harvests. Liwei’s rent-collecting trips always leave him feeling guilty; he feels like a bloodsucker, robbing every single *qian* from the poor peasants.

But today, they are smiling.

Liwei speeds up, hurrying towards the source of all this.

Finally, in front of the Chai mansion under the red banner, Liwei sees the last peasant receive his packet. His heart thumps. A bright smile comes to his tired face.

*The child is born!*

Leaving his luggage with Butler Fong, Liwei rushes to the west court to see the infant.

\*

Mingzhi's mother stays in bed for another two months. Feeling stronger, she sits up and holds Mingzhi for longer periods. But her son needs more movement now. He searches around for Mama Wang and cries for her when he sees her standing to one side. Mama Wang lifts him and paces about the room to calm him down. His mother's eyes follow, her chest feels tight.

At dusk, after dinner, Uncle Liwei visits the adjoining room. He tells his little nephew stories that are only noises to him. But his uncle's gentle voice soothes Mingzhi. He stares up quietly and listens as though he understands the tales of monkey and piggy, and the twenty-four dutiful children.

In the adjoining room his mother sits up, listening, imagining her child grabbing Uncle Liwei's fingers, smiling at him. And she smiles quietly, too.

\*

Happy faces are everywhere as the autumn harvest approaches. Working in the billowing paddy fields, chasing away sparrows and killing grasshoppers, the peasants say when they meet: 'Indeed, Heavenly God has changed at last.'

After years of poor harvests, a bumper crop is expected. Before their eyes are thousands of acres of golden fields, eye-catching, heart-warming.

\*

At six months old, Mingzhi is joined by his half brother, Er Niang's son, Mingyuan. His scholar name is Haojie, which means an outstanding person, a hero.

\*

Rain starts pouring the night before Mingyuan's Full Moon. Thunderstorms howl. The Plum River seethes ferociously, pounding against its bank. A worried peasant checking the embankment that evening finds a fissure in its surface. He hurries for help but the dyke collapses before help arrives. Water runs wild in the fields, washing away the spring sprouts.

Master Chai sends Butler Fong and Liwei to lead the servants and peasants in containing the flood. The rain and thunderstorms stop after midnight, but the Plum River continues roaring. Sand bags are filled and stacked, cattle herded to higher ground, along with women, old and young ones with armfuls of pots and pans and mattresses, dropping them all the way. There is little shelter. They crouch, soaking wet, in caves, between bushes, under trees.

Butler Fong and Liwei return at dawn covered in mud. Their lips are pale, their hands wrinkled, their eyes gloomy. *Everything's gone.*

Master Chai worries about his rents.

No rice cakes are baked, no red boiled eggs prepared for Mingyuan's Full Moon, despite Er Niang's angry stamping in her room, hard on her tiny feet and frustrated heart.

\*

The next autumn on his birthday, Mingzhi is deemed to have turned two years old, having spent his first year inside his mother and the second in the outside world.

Early morning. Mingzhi is seated on a table top in the centre hall of the east court, surrounded by a set of brushes for calligraphic writing, a pair of scissors, a couple of copper coins, copies of books, a bowl with five grains, a ledger, a shovel, a set of mandarin costumes, and many other items, each representing a particular occupation.

Master Chai's eyes follow Mingzhi's hands as he moves and touches the surrounding items. He grins when his little grandson lays his hands on the set of brushes but drops his smile when Mingzhi reaches for the handle of the shovel. *No!* Mingzhi moves away. The worried grandfather is relieved. The colourful mandarin costume catches Mingzhi's eyes. He grabs it. *Yes!* Master Chai holds his breath, but exhales immediately when the infant at once pushes the costume away and snatches the ledger instead, observes it, opens it wide, tears it, giggles, and looks at nothing else.

Master Chai frowns, dismisses the ceremony as flawed. Mingzhi will be neither a businessman nor an accountant. He is predestined to be a scholar, a successful one.

A Mandarin.

\*

Mingzhi totters in the courtyard, in small, careful steps, away from Mama Wang at one end towards Da Niang at the other. He looks up, but is unable to see beyond the wall, and the hills and mountains that lie ahead.

Far away up north, where Mingzhi's young eyes can't reach, the white ghosts and the dwarf ghosts come rushing in: British, French, American, German, Russian, Japanese,

Italian and Austrian, with watery mouths and glowing eyes. All hunger for a piece of the cake called China, sweet and soft creamy, dying to gobble up their shares in a single bite.

And Mingzhi grows, in a small village ignorant of the threats that will change his life.

## *Chapter Two*

### **Summer 1879**

A glorious afternoon and Mingzhi wakes early from his nap, determined to make the most of his day. He grabs his kite, tugs at Mama Wang's sleeve and makes her go with him.

Outside, the sun is blazing. Mama Wang stops the five-year-old from running to the courtyard. 'Stay here, you little precious pearl. It's too risky to play under the sun.'

Mingzhi makes a face but does not argue. Mama Wang sits fanning herself on the wooden bench on the veranda, watching Mingzhi throw the kite skyward. The air is still. The kite twists above his head and falls.

He picks it up and tries again. Another quick fall, right on his head. He examines the joints of the kite and finds them all intact. He tries again, climbing on a stool this time, till the wind comes and the kite takes off. Mingzhi cheers, pulling the string.

Mama Wang fans herself slower and slower, her eyes become smaller. Finally the fan drops as she dozes off.

The kite crashes to the ground once more. Frustrated, Mingzhi hurls the roll of string away. There is a faint rattling sound from the end of the courtyard. Squinting at Mama Wang, now asleep, Mingzhi steps down from the veranda and walks slowly

toward the noise. It comes from a bush under a willow in a corner, gets louder as he approaches. He peers under the bush and a coil of metallic golden cord springs upright, rattling. The reptile flickers its forked tongue in and out, toying with its prey. Petrified, Mingzhi stares into the pair of blazing eyes and cries out.

The mansion wakes. Mama Wang stands as rigid as a log, unable to take in the picture before her.

A figure runs past Mingzhi. A series of loud thumps follows. *What happened? Am I dead?* Mingzhi rubs away his tears and finds Uncle Liwei standing tall before him, holding a spade. The rattlesnake's body is just recognisable in the mess on the ground. Mingzhi clings tightly to his uncle's leg, feels its strength and knows he is safe.

'I'll protect you, wherever you are.'

He feels pats on his head and hears Uncle Liwei's murmur, gradually drowned out by the voices of the fast gathering crowd.

At night Mingzhi's temperature rises: his body is burning hot, his eyeballs roll up. He tosses in bed, red-faced, muttering senselessly, sobbing. Da Niang sits by the bedside, watching Mama Wang repeatedly wet a towel with cold water and press it to his forehead. It warms up in minutes. *The snake ghost has possessed my Doggie. It is taking him away!* Mama Wang keeps rubbing Mingzhi's face, limbs and body with the cold towel. Her face turns pale; her hands shaking.

'It's the snake ghost, Madam. It is seeking revenge!'

‘Stop that nonsense!’ Da Niang’s voice quavers. Her son’s face is bursting red, an over-ripe persimmon waiting to explode. She helplessly sends her maid for Master Chai. The furious grandpa at once summons a doctor from Pindong Town.

Two doors away, Er Niang cranes at the window for her servant, hoping for her to come back with the worst news possible. Mingyuan, now four years old, takes the opportunity of climbing onto the stool and reaching for the jar of sweets on top of the cabinet. *Too high.* He lifts his foot and stretches his arm, wobbling.

Thump! He falls and wails. Er Niang rushes forward, whacks him to stop him crying. ‘You should be laughing now, not crying, you stupid child.’

Master Chai paces the room until midnight, until the doctor declares Mingzhi safe. Until Mingzhi’s father comes home, happily chanting snatches of opera.

Next morning, Mingzhi wakes to find a stranger by his bedside.

‘That’s your new nanny.’ His mother tries to calm him down.

‘I want Mama Wang!’

He cries, shrinking into a corner of his bed, avoiding the new girl’s touch, screaming for his lost nursemaid. But Master Chai does not yield.

\*

Days, weeks, and even months later, he still cries in his dreams at night, misses the warmth of Mama Wang’s breasts, her husky yet tender voice. And when he wakes, he sucks his tasteless thumb in the darkness in tears.

\*

The ban on entering the courtyard is lifted a month after the incident with the snake. But now Mingzhi prefers to stay in his room. He has found himself a new world.

With the maid's help, Mingzhi curtains off the gap between his bed and the wardrobe in the corner with the sheet his mother embroidered. This magic room slightly bigger than a two-door wardrobe is good enough for him to move around, for three persons to shelter inside.

Yes, it is a magic room. Every morning Mingzhi walks to the curtain as if approaching the entrance of the hidden paradise of *Taohua Yuan*, the legendary Peach Blossom Spring in the folklore of the Ming Dynasty: the only place on earth where peace, harmony and love are to be found, where everybody lives happily in perfect health. Concealed in a luxuriant peach blossom grove by a stream, the village isolates itself from all the hustle and bustle of the outside world. Mingzhi has dreamed about this well-known story day and night since Uncle Liwei narrated it to him.

Mingzhi touches the embroidery on the curtain. Peach blossoms - ranging from as tiny as a copper coin to the size of a rice bowl, budding or blossoming in various tones of pink silk - shine in the morning rays, inviting him to his little *Taohua Yuan*. Mingzhi holds the curtain up and slips into his secret kingdom.

On the little stool in the corner sits a sandalwood box. He opens it, and there are his treasures: a grasshopper and a dragonfly made of bamboo leaf, a carved wooden rabbit, a pair of copper turtles, a set of toy bricks and a white silk kerchief embroidered with his name.

Smoothing his kerchief on the floor, Mingzhi carefully arranges the family of insects and animals on top, as if they are racing. The rabbit cranes its neck at the backs of

the turtles, which are well ahead of it. The dragonfly rests on the back of a turtle with its tail raised high, as if cheering for its friend's triumph. And the grasshopper stands aside, watching, like a judge.

Mingzhi shhs: 'Be good, don't move. I'm making you a home.'

He piles up the bricks.

'Knock, knock, knock. Any body home?' Uncle Liwei ducks in. 'Hey, how can the turtles win?' He shakes his head: 'They are slow. I told you that.'

'I know... But can't they win just for once?' Mingzhi looks up at him, hoping.

Uncle Liwei sighs and pats Mingzhi's head as he squats down level with the boy: 'You're just like your mother.'

'Is someone talking about me behind my back?'

Da Niang appears.

Mingzhi cheers. He rushes to hold his mother's hand, leading her to the stool.

Leaning against his mother, Mingzhi urges Uncle Liwei to repeat his favourite story. His uncle protests, but yields later as always when the boy insists. He clears his throat and the tale begins:

*Once upon a time, a fisherman poling his boat along a stream suddenly saw ahead of him a mass of glowing peach blossoms: bright pink, cluster upon cluster. He gazed fascinated as the stream carried his little boat through the peach blossom grove to a village he had never seen or heard of. The friendly villagers welcomed him with great hospitality, without asking where he came from, what he wanted...*

Mingzhi feels Da Niang's hands around his shoulders. He glances up. His mother's dreamy eyes look far away, as if she is wandering in the fairyland of Peach Blossom Spring. Uncle Liwei's voice envelops the three of them, fills the boy's little world behind the curtain.

*... As he stayed on, the fisherman found the place a heaven: no quarrels, no disputes, only laughter and smiles on the healthy, gleaming faces of men and women, young and old. He lived there happily, enjoying talks over wine and chess after a day's farming with the villagers...*

Mingzhi presses his body against his mother, feels the warmth she exudes, the calm Uncle Liwei's voice conveys.

\*

The bed is warm and Mingzhi falls fast asleep. Outside the window, the night sky darkens. Mingzhi hears insects humming, close to his ears. He opens his eyes. His family of insects and animals, all as big as he is, marches in. The dragonfly leads; the turtles and rabbit follow while the grasshopper guards the rear. They stop by his bedside and gesture to him.

Mingzhi jumps off his bed and joins the parade behind the grasshopper. They march around the room, again and again. Then suddenly they are all riding on a flying dragon, round and round, higher and higher. Cheers and laughter fill the room. But moments later the old rivals, the rabbit and the turtles, begin pushing each other, shouting abuse, louder and louder. The dragon starts twisting violently, flips over and comes crashing down.

Mingzhi wakes to the sounds of clattering and banging, unsure if he is still in the dream. He turns to face the wall separating his room and his mother's. Through the chinks of the wooden planks flickers of candlelight slip in, casting faint stripes on his bed, the wall and ceiling. *Mother*. He grasps the edges of his blanket tight. Waits. A door squeaks open. He hears his father's drunken muttering, along with Da Niang's pleadings, faint and helpless. Then there are sounds of heavy breathing and moaning, like those of an animal.

The door squeaks again, closes with a bang. Mingzhi hears his mother sobbing, muffled yet clear in the silence of the night. He stares hard at the source of the unsettled stripes of light, imagines his mother burying her head under the pillow. But the young boy's heavy eyes soon droop, and he falls asleep again.

\*

Likang always comes home early at the end of the month, when he has spent his allowance. A substantial dinner is prepared for the master of the west court. Boiled country chicken and braised duck are essential, and his favourite wine, *wo jiapi*, of course.

The dinner table is carefully arranged, too: first wife Da Niang to the right and second wife Er Niang to the left of the master's seat. The boys sit next to their mother, and the girls between their brothers.

Er Niang leans close to Likang, pours him a cup of *wo jiapi*, smiling brightly as he drains it.

'One more.' She refills his cup and squints over at the other side, only to find that Da Niang holds herself aloof, contemplating the bowl of rice in front of her.

The children watch their father tear a drumstick off the whole boiled chicken. Grease oozes out between his fingers as he brings it to his mouth. Then, aware of the eyes on him, he pauses, puts the piece of chicken in Mingzhi's bowl and tears another for Mingyuan.

'Don't stare. Eat!' He orders, takes a stern look around, especially sharp at the girls.

So they quietly munch their food amid the sounds of their father's noisy gulping of meat and wine.

And the dinner ends with Er Niang supporting the drunken Likang to her room.

\*

A peal of laughter breaks the quiet autumn morning. Mingzhi wakes. He kneels on his bed and peers through the window.

In the now bush-free courtyard, his half-brother Mingyuan is riding on the back of Er Niang's servant girl, who is down on all fours.

'Faster, faster! You're too slow!' Mingyuan shouts, brandishing his bamboo cane.

The teenage girl struggles over the leafy gravel, crushing the leaves, pressing the grit. Blood smears her palms and stains the dress under her knees. Tears fill her eyes.

'Be careful, son,' Er Niang calls from the veranda where she sits. 'Looks like I should get you a better horse.'

Mingyuan taps the girl's head with the cane: 'Did you hear that? I said faster.'

She inches forward.

Mingyuan croons:

'Little pony gallops,

Little pony gallops;  
Takes me to the east,  
Takes me to the south,  
Takes me to the west,  
Takes me to the north;  
Takes me to the horizon.'

Mingzhi quietly sings along. Mingyuan looks around and sees him. He beckons to his Big Brother: 'Hey, here, join me for a ride!'

Mingzhi shakes his head.

'Come on, let's play hide and seek,' Mingyuan urges, but Er Niang chips in: 'Stop it, Mingyuan. Who do you think you are to play with him?'

A cricket leaps in front of the servant girl. She yells and falls over. Mingyuan jumps off.

'It's only a cricket, silly!' He crushes and grinds the insect under his foot, then giggles.

Mingzhi's chest tightens. He cowers under the window, imagining the yellow and brown mess on Mingyuan's sole.

Er Niang's sharp voice penetrates his thoughts: 'Hey, what a brave boy you are, Mingyuan.'

Pale autumn sunlight slants in through the open window, falls on Mingzhi's head and shoulders. There is no heat in it, yet Mingzhi squints as he looks up.

He feels dizzy.

\*

*...Days, weeks, months passed. Homesickness began to drown him. He bade farewell to his friends. Before the fisherman's departure, the head of Peach Blossom Spring reminded him to keep the place a secret...*

Mingzhi does not understand the fisherman's decision to return home, a decision he regretted later according to Uncle Liwei. *Even my little things enjoy living in their Taohua Yuan.* He builds a home with the wooden bricks for his toy pets: four pillars, four walls, a roof and a door. And he houses them in it: the stern-faced grasshopper, the sympathetic dragonfly, the arrogant rabbit and its rivals the turtles. All live in harmony under the same roof.

\*

Liwei concludes the year-end account: it's declining, though not a deficit.

Master Chai sits erect in his dragon chair, contemplates the open pages. His maid stands to one side, observing her master's taut face. He takes a sip of tea but spits it out abruptly, smashes the teacup on the floor and howls: 'Warm tea only I said, stupid!'

The girl turns pale. *Another night without dinner.* She holds back her tears, quietly replaces the tea and cleans up the mess.

Spring comes and the women are busy plucking mulberry leaves from the trees that spiral up the eastern hillside. Setting out at dawn, the peasant women carry wicker baskets on their backs, exchanging gossip and household tips along the way. By early afternoon they struggle down the hill, hunched under full loads of fresh mulberry leaves. There is more chattering along the way as they head for the silkworm farm, passing the Chai Mansion.

Tossing in his bed in his afternoon-nap-hour, Mingzhi hears the commotion from beyond the wall that encloses the courtyard. A husky voice stands out from among the others. *Mama Wang*. Mingzhi sits up; his heart pounds. The room is quiet. The maids have long since retreated to their naps. Mingzhi puts on his shoes, sneaks out of the room, walks across the courtyard and lightly pushes open the door to the street.

The women pass by in groups. Mingzhi watches them through the gap. They all look alike: scarves on their heads, long-sleeved plain cotton shirts dotted with little flowery designs and dark coloured trousers. All are well wrapped up against the greedy mosquitoes and the burning sun. But Mingzhi spots her as they pass. *Mama Wang*, plump as ever but even stronger-looking, is among the youngest and toughest women in the lead.

Mingzhi calls out: 'Mama Wang!'

The clattering of the crowd drowns out his faint cry. Mama Wang's blue scarf moves further away, disappearing in the shuffle of blues, greens, greys and blacks.

He pushes the door open and darts out. The women are walking fast. Mingzhi lags behind with his shorter steps, passing an orchard, crossing a bridge. He speeds up, yet still the gap widens. Panting, he watches them turn to the right after a farmhouse and disappear.

'No, wait!'

Almost crying, Mingzhi runs along the track. His feet are sore in his thin-soled cotton shoes, his heart burning. *I want Mama Wang!* He keeps running, past the farmhouse, turns the corner.

All is quiet.

The women and their chatter have left no trace in the afternoon air. Mingzhi glances around, panicked. Then he notices smoke puffing up from the chimney of a farmhouse twenty yards away. He spots the entrance and hurries towards it.

In the courtyard some women are unloading mulberry leaves, and their busyness blinds them to the little boy. Mingzhi moves between mounds of mulberry leaves, searching. But Mama Wang isn't there.

There is a row of four rooms behind the women. Mingzhi sneaks to the first door. Inside, there are more leaves; a storeroom apparently. He shifts to the next, peers through the wide-open window. Worms. Hundreds of thousands of them, round and white, wriggle in trays layered with mulberry leaves on the long wooden tables that fill the room.

Mingzhi feels as if they are burrowing through his stomach, in and out. Hundreds of thousands of them. He looks away, holds his breath and moves to the third room.

It is crowded with the same trays and tables, but the trays are filled with white silky balls. Tray by tray they are carried by some of the women into the adjoining room. Mingzhi follows. And there he sees Mama Wang. Removing a tray from a table she pours the cocoons into a big steaming cauldron. Mingzhi climbs up the windowsill and looks down.

In the cauldron, the snowy balls surge about in the hot waves. Mingzhi imagines the hundreds of thousands of worms yelling in pain and then curling up dead in their silky homes.

Mama Wang sieves up the silky balls floating on the surface, then goes for another tray.

And more are poured in.

More killings.

Mingzhi grasps the window panel. It squeaks noisily. Mama Wang glances up.

‘My little precious pearl! What are you doing here?’

She hurries forward, reaching for Mingzhi’s legs. Mingzhi steps back and down.

He stares at Mama Wang through the open window as though she is a stranger.

‘Come over. Let me see if you’ve grown.’

Mama Wang holds out her hand. Mingzhi shakes his head, turns and runs.

\*

That night in Mingzhi’s dreams, hundreds of thousands of worms wriggle over Mama Wang’s broad, placid face. Soon they fade away altogether in a gush of steam.

### *Chapter Three*

Paddy buds are sprouting and there is not much work for Liwei before his next rent collection trip. He spends more time with Mingzhi, teaching him to recite from *Sanzi Jing*, the Three-Character Classic.

From morning till noon the uncle and the six-year-old nephew sit together on the veranda. Uncle Liwei reads aloud: ‘Men are kind-natured when they are born. Their natures are similar; their habits become different ...’

Mingzhi follows, memorising every single word his uncle utters without understanding their meaning, rattling them off, clear and apparently articulate.

The small booklet of *Sanzi Jing* Uncle Liwei brings with him is mildewed and smells. They squat in the middle of the courtyard, reading the lines aloud as they spread the booklet wide page by page under the sun. In front of them are two shadows, inseparable, one big the other small; their rhythmic voices loud and vigorous, muffling the tiny voice that has been echoing them all morning.

It’s Mingyuan.

Behind the window of Er Niang’s room, he stands leaning against the windowpane, cocks his ears, quietly reciting along.

\*

Soon the Lunar New Year approaches. Like other children, Mingzhi now has only red good-luck-envelopes, clattering firecrackers and mouth-watering rice cake in his dreams. He is eager to swirl in the whirling red paper flakes, the remains of spent firecrackers, eager to dig out the contents of red envelopes, to compare the amount of money collected with Mingyuan. And to enjoy a sweet mouthful of sticky tasty rice cake. *For a full fifteen days!* Mingzhi checks the calendar every morning as soon as he wakes, crossing off yesterdays.

‘New Year is for the children,’ the peasants say, and some add: ‘Chai’s children.’

There are new clothes, new shoes to prepare and red envelopes to fill for their children; also the silver paper and joss sticks – at the very least, if they leave out the rice cake - for the praying ritual. The peasants’ smiles turn bitter. To some, celebrating the festival according to tradition means piling their debts up higher, slaving more for Master Chai.

Yet the festival comes and goes. Before the lucky ones have tasted enough rice cake or counted the harvest from their red envelopes, Old Scholar Yan’s private school reopens on the sixteenth day of the new year.

The weather is good, so Old Scholar Yan instructs his disciple to set up the class under the old willow tree. With his hands locked tight behind him he strolls between rows of six to twelve-year-old boys, reciting from *Sanzi Jing*:

‘Men are kind-natured when they are born...’ He pauses.

‘... Their natures are similar; their habits become different...’ Behind him a tiny voice continues, trembling but clear: ‘... If they are neglected, not properly taught, their nature will deteriorate...’

Old Scholar Yan turns back. Mingzhi meets his eyes and smiles shyly. His teacher nods, encouraging. The boy continues reciting the entire book. The old teacher looks on, smooths his beard and nods. He recognises him: the eyes, the face. The look.

\*

News of Mingzhi's performance on his first day at school reaches his grandfather. Master Chai takes a sip of tea. The refreshing taste of *o-long* lingers on his tongue, warms his throat and his chest. He can't contain his smile. Recent visits of Mandarin Liu from Pindong Town have made the old man thoughtful. A greedy fish he is, a hungry shark, asking more and more, threatening with even higher taxation if his appetite is not satisfied. Master Chai recognises none of the characters in the paper the Mandarin raises before his face. A humiliation that is too hard for him to swallow. *But not for much longer!* In his mind's eye Master Chai sees Mingzhi in his mandarin costume. He sees his grandson sitting at Mandarin Liu's courtroom desk before a roomful of officials while he watches him from behind a curtain.

Master Chai takes another sip, not realising the tea has cooled off. When he finally notices, he quietly beckons his maid to replace it. The young girl is fortunate to escape punishment.

At dinner, Da Niang prepares her son's favourite salted radish omelette. She is glad for her husband's absence, so there isn't a family dinner for the west court. *Only Mingzhi and I.*

Da Niang sits close to her son, picks up a piece of omelette with her chopsticks and puts it in his bowl. She watches him stuffing it into his mouth, smiling at her while he munches. Cheeks bulging with food, his eyes narrow to tiny slits as he smiles, like the

forever-cheerful Laughing Buddha. Da Niang giggles. *She is laughing!* Mingzhi keeps smiling and his eyes become even smaller. He picks up a piece of omelette for his mother in turn. Da Niang chews slowly, relishing the sweetness of the radish, the crunchiness of its fine fibre, and the buttery smell of egg.

Candlelight yellows the room. She feels warm.

\*

On rainy days Old Scholar Yan holds classes in his house. His students resent this, missing the warmth of the sunlight, the faint smell of plum blossoms in the air, the red dragonfly and splendid butterflies that colour the sky, and the humming of the cicada, an echo to their monotonous reading of *Sishu Wujing*, the Four Books and Five Classics - basic readings of Confucianism - the essentials for the civil service examination.

Knowing this, Old Scholar Yan begins the class by telling a story of the Twenty-Four Dutiful Children. The students sit still, all eyes on their teacher, listening.

Except for Mingzhi.

He knows all the twenty-four stories well, having heard them more than once from Uncle Liwei. They are all similar: kind parents treating their child with much love and care, and he paying them back by all means. And they live happily together forever after.

He looks out of the window. A curtain of rainwater falls from the eaves into the ditch. Behind it a family of mandarin ducks bathe in the pond in a corner of the courtyard, flapping their wings, quacking, the big ones pecking their children, helping to clean them.

Old Scholar Yan notices Mingzhi but says nothing. The boy looks far away. *A place beyond my knowledge.* Strolling between two rows of students, the old man trips on a desk leg, stumbles and nearly falls over.

\*

At home after school Mingzhi becomes his sisters' teacher. He smooths rice paper on his study desk and demonstrates his calligraphy skills.

The girls crowd forward.

'Let's begin with the basics,' he lowers his voice, touches his beardless chin, mimicking Old Scholar Yan.

His sisters giggle. Meifong, the youngest, pats her brother's head. Mingzhi laughs, dodging. He writes, starting with a left falling stroke, joined by a right one from the middle of the first stroke. Black ink seeps through the rice paper. The strokes stand up: two legs supporting the body. *Ren*, 'people'. The girls study the strokes, try to associate the character with the word in their daily conversation.

Then they rush after Mingzhi's brush. He hides it behind him.

'Not yet.' Mingzhi adds a line horizontally across the first stroke. That gives *da*, 'big': a man with both his arms stretching out wide.

'One more.' He swiftly presses a dot in between the strokes, turning it into *tai*, 'greatest'.

The girls observe the changes. *Like magic.*

*Ren – Da – Tai.*

They read aloud after their brother.

Taking their turns, the sisters hold the brush for the first time. Though her hands tremble, Meilian, the eldest, manages to copy the strokes. Her lines are thin and shaky.

‘Like chicken claws,’ teases Meifong, her younger sister.

But she is not much better, both the legs of her ‘human’ jumble to the left. And she is fond of dots, making hundreds of them on the paper.

‘Stop it, what a waste.’ Meilian reaches for the brush. Meifong dodges her, runs brandishing the brush, splashing the black ink about the room, onto her sister and her brother.

*That’s too much!* Meilian and Mingzhi cup a handful of ink each, chase after Meifong.

The first lesson ends with the three black faces laughing at each other, before the asthmatic Meifong flops into a chair, coughing breathlessly. Mingzhi watches as Meilian massages Meifong’s chest until her breathing eases. Mingzhi stares at the two smeared faces in front of him, almost unrecognisable, like strangers. A sudden fear rushes over him. *My sisters! I want my sisters! I want to see their smiles!* Panicked, he hurries for a moist cloth and rubs his sisters’ faces with it despite their screams of protest, until the ink is wiped away and their cheeks appear clean, pinkish again. And he feels safe.

\*

Master Chai has important visitors and Mingzhi is summoned to the east court, to recite poems of the Tang and Song Dynasties.

The centre hall seems too spacious and the guests, a dozen of them, are staring. Mingzhi is shy at first, aware of their gazes on him: Master Chai is critical under his tightly knitted brows and the guests are expectant. His body itches, his eyes fix on his

feet and his voice trembles. Yet his pronunciation is clear and his words and rhythm accurate. The audience applaud, requesting more: Li Bai, Du Fu, Li Shangyin, Li Yi, Li Qingzhao, a long list of the greatest poets of the most glorious periods in the history of Chinese literature.

Mingzhi flushes, his eyes shine. He raises his voice, blurting out the poems, one after another.

Master Chai's brows loosen. He sits back, keeps knuckling the rhythms against his armrest. *That's my grandson.* He nods.

\*

Mingzhi's eldest sister, Meilian, waits for her brother to come home in the afternoons and asks him about his lessons for the day. The sister and brother hide behind the curtain in Mingzhi's secret world. Meilian listens to Mingzhi reciting poems, telling tales as told by Old Scholar Yan, explaining the teachings of Confucianism as he has been taught.

Though starting late – at the age of fourteen – Meilian is certainly a fast learner. By dusk before dinner she recites the poems together with her brother, and is able to explain the metaphors that are too difficult for a six-year old: the solitude, the feelings of loss or resentment subtly wrapped under beautiful landscapes: the vast snowy land, the magnificent gorges, the borderless steppe, the roaring Yellow River or the quiet Yangzi Jiang. Mingzhi likes listening to his sister, her voice soft and comforting. He lays his head on her lap, his cheek against the smoothness of her silk dress.

At night, lying in his bed Mingzhi stares hard at the light beams silting through the seams of the planked wall, listening to his eldest sister's whispers from next door,

vague, indistinct. Imagining her at her younger sister's bedside, telling her the story she has learned; imagining Meifong falling asleep before it ends.

Sometimes after the lights are put out, he hears his eldest sister reciting poems by her favourite poet, Li Qingzhao, the greatest woman poet of the Song Dynasty. Mingzhi remembers that Meilian once told him about the miserable life Li had led. It began happily, with an open-minded father who allowed her to learn reading and writing, and later a loving and caring husband. But everything changed after her husband's early death. First came mourning for him, then a disastrous second marriage, then being left alone during the war. What is marriage? What is war? Why did she have to marry again? He doesn't understand. And her sister always keeps quiet whenever he asks her questions. He thinks she doesn't understand, too.

But most of the time, Mingzhi falls asleep before Meilian stops reciting. There is always a herd of sheep walking through his dream, dotted on the vast, green steppe of Mongolia, exactly the way Meilian described it when they read the poems.

'It's beautiful, Eldest Sister,' he murmurs and rolls over, falling deep into his dreamland.

\*

Master Chai asks for a mid-year account for the first time. The balance does not show even the slightest improvement. Liwei quietly lays the book on Master Chai's desk and leaves the room before his father notices it.

\*

The village is swept by an anonymous plague. First the cattle: pigs, cows, oxen, chicken, ducks, die with their mouths spewing out foaming spittle and their bellies protruding;

then the weakest among the children. The unfortunate mothers cry their hearts out while the fathers have more worries: the living need to be fed.

Liwei, with Butler Fong's help, instructs the villagers to set up a crematorium, gather and burn the contaminated corpses. *Only the cattle, not my children.* The villagers are adamant. Without the body as shelter, the young soul will be trapped at the edge of the underworld, wandering, unable to be reincarnated. Liwei has to yield to generations of belief in Taoism.

Unable to afford a coffin, they wrap the bodies in swaddling bands and bury them by the marsh at the western hillside.

On Liwei's advice, Old Scholar Yan dismisses the children and announces the school closed until things improve. Mingzhi comes home early to the news that his youngest sister, Meifong, is ill. She lies unconscious in bed and occasionally vomits. Her face is as red as an over-ripe persimmon.

Mingzhi holds Meilian's hand tight, standing aside with her, watching their mother hold open Meifong's jaw, forcing herbal medicine into her mouth. Excess liquid flows from the corners of Meifong's mouth, staining the pillow, spreading instantly, black against the white sheet. Mingzhi feels weak. He squeezes Meilian's fingers, and she lets him, does not yell.

By evening foaming spittle starts spewing from Meifong's mouth. Da Niang asks Meilian to take Mingzhi to his room, and sends a maid to Master Chai, asking for a doctor to be sent for.

The grandfather says nothing.

Late at night Mingzhi hears his mother's cry, long and tearing. The brother and sister cling tight together in bed, weeping under the blanket.

Master Chai gives the order to bury Miefong on the same night. *Dying young, what a bad omen.* Worse still, dying of an unknown disease. *Feng Shui comes first.* Master Chai decides: the Chai clan's geomantic omen is not to be contaminated; the girl's body shall not enter the clan cemetery. Da Niang kneels in front of Master Chai and pleads. The old man turns his back on her and retreats to his room.

A crude wooden coffin takes Meifong to the mass cemetery on the eastern hillside, where orphans, loners and the unclaimed bodies of strangers are buried.

On the same night in Pindong Town, Likang has a row with a gang of local rascals over a singsong girl at the brothel. He is unlucky to be sent home on a stretcher with a broken leg and an asthma attack, but lucky, in a way, to be in time to see off his dead daughter.

\*

When the school reopens, Master Chai allows Mingyuan to join his Big Brother. Anything may happen: a plague, a child's death, a father's injury, anything. Master Chai has been alerted. *Too risky to focus on just one.*

Er Niang cheers in her room. She orders her son's favourite roast pork for dinner. *A few more steps, son, and we shall get there.* She pours herself a cup of rice wine and drains it.

\*

Mingzhi is delighted to have Mingyuan's company. The route to the school was too long, too quiet. Butler Fong, his escort, was quiet too, and unable to answer his questions about the poets and their poems, and the Confucian readings.

The two boys start with *Sanzi Jing* on the first day. Mingzhi reads it once for his half brother, and is surprised later that Mingyuan manages to remember half of it in minutes. A few days later they are able to recite the entire book together as they walk along. Each ready to remind the other when there is a slip of memory: words missing, phrases jumbled up. The journey becomes short, enjoyable.

Within two months Mingyuan has learned enough from Mingzhi to catch up with him. He becomes impatient. Slow walks and repeating the same poems and readings no longer interest him, but his surroundings do: he prods caterpillars with a twig, chases butterflies, catches dragonflies and tears their wings off. Butler Fong does nothing and Mingzhi's complaints are in vain.

Mingyuan starts running ahead of Mingzhi, challenging him to races. Mingzhi watches, and stays between his half brother, rushing ahead, and Butler Fong, who guards behind.

\*

Likang's broken leg confines him to his room for two months. Despite his two wives' careful tending Likang feels bored. He sends Butler Fong for friends he had fun with at the Pindong Town brothel. They come with their fighter crickets; set the insects to fighting each other, and themselves to gambling over the results.

This does entertain Likang for a week, but no longer. On the eighth day, the humming of crickets begins to annoy him as much as his constant bleating and demands annoy his pals.

It is impossible to smuggle Likang's favourite singsong girl into the mansion, though Master Chai has always been tolerant with him because of his asthma. So these good friends of Likang finally work out the best solution: opium.

Likang's first puff of opium chokes him, but the second takes him to the ninth layer of sky, drifting: boneless, fleshless, weightless. And he never steps down to earth again.

\*

Master Chai falls ill on the evening of the Mid-Autumn Festival. The garden dinner in the east court for the family is cancelled, but the lanterns, which had been prepared in the morning, are left hanging on the boughs.

So are those in the west court. Mingzhi and Mingyuan watch Meilian hang a lantern on the branch and say it's for Meifong. Mingzhi looks at his sister's solemn face, knows she is still grieving for their sister's death. *I miss your smile, Elder Sister.*

They stand in silence. Moments later Meilian beckons them, organises and leads a lantern parade around the courtyard. Candlelight, thin and soft, flickers in the colourful paper stripes. The wind is strong. It clears the cloud and shakes their lanterns. They bring the fragile lanterns close to their bodies and carefully shield the candles with their hands.

Before the first circuit ends Mingyuan shouts: 'Let me take the lead!'

As he rushes forward Mingyuan stumbles over a stump and falls. His face is pressed into a pool of mud and his paper lantern burns off in seconds. Mingzhi laughs pointing and Meilian holds her brother's hand tight as she giggles. *Her smile is back!* Looking up, Mingzhi sees that his eldest sister's face is clean and bright, like the moon above her.

The wind keeps blowing, sweeping over a big piece of cloud.

In the east court, Master Chai lies awake in bed. His head aches. Outside the window the moon is now half-covered by the cloud. *Even the moon is against me, can't be at its fullest and clearest as it should be on this day.* Master Chai thinks about the preceding series of calamities: the declining revenue, the plague, the death and the injury.

And now, his own illness.

*Something has to be done.* The old man thinks hard.

The night is so quiet that the children's laughter - the boys' and the girl's - though a distance away, reaches their grandfather.

*Yes, the girl.*

Master Chai heaves a sigh of relief, closes his eyes and sleeps.

\*

Meilian's wedding is scheduled for the following month: To drive away all evils and restore good fortune. Master Chai happily announces the bridegroom-to-be: Mandarin Liu's eldest son, thirty-eight years old; and Meilian is to be his second wife.

Da Niang hugs Meilian tight with all her might, yet she feels weak, helpless.

Meilian feels her mother shiver, and herself sinking, emptying.

But Master Chai is so pleased with the arrangement that he sends for the best tailor in Pindong Town, ordering a fine silk wedding gown to be made, to match the bridegroom's. *And I will be sitting at Mandarin Liu's family table, drinking with him.* Though not yet fully recovered, Master Chai feels his head lighter and his body energised.

Meilian stops coming to Mingzhi's room, and keeps herself to hers.

The boy asks his mother, 'What does "getting married" mean? Is Eldest Sister leaving us forever?'

Da Niang pats his head, sighs. There is a long silence.

'You will know later, son, you will know.'

On the wedding day Mingzhi sees his Eldest Sister being led into the red-curtained sedan. The autumn wind slaps her ferociously and the silk gown clings tight to her body, lean and trembling. Mingzhi can't see Meilian's face under her red headscarf, but remembers her look under the autumn moonlight. Smiling, clean and bright.

The sedan takes her away.

### *Chapter Four*

For the first time Master Chai's eldest son comes up with a brilliant idea: to cultivate opium poppies. The market looks bright. Already, half of the population of Pindong Town are enjoying this magic smoke, indulging themselves with it after a hard day's work, puffing the long pipe, leaving sweats and aches and all scolding and faultfinding behind. And more are expected to join them.

Master Chai praises Likang for his clever idea, and this eldest son of his smiles slyly: an uninterrupted free supply is guaranteed.

Recent harvests of paddy have been poor and the plague has killed the cattle that might bring extra income. Debts have piled up. The villagers have no choice but to accept Master Chai's suggestion. Furthermore, free seedlings will be provided, which is too good to resist.

And the timing is just right. Master Chai stands with Butler Fong in the late autumn wind, bracing himself with his dragon stick, watching the peasants sowing. *It won't be long.* Master Chai closes his eyes. He sees a valley full of red poppies in front of him and smells their exotic fragrance. The corners of his mouth gradually curl up, stretching the creased pair of lips.

As he opens his eyes again, from the hillock where he stands, Master Chai sees Liwei come through the pass, cross the river and enter the village, returning from his annual trip.

The old man's smile disappears. *Liwei*. He sighs, thinking about his son's reaction as he stares at the approaching figure. Then he thumps his dragon stick, turns and leaves. Butler Fong follows.

At home Mingzhi is waiting for his uncle. Two months seem so long, so much has happened. So much to tell.

\*

Mingzhi cheers in his room when the news of Uncle Liwei's return reaches the west court. He hides in his secret world, wipes dust off the stool with his sleeve and sits on a cushion next to it, with his arms around his bent knees – a good sitting posture for long hours of talking: Uncle Liwei's stories from afar and his own from home.

The cushion is soft and comfortable and Mingzhi dozes off. He has a big, red persimmon in his dream. He takes a bite. It's sweet and juicy, and the sticky fluid flows along the corners of his mouth.

'It's delicious, Uncle Liwei,' he murmurs, and his lips twitch. He opens his eyes gradually and wipes saliva from the corners of his mouth.

His uncle is not there.

In the ancestral hall, Liwei, who has been summoned to the ceremony as soon as he set foot in the mansion, kneels with his brother Likang behind Master Chai. Each with a bunch of joss sticks in their hands, they kowtow after their father.

Later, Master Chai, with a pair of divinatory blocks in his hands, immerses himself in whispered prayer while his sons kneel in silence. Then he throws the blocks.

They fall face down. A bad omen.

Master Chai turns his solemn face to his sons.

‘This is a difficult time and opium is our only chance.’ He darts a sharp look at Liwei. ‘The ancestors say, if we don’t follow their instructions, the consequences will be dreadful.’

Liwei glances up, wanting to say something, but Master Chai immediately points at the blocks and raises his voice: ‘This is a warning. The ancestors say the family has to work together in order to keep the Chai clan going. Only undutiful scions would go against the ancestors’ will!’ He stares at his sons. ‘Have I made myself clear?’

Liwei lowers his head as soon as his eyes meet his father’s. He knows the old man has used the ancestors as backing. Defying the elder, and worst of all, defying the ancestors, are sins too big to commit.

*No, I can’t...*

Liwei grasps the ground where he kneels, scratching the crude surface under him until his fingernails crack. His posture remains rigid.

Later that night in the east court, Master Chai orders a dinner with his sons: to welcome Liwei’s return, and to wish their new business well.

After his father has drained two cups of *wujiapi*, Liwei carefully broaches his suggestion: to alternate the plantings of poppies and paddy: spring for paddy and autumn for poppies. A plan for self-sufficiency, says his second son.

Likang sneers but Master Chai, after some moments of thorough thinking, takes in the advice as he sees this as an opportunity to tie Liwei up.

‘Since you know what’s needed, you’d better manage the business for me.’

Speechless, Liwei watches his father gulp another cup of *wujiapi*, wipe the corners of his mouth and thump the cup on the marble-top. *Clank!* Loud in the quiet hall, and hard against his heart. He has nowhere to hide.

\*

The following day Mingzhi busily describes Meilian’s wedding ceremony to his unusually quiet Uncle Liwei. His childish voice fills his secret world.

Beyond the curtain, beyond his world, poppy plants raise their heads, opening their eyes to their first peeps of the blue sky. And soon they will stretch their arms and thrust their flowers upwards, releasing waves of pungent odour that will brood over the village, its surroundings, the nearby towns, and the unknown world beyond.

In his little space, leaning against Uncle Liwei’s stout leg and staring up at him, Mingzhi smiles brightly, sweet and content.

School continues: outdoors on sunny mornings, indoors on gloomy days. Those unable to recite the readings are punished, standing in a corner for half a day, while able pupils are praised, occasionally presented with a new brush, an inkstick or a few pieces of paper. Mingyuan is fond of these, volunteers to recite and accumulates prizes, showing them off. But Mingzhi is neither interested in the brushes nor the papers. An attentive glance or gentle pats from his teacher leave him feeling warm, encouraged, and eager to learn more.

Still, Mingzhi receives more brushes than he needs. He shares them with those standing-in-a-corner-for-half-a-days, comforting them; but he keeps one for himself, the finest of all, made of goat's hair, inscribed in gold with 'Shanghai Fine Brush'.

During midday breaks, when Mingyuan and his schoolmates take their naps or play hide-and-seek, Mingzhi stays indoors, practising calligraphy with his precious brush. The rapid, cursive style of *caoshu* - the strength the strokes exude, the freedom of their movements - fascinates him, but Mingzhi is too young to wield the brush, to exert his strength as he wishes. So he begins practising *kaishu*, the regular script, concentrates his strength in his arm, wrist and fingers, learns to control the brush: pressing down then withdrawing, a heavy dot followed by a soft twist, or a sharp tail after a powerful stroke.

Old Scholar Yan notices his quiet student, and spends time practising with him. Mingzhi watches his teacher write, noticing the slightest details: the way he holds the

brush, the beginnings and endpoints of each stroke. The samples of character radicals that Old Scholar Yan writes keep Mingzhi busy, trying to imitate the positioning of lines, strokes and dots, the exertion of power: thickening the ink as he presses down, thinning it as he withdraws.

Mingzhi listens to his teacher's comments, recognises when he has made a weak stroke, or when a withdrawal comes too quickly, or a line is too long or too short, too high or too low, too far to the right or left, and corrects his mistakes.

Old Scholar Yan notices how fast Mingzhi has learned, and is pleased, though Mingzhi is still unable to exert enough strength.

\*

At home, however, when not studying, Mingzhi sometimes likes to kick the shuttlecock with the young maid in the courtyard. He counts as he kicks up the rubber base, watching the duck feathers white against the blue sky, then against the green bushes as it falls. And he kicks it up again repeatedly before it touches the ground. Mingzhi likes seeing the feathers spiralling in the air, like birds fluttering, flying away. *So free*. Its fall agitates him, his heart sinks, and he tries with all his might to stop the shuttlecock touching the earth.

Mingyuan never plays shuttlecock-kicking with Mingzhi. He despises it as a 'girl's game' and prefers the eagle-preying-on-the-chicken game: he, the eagle, breaks his mother-hen's defence line, lunges at his prey - the unfortunate chick played by the maid - and punches and pinches her.

But Da Niang joins Mingzhi occasionally, struggles to balance her lean body on her bound feet, kicking the shuttlecock upwards. Though wobbling and breathless, she

smiles, enjoying this little relaxed moment with her son. Mingzhi likes running to her, hugging her tight, so that they both fall, laughing.

\*

Spring again.

Mingzhi wakes in wafts of sweet, pungent odour. He sneezes.

Outside, Master Chai's dragon stick thumps past, short and quick. Tuk, tuk, tuk... Like the old man's kicking heart. News of the first poppy blossoms excites the Master. He hurries to the fields with Liwei and Butler Fong.

From the same hillock where he stood three months ago, he sees a sea of red opium poppies billowing in the morning breeze. *Red, the lucky colour.* Master Chai smoothes his goatee, grins and nods. He looks northward, past the village, past the river, over the mountains.

Up north in the busy cities, hundreds of thousands of crates of opium are gathered, some shipped south-eastwards to Indochina, but mostly distributed inland: city – town – village.

Plum Blossom Village.

The Chai Mansion.

Likang.

In his room, Mingzhi keeps sneezing. He covers his nose with a kerchief and shuts all the windows, but the smell grows stronger.

\*

Having unloaded salt and other merchandise along the river southwards, on its return journey the salt boat collects grain and farm produce, then loads and takes away the first harvest of opium, crudely dried under the sun without baking.

And it returns for the second, third, fourth harvests, and more.

Debts are settled and there is a balance after paying land rental. Contented peasants smile from their hearts: fathers proudly hold up their heads; mothers briskly prepare meat-meals; grandparents enjoy masticating a mouthful of sticky rice cake with their toothless gums; children run happily, playing squibs in their new clothes and new shoes in this and the many new years to come.

\*

However, Mingzhi's interest in red good-luck envelopes is flagging, and the rice cakes now seem too sweet. There is something more important to anticipate in the New Year: Meilian's returning home.

Meilian comes home only once a year on the second day of the New Year, like many other married daughters. Da Niang cranes her neck from Winter Day onwards, counting down until Meilian's return as she scoops out her dumplings; and she gets even edgier at the reunion dinner on New Year's Eve. *A reunion without a married away daughter.* Even the brownish braised duck and the golden grease-dribbling chicken drumstick are tasteless to this anxious mother. Mingzhi keeps a jar of his eldest sister's favourite preserved plums in his room, waiting to share them with her when they go through his collection of calligraphic poems.

So much to tell, to do together, and so short a day.

When Meilian finally returns to her mother's arms, Da Niang notices that her lean body has got thinner. She listens to her daughter's complaints: the opium addict husband, the jealous first wife and third mistress, the stern-faced mother-in-law, begrudging her failure to produce a child... Da Niang can only hold her daughter tight, whispering into her ears, asking her to endure, to abide by the Three Rules of Obedience (be obedient to her father before marriage, to her husband after marriage and to her son after the death of her husband) and the Four Virtues (morality, proper speech, modest manners and diligent work) as told by the greatest of scholars, Confucius. It's a woman's fate, and it's her duty to serve her man and his family, she says. Meilian listens quietly, her eyes full of tears.

Mingzhi notices his eldest sister's more prominent cheekbones, her paler face. And she is no longer interested in poems. What for? She says. Mingzhi sees emptiness in her eyes.

On her third trip home, Meilian carries a baby girl.

On her fourth, Meilian's husband comes visiting with her for the first time, bringing their newborn son.

And the new years come and go.

**Spring 1890**

After school Mingzhi walks along the path flanked by willow trees. Above him, hanging leaves rustle in the afternoon breeze, catkins shower on his head and shoulders. He stretches out his palm and catches a handful of the green flakes, soft against his flesh. The wind grows stronger, bringing with it a pungent smell. Mingzhi sneezes, and the catkins fall, whirling to the ground.

Opium.

Mingzhi frowns. He smells it even in the distance, so strong, engulfing the village, engulfing him. Ten years have passed since the outbuilding-for-factory was built, ten years of reaping poppies and drying opium. Yet to him, the odour is still as strong, as unbearable as ever.

After spring harvest the fields flanking the path are bare, waiting to be ploughed and sowed again. *A break from the bloody scene of poppy blossoms, at least.* Hungry for a gasp of fresh air he takes a deep breath, chokes, sneezes, then coughs violently. As he has now crossed the bridge leading to the factory and the mansion, before him is a sea of raw opium blocks drying in an acre-wide open field.

Mingzhi clamps his nostrils shut, holds his breath and moves fast across the field. In the distance, he sees Mingyuan and his schoolmates running wild, chasing after each other, laughing and zigzagging in a dark maze of opium blocks.

Mingzhi's nose itches. He sneezes, again and again.

\*

The factory has been busy day and night. By the end of spring the salt boat will pass by, and it doesn't wait. Missing it will mean another four months of waiting, of sweet potatoes or plain porridge diets for the peasants, and of the risk that the opium stock will be left damp in the rainy season.

Mingzhi takes his evening walk after dinner. His route has become a routine: past the open field and the smokehouse, across the bridge, along the riverbank and up the hill slope, round the village and back.

That's his world.

Sometimes he stands on top of the hill and imagines what lies behind the mountain and the many mountains beyond: the people, their language, their food, their lives, and the town, the city, the ocean, the gorges, the desert and the steppe. The many poems he has read creep into his head, luring him into painting mental pictures, colourful but vague. Colourful as he thinks they should be, vague, as he hasn't witnessed any of them himself.

So most of the time he suppresses this restless desire, sitting for long periods near the bamboo groves by the river, listening to the symphony of the night: crickets chirping, frogs croaking, the owl's cries, the monkey's shrieks. Admiring nature's greatest musicians, and thinking of nothing.

And the night passes.

But this evening as he steps out of the mansion, Mingzhi knows his musicians will be shy to perform. *Another busy night.* There is light from the outbuilding not far

away. Black shadows shuffle, bustling. Coming closer, Mingzhi sees Uncle Liwei at the entrance, instructing workers to pour raw opium into the vats and stir it. Behind him, the torch burns fiercely, casting a stooped, tired silhouette, his grey hair silver in the brightness of the fire, his forehead greasy from the heat.

*He has aged.*

Mingzhi strolls on. Uncle Liwei glances up, sees him and beckons. Mingzhi speeds up.

‘It’s ready, Second Young Master!’ A worker shouts from inside the building.

Uncle Liwei immediately rushes in. Mingzhi knows his uncle has to oversee the workers as they pour melted opium into the moulds to make opium blocks. He knows Uncle Liwei has to stay there throughout the night.

Mingzhi turns and walks away.

In the rustling evening wind, he hears the bustle of the workers and the clattering of the wooden stirrer against the clay vats. But there are other noises, coming from some nearby bushes. Mingzhi leaves the gravel path and walks across the grassland to the bushes.

He searches. Between the branches, a puppy whines, shivering. Its body, all black, is hidden in the dimness of the bushes. Mingzhi almost missed him. But its eyes, though filled with fear, are bright against the surrounding dark. Mingzhi pats its head. It wags its tail.

*Poor little thing.*

‘Where is your mother? And your father? Have they forgotten about you?’

The puppy keeps wagging, whining and squinting up at him from under its eyelids. Mingzhi picks it up and warms it in his arms.

‘Charcoal, that’s your name.’

\*

On the fifth day of the fifth lunar month, Old Scholar Yan leads his students to celebrate Poet’s Day. To commemorate the patriotic poet of the Zhou Dynasty, Qu Yuan. Joss sticks in their hands, they stand in silence.

Later, Old Scholar Yan announces a poem-writing competition for his students. They are to write about this unfortunate poet, also an adviser to the emperor, who killed himself when his country fell into the enemy’s hands.

*How could a loyal official like him end by being accused of treachery?* Mingzhi sits for a long time thinking about the poet: how he was framed by a jealous colleague, how the emperor misjudged him, ignored his sincere advice and ordered his exile, and how he drowned himself out of despondency.

He murmurs a verse from *Lisao*, Encountering Sorrow, a record of Qu Yuan’s noble ideal, written during his exile:

‘I am the only clean soul in this muddy mess,

Staying awake among the drunks;

How could I let my body

Be contaminated by this filthy world?

I would rather float in the running stream,

Let the fishes clean my flesh...’

Outside, the sky is clear after the morning shower. Rainwater dribbles from the willows. Catkin flakes fall, whirling and ruffling the brimming surface of the pond. Mingzhi stares at the ripples. His eyes grow moist.

*Did he make many ripples on the Nilo River?*

Silence.

Mingzhi remembers once he raised this question with Meilian when they read the poem together. Now he is able to see the lonely soul even without her explanation.

*Eldes Sister.* He feels a twinge in his heart.

Mingzhi looks around. His fellow classmates are busy writing. He grinds some ink, wets his brush, and begins.

\*

Late at night. Engrossed in the poem in front of him, Old Scholar Yan does not realise that the candle is burning down. As the room gets darker, his head draws closer to the writing, so close it almost touches the pages.

His disciple quietly enters, brings in warm tea and replaces the candle with a new one. His master waves him off and asks him to take his rest.

Old Scholar Yan reads about a scarred and despairing soul in Mingzhi's poem, and he sees how it alludes to the writer himself.

*The boy.* Old Scholar Yan sighs, remembering his first sight of Mingzhi.

But then, this thoughtful scholar suddenly realises that Mingzhi is no longer a boy.

\*

Mingzhi comes home with his winning prize, a book of *Lunyu*, The Analects of Confucius, which contains all the Confucian sayings. He hurries to his mother's room and opens the door.

Da Niang is sitting before an image of Buddha, with her back to him, engrossed in chanting sutras. Her voice is soft, monotonous and calm. She kneels straight-backed, so motionless that it seems an eternal posture. Smoke from the burning joss sticks fills the room, shielding her.

Mingzhi stands outside the smoke shield, watching.

Moments later, he closes the door lightly and leaves.

Returning to his room, Mingzhi puts down his book and ducks into his secret world. Everything is there, as before. The stool, the sandalwood box with its inhabitants: the rabbit, grasshopper, dragonfly and turtles, and the kerchief and blocks. Mingzhi stoops, picks up the rabbit and examines it. Parts of its varnished outer layer have worn away, leaving it dull, lifeless.

Sitting down on the stool, he puts the rabbit back into the box, closes it and glances around.

Now that he is a well-built sixteen year-old, this space between his bed and the wardrobe seems much smaller. But it feels empty: Da Niang has stopped coming here since his vocal cords changed; Uncle Liwei hardly visits since Master Chai put him in charge of the opium trade.

Eyes closed, Mingzhi remembers Da Niang's warm bosom, Uncle Liwei's calm voice, Meilian's soft whispers. *Like a dream.* Charcoal sneaks in from under the curtain,

comes wagging and squawking to his side. Mingzhi opens his eyes, pats Charcoal's head, then holds a corner of the curtain tight and pulls it down.

A curtain of faded peach blossoms withers on the floor.

### *Chapter Five*

Master Chai plans his sixtieth birthday celebration: after the salt boat has taken away the biggest of the opium harvests. *Coincidentally, a double celebration.* Master Chai sits at his desk in front of the accounts. The figures are leaping, so is his heart. *A good omen for a long and prosperous life.*

Months ago he had ordered Butler Fong to contract the Northern Opera Troupe, the Master's favourite, to perform on seven consecutive nights.

In fact the troupe is everyone else's favourite too. Since the leaked news, the peasants have had nothing but the Northern Opera Troupe as their after-dinner subject, and 'Is Golden Swallow, the troupe's leading artist, coming along?' becomes the hottest bet among them.

Their anticipation runs into the ploughing, sowing and reaping of the poppies, into the opium blocks, and it thickens as the opium dries. Then it bursts into the air – everything is revealed when the salt boat comes and loads away the opium, and another boat comes, bringing with it the long-awaited troupe.

Arriving three days early, the troupe - a crew of eighteen artists, musicians, apprentices, their masters and the manager - along with nine colourfully flagged carts loaded with costumes, props, musical instruments and makeup, form a spectacular

entourage. As soon as they enter the village, the peasant children crowd round, tailing the carts.

‘Golden Swallow! Golden Swallow!’

The peasants put down their hoes, stop ploughing and shout at the group as it passes by the fields.

‘There he is!’ A peasant has spotted the pretty young leading artist.

‘I told you he would come.’

‘Certainly he would. The Northern Opera Troupe is nothing without him.’

‘Wow, even without his makeup, he is still prettier than a woman.’

‘Aiya, he looks just like a celestial goddess in his long white gown.’

‘Eh, who’s the boy next to him?’

‘Must be Little Sparrow. They say he is training to be Golden Swallow’s successor.’

*The most popular opera troupe in the country and its most popular singer are here!* The peasants buzz with excitement as they watch the troupe entering the Chai Mansion.

Seeing his fellow workers’ behaviour, an old peasant sniffs: ‘Hey, get back to work! What’s so great about them? Only a bunch of depraved singsong actors.’

A big boo is the immediate response.

As soon as the main door of the Mansion thumps shut, the children climb on top of each other to peep over the wall.

In the west court, Mingzhi hears the commotion. He also hears Er Niang and Mingyuan cheering in the courtyard. His mother remains silent in her room. He imagines her praying in front of the altar. *It must be a nuisance to her.*

‘Can someone tell me what’s going on?’ Likang shouts from inside the master room. His midday nap has been interrupted.

But almost instantly Mingzhi hears him mutter: ‘Where’s my pipe?’

Mingzhi knows that moments later his father will be deaf to all noises.

\*

Likang lies sideways on his bed, smoking his pipe. He doesn’t have to travel all the way to Pindong Town brothel for his lovely singsong girl. She is always there in the puffs of smoke, drifting with him through the ninth layer of the sky.

Master Chai is pleased to have his eldest son at home. *No more fights, no more broken limbs.* He sees no reason to stop him smoking. After all, it is Likang’s idea that has opened the door to his family’s wealth, which is growing as rapidly as Likang’s appetite for opium.

\*

Butler Fong arranges for the troupe to settle in the north court. The all-male troupe has its first rehearsal almost immediately after the carts have been unloaded. The servants are delighted, making excuses to go and see them rehearsing. These sly ones trace the vague snatches of music to the north court, and are fascinated by it.

‘That must be The Legend of Lady White Snake! I can’t wait to see that.’

‘That’s right. They say the head musician composed it himself.’

‘Yes, what an achievement! That’s why the Northern Opera stands out from the rest of the troupes.’

‘Exactly. Those old fashion companies, they only perform a few classic plays. I can name them with my five fingers: Fifteen Strings of Cash, Si Lang Visits His Mother, The Butterfly Dreams, and... what else... Oh, yes, Longing for Worldly Pleasures – not even five!’

The servants whisper among themselves, eager to be the first to witness the play, but are disappointed to find that all the doors are locked and all the windows tightly sealed.

The secrets of the play are not to be revealed, not until it takes to the stage.

\*

Even Er Niang, the most enthusiastic of opera lovers, is not allowed into the troupe’s compound.

At the dinner table in the west court, she nags Likang to help her gain access to the troupe, to learn singing from the artists. Annoyed at her badgering, Likang pushes away his unfinished bowl of rice and beckons Da Niang: ‘Come and massage my back.’

Er Niang stamps her feet under the table as Da Niang helps the half-drunken Likang leave the room.

Mingyuan puts some streaky pork into his mother’s bowl and consoles her: ‘Don’t worry, mum. I’ll find a way. We will both learn singing together.’

Sitting at a corner of the dinner table, Mingzhi quietly finishes his dinner. Charcoal is waiting for him outside.

\*

It is a quiet evening. The chirping of crickets lures Charcoal into the bushes. He pricks up his ears, darts here and there but catches nothing. Frogs croak from the riverbank. Charcoal jumps out of the bushes, looks at the riverbank and then back at the bushes, uncertain of which to chase - the crickets or the frog.

Mingzhi laughs, whistles for the dog to come forward. It is a moonless night; they have to return home before dark.

Charcoal escorts his master down the slope. Suddenly, a sorrowful tune penetrates the screen of the night as it rolls down. The dog pricks up his ears again. Mingzhi traces the sound.

Down the hill, by the river, near the bamboo growth, a slim figure sits on a stump playing the flute.

They greet each other with a smile and exchange names.

*Little Sparrow.* Mingzhi repeats it in his mind, his eyes filled with questions.

'It's a given name, given by the troupe leader. Good for the stage,' his new friend explains.

Questions remain in Mingzhi's staring eyes. But the young opera apprentice looks away, takes out the bamboo-leaf flute he's made for himself and shows it to Mingzhi. Mingzhi examines the folds. The green, refreshing smell of bamboo leaf fills his nostrils.

He places the flute between his lips, tries to play it, but hears only a sharp and tearing noise, like scratching on metal.

Little Sparrow smiles and takes the flute from Mingzhi. ‘A busker in Shaanxi taught me, this day two years ago.’ He hesitates, smoothes the folds of his flute and whispers at it: ‘My birthday.’

Little Sparrow starts playing the flute, and Mingzhi has to swallow back his Happy Birthday greeting.

Unlike the earlier piece, this tune is light and lively: a running stream, a splashing waterfall and cheeping birds, mingle in harmony.

Mingzhi applauds. Little Sparrow blushes, says it is a Shaanxi folk song.

Shaanxi. *The Mountainous West*.

Mingzhi looks westwards. The western hill stands firm, blocking his view. *What is the world like behind it?* The hill remains silent. Behind it lies a world beyond Mingzhi’s knowledge.

But it is part of Little Sparrow’s.

Mingzhi tries hard but fails to visualise Little Sparrow’s journeys: from the metropolis Shanghai in the east to the mountainous region, Shaanxi, in the west, also southwards to the mysterious Yunnan, and of course, the colourful but chaotic Imperial City in the north.

Too far, too many. Too confusing.

His mental pictures overlap and crumple together.

Mingzhi demands details and Little Sparrow does not disappoint him. His calm, gentle voice takes Mingzhi on stormy days through the surging waves of the roaring Yellow River, trudging across the bare desert under the searing sun, struggling through the dense jungle in fear of cruel bandits, spiralling up and down the narrow paths on land-

sliding hills, stopping at the numerous cities, towns and villages, listening to folklore and songs in different local accents.

Mingzhi's mental pictures become more vivid, more realistic.

The pair of new friends sit talking late into the night. Charcoal crouches between them, taking turns looking up at them as they take turns to talk. Left, right. Left, right. Sometimes slow, sometimes fast. Left, right. Left, right. It tires him and he yawns. His master and his friend laugh at his awkwardness.

Charcoal ignores them. His eyes droop, and he sleeps quietly in the warmth of their legs.

\*

*I have a friend.* Mingzhi falls fast asleep. A smile hangs at the corners of his mouth.

Little Sparrow's music swims into Mingzhi's dream. His pale young face drifts in the river of his sorrowful tunes. It falls fast backwards, and Mingzhi sees Little Sparrow in his childhood: thin and frail, being left with the leader of the opera troupe, standing alone and watching his father walking away with fifty teals in his hands...

Mingzhi tosses about in bed. It is warm and he sweats, kicking away his blanket and slipping into his dream again.

The images come back swiftly, drifting a little forward in time: Little Sparrow practices body movements, struggling to keep his balance on a long bench... Little Sparrow learns the female role's acts, trying to hit the high notes but going out of tune... The troupe leader rushes forward and canes him violently...

Little Sparrow's muffled cry blends with the background music. Sad and helpless, and close to Mingzhi's ears.

Mingzhi opens his eyes to a whimpering Charcoal. The dog's forelimbs rest on the bed and he leans close to Mingzhi, squinting up at him from under his eyelids.

Mingzhi sits up. There are bloodstains on the edge of the bed. He takes Charcoal's limbs and examines them carefully. On the dog's right foreleg close to the thigh there is a severe burn, a raw mess of hair and skin, flesh and blood, with some red paper flakes from a firecracker stuck to it. A red string is tied around the leg above the wound.

Outside, Mingyuan's laughter looms in the sound of clattering firecrackers. Mingzhi knows his half brother has stolen them from the spare stocks meant for his grandfather's birthday celebration.

Mingyuan laughs away, denying Mingzhi's allegation: 'I did not harm your stupid dog. It burnt itself.'

Mingzhi stands facing the morning sun. He watches as Mingyuan walks away through the courtyard, leaving a long shadow that falls over him.

\*

Mingzhi does not practise calligraphy during his midday break. He goes to the bamboo groves by the river. *Let's meet at noon*, he and Little Sparrow promised each other last night.

Mingzhi runs his fingers over the calligraphy set in his pocket, imagining his new friend's smiling face on receiving his belated birthday gift.

The noon sun stabs through between the pointed leaves, falls sharp onto Mingzhi's head and shoulder. He sits closer to the clumps of bamboo, avoiding the sunlight.

Even the insects are wilting in the noon heat, preferring to rest in silence. Mingzhi plucks a bamboo leaf and tries to make a flute the way Little Sparrow did. He folds and unfolds it, and tries again. The sunlight gradually slants in through the leaves, quietly hunting him again.

Still, there is no trace of Little Sparrow.

\*

Er Niang's voice comes through from inside the north court. Sharp and high-pitched. Mingzhi stops, standing in front of the closed door.

Er Niang is singing a snatch from the nun's role in 'Longing for Worldly Pleasures':

'... Every day I burn incense and change the holy water in the temple;

I have seen several young men sporting by the temple gate.

One glanced at me and I glanced at him.

Ai, what suspense for us both!

How to be united as lovers! ...'

There is applause, followed by another familiar voice: 'That's great, Mum!'

Mingzhi drops his hand, uncertain if he should knock on the door.

The door squeaks open. Walking out, the middle-aged troupe leader nearly bumps into Mingzhi. His critical eyes run over Mingzhi from head to toe—his appearance, his demeanour—and he says: 'Are you here to learn Peking opera too, Eldest Grand Young Master?'

Mingzhi shakes his head and peers over the troupe leader's shoulder. In the courtyard, Little Sparrow is half-squatting on a wooden bench in a corner, holding a bowl

of water in each outstretched hand and staring down at his shadow under the afternoon sun.

*He is being punished.* Mingzhi's heart pounds. He remembers the strict rules of the opera troupe Little Sparrow spelled out to him last night. All troupe members are to abide by them and there is no exception or excuse. Violation means punishment: caning, starving, scorching under the sweltering sun, and more. Little Sparrow said leaving the troupe at night without permission was a severe offence. He said it was his fourteenth birthday and he wanted to be away from the troupe last night, just for one night.

He said he was careful. He said...

Mingzhi quietly sneaks away, not wanting to be seen. Not by Er Niang or Mingyuan. And certainly not by Little Sparrow.

\*

Mingzhi lies awake in bed, thinking about Little Sparrow: if he is still squatting in the courtyard, if he will get his dinner.

Outside the open window, the western hill sits gloomily in the light of the waning moon. In the whirring wind, trees howl like lunatics, stretching their branches, twisting and extending them like tentacles.

Mingzhi feels as if they have reached for him and bound him tight in his bed. Feeling breathless, he pulls his blanket away and takes a hungry gasp of air.

Then he hears the familiar notes. In long trembling waves they thread the night.

Mingzhi pictures Little Sparrow sitting alone in a corner of the north court, playing his flute.

Abruptly, the music stops.

The unfinished notes continue in Mingzhi's mind.

\*

Rumours roam around the mansion: Mingyuan is paying the troupe leader for him and his mother to learn Peking opera, and they have demanded to have Golden Swallow as their coach.

Likang sniffs in his bed when he hears the news and takes another puff of opium, making sure the flame has not gone out; Da Niang continues chanting sutras in front of her altar; while Liwei has been out in the field since dawn. And Master Chai, blinded and deafened by the excitement of his big day, is ignorant of the whispering maids in the corners, who disperse instantly - like startled birds fluttering away in the bush - as his dragon stick thuds closer.

Gossip has it Er Niang is not the right material for Peking opera, and that Mingyuan only frolics away his afternoons with the martial actor's weapons, brandishing swords and spears in the courtyard.

These stories leap over the walls and plunge into the poppy fields. Passing the news on as they plough the field, by evening the peasants have a picture of Golden Swallow sitting with his hands over his ears while Er Niang sings briskly in front of him. This gives the peasants their best after-dinner entertainment for days.

Thinking it over, however, the peasants, especially the elders, shake their heads: 'Master Chai's grandson and daughter-in-law learning opera singsong? Shame on him, shame on the Chai clan.'

Inside the mansion, the master of the Chai clan is proudly admiring his new gown, just completed and delivered by the Pindong Town tailor. Fine Suzhou silk. Soft and

smooth and shiny. Elegant and prestigious. **LONGEVITY**. The character embroidered in golden silk on the front of the gown shines in the candlelight, as bright as Master Chai's smile.

*Tomorrow.*

Master Chai carefully lays down his precious gown and orders a cup of hot tea from his maid. The night is long.

In his room, Mingzhi blows out the candlelight and slips into his bed. It is a quiet night. The bamboo-leaf musician has been silent. Mingzhi's dream is quiet too. He pushes open the main door. It does not squeak. He sees fluttering birds and ducks, cocks fighting, pigs gobbling, peasants working in the field, and the running stream, but hears nothing. Everything is soundless, and the air stagnant. *Where is mother? Where is Uncle Liwei? And everyone else?* Shuddering, Mingzhi runs blundering through the open field, fast, but no footsteps are heard. Silent wind slices his ears, and he feels as if he is drifting in the air. Now that he is panting, he feels only his beating heart and pounding pulse, thump, thump, thump, strong in his head.

Abruptly, he stops.

In front of him in the middle of the field, a stage suddenly lights up, bright and colourful. In the centre, the opera actors shuffle about waving their long flowing sleeves. Their mouths busily open and close, open and close, yet no sound comes out of them.

Mingzhi looks around, finds himself the only audience to this pantomimed Peking opera. He turns and runs again, across the field, past the bridge, up and down the hill... He keeps running in the silent darkness, and finally a familiar voice breaks through:

‘Eldest Grand Young Master...’

Mingzhi heaves a long sigh, opening his eyes to the sunlit room. The maid has brought in his breakfast.

‘It’s time to get ready, Eldest Grand Young Master.’

\*

In the centre hall all servants gather, listening to Butler Fong’s briefing: tea ceremony first thing in the morning followed by lunch and an opera performance. Duties are assigned, accompanied by a harsh warning: punishment, that’ll be the only response to any mistakes, major or minor.

Tea is ready and Master Chai, in his new gown, sits back on his dragon chair, waiting for his sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren to serve tea, paying their respects in the traditional ritual.

The grandchildren take their turns after their parents and uncle. Eldest Grandson Mingzhi, leading his half brother Mingyuan, steps forward and kneels before his grandfather, holding out a cup of tea and declaring loud and clear:

‘For the best of fortune, as deep as the Eastern Ocean;  
For longevity, as sustainable as the Southern Mountain.’

Master Chai laughs, looking at the pair of handsome young men in front of him. *My lovely grandsons.* Taking a sip of tea, he returns the cup to Mingzhi and pats his head: ‘You will recite to my guests later, show them how much you’ve learned. Be prepared for it, my dear grandson.’

*No, not any more!* Mingzhi frowns, his shoulders drop, and the cup in his hand falls, smashing to pieces on the floor.

Master Chai's smile freezes. *What a bad omen.* Da Niang turns pale. She cries out instantly: 'Breaking into a flowering future! Breaking into a flowering future!'

This cliché fails to soothe the angry old man, his face as solid as steel.

Standing to one side, Er Niang sniggers quietly as she observes Master Chai's solemn face. She waits for his action, but is disappointed when Butler Fong bursts in: 'Mandarin Liu is on his way!'

\*

Mandarin Liu enters the village in his official sedan, escorted by his retinue, bustling along the way. Standing to the sides of the path, the villagers whisper their sympathy for the sedan bearers, who grit their teeth, letting beads of sweat run down their faces, necks and naked upper bodies. The villagers imagine the well-fed Mandarin with his round face and limbs and protruding belly sitting comfortably in the swaying sedan, munching streaky pork. *Definitely not the bearers' favourite passenger.* As they joke amongst themselves the villagers watch the entourage heading towards the Chai Mansion.

*The most honourable guest of honour arrives first.* The broken cup has been nudged out of Master Chai's mind. He taps his dragon stick forward, leading Mandarin Liu to the guest-of-honour's seat.

Mandarin Liu's gift has been generous: a set of marble statues of three silver haired old men - the symbols of Good Fortune, Prosperity and Longevity. Proudly displaying them on the gift table, Master Chai smoothes his goatee, unable to contain his smile as he strolls around admiring the fine craftsmanship. *Things did change.* The marriage. The precious only grandson Meilian gave to the Liu family. Association with

Mandarin Liu has facilitated his opium trade. Content with a share of the revenue, this father-in-law of Meilian has conveniently left Master Chai out of his tax list.

Guests keep streaming in. Sitting back on his chair receiving greetings, Master Chai's mind spins fast. *This connection has to be strengthened.* His eyes scan the hall and catch Liwei, who, sitting next to Mandarin Liu, is whispering with him about the next payment of the mandarin's share.

Liwei, his second son. Master Chai sighs, does not understand Liwei's decision: to refuse all marriage proposals after his wife's death, two years after his wedding. An obedient and good helper, he follows his father's will (though Master Chai knows deep down Liwei disapproves of the opium business) in everything but this. He is adamant, determined to be single. *A widower for eighteen years.* Master Chai shakes his head: Liwei must have a son of his own, one that is as smart as Mingzhi.

*Mingzhi.* Master Chai looks around. The hall is full. Guests of honour, close and distant relatives, having tea and exchanging pleasantries. Servants busy serving. His sons, his daughters-in-law, Mingyuan.

*And Mingzhi?*

\*

The main door thumps shut, locking away all noises and faces behind Mingzhi. He takes a deep breath. Relieved. *Enough of those sweet-as-honey birthday greetings and forced smiles.* The sky is clear blue; Mingzhi squints. *And he wants me to recite to them.*

The recent reciting sessions have embarrassed him: standing alone, reading, and hearing his beloved poems drowned in the noise of the busily gobbling guests. A shame to the poets, a shame to himself. He is old enough to recognise the flatteries that follow:

half-hearted, only to please his grandfather who uses him to feed his pride, to show off the fact that he has a grandson who reads and writes.

*Enough.*

Mingzhi knows he will be angry, the old man, his grandfather, the master of his family, the master of Plum Blossom Village, whom no one dares to offend.

*And I am doing it for the first time.*

For some moments Mingzhi stares at the closed door, imagining his grandfather's reaction. Then he shrugs and turns away, walking straight ahead.

Outside, it is quiet. The peasants are enjoying their precious day off, having lunch with their families, thanks to their landlord's big day. The normally busy fields are empty; the paths usually crowded with dutiful women bringing lunch to their husbands are silent. Mingzhi walks in this unusually tranquil midday, breathing the fresh soil of the newly ploughed land, feeling relaxed. *There's only me.* Charcoal barks, running close to Mingzhi's legs, as if protesting. His master smiles, stoops and caresses him: 'And my Charcoal, of course.'

The little faithful dog looks up at him, wagging. With his small steps he follows Mingzhi across the bridge, through the field and up the hill. *We have plenty of time today, and no one is watching us.* Mingzhi decides to explore further than his usual evening walk.

On the other side of the hill Mingzhi finds an escarpment. An old pine tree stands alone; its twisted trunk hangs out from the rock face. The green needles covering the outstretched branches seem engraved upon the blue sky.

Mingzhi recalls Old Scholar Yan's description of the energy force of nature: the older a pine tree is the greater energy force it gathers, and where it stands it cultivates good *fengshui*. Mingzhi touches the creased and cracked bark, mottled black and dark brown, crumpled like an old man's wrinkled and freckled face. *Must be very old, for sure*. Charcoal rubs his back on the trunk, a perfect treatment for his itchy skin.

Mingzhi walks round the tree and finds it rooted in a ledge with a wall of stone behind it, leaving a narrow space between them. Mingzhi squeezes in, and is surprised to find a cave, concealed by the exposed roots and trunk. It is spacious. Sunlight slants in from a crevice in a corner; the afternoon breeze sneaks in. Bright and airy. *Like a fairyland in the poems I've read*. Mingzhi walks about in it and finds a hidden corner: a perfect place for a reed-bed. He imagines spending afternoon hours with his pet in this newfound land. He whistles for Charcoal: 'Hey, we have a secret little home now!'

\*

Minyuan replaces Mingzhi as reciter for the guests. Da Niang worriedly sends her maid to look for Mingzhi. *Not today, my dear son*. She knows he has got himself into big trouble. Her eyebrows are as tight as Master Chai's pursed lips. Er Niang watches Master Chai closely as the old man sits straight up, locking his eyes on Mingyuan, fearing that his second grandson might fail him.

Poem after poem Mingyuan recites, fluent and clear. Master Chai nods and sits back, a smile on his face. Er Niang winks triumphantly at Mingyuan then squints at the pale-faced Da Niang with a smirk.

A loud gong marks the opening of the Peking opera: The Legend of Lady White Snake is unveiled.

\*

Little White, the snake demon played by Golden Swallow, fights against Master Qinghai, the monk who is determined to take away this snake demon and separate her from her human husband. Golden Swallow waves and flaps his long flowing sleeves, and swirls, round and round. But Master Qinghai seems stronger, Little White is pushed to the floor, mourning.

All eyes are on the stage. Mingzhi quietly sneaks in, hiding himself in the crowd. Charcoal follows him closely.

Master Qinghai steps forward. Little Green, the faithful maid of Little White, rushes in, stopping him from hurting her mistress.

Mingzhi strains his eyes. This green snake, Little Green, looks familiar. Her round eyes, sharp nose and delicate lips...

*Little Sparrow?* Mingzhi is stunned to see his friend, almost unrecognisable, in heavy makeup and the maid's costume. But Charcoal has spotted him, a friend of his master's; he barks joyfully, wags his tail, jumps onto the stage and runs to Little Sparrow.

The musicians drop their large and small gongs, drum and clapper, *yueqin* and *huqin*, *erhu* and *sanxian*, all fall clinking and clattering. Golden Swallow hides himself in a corner. The monk actor brandishes the spear in his hand. Little Sparrow stands still while Charcoal passionately rubs his back against the petrified actor's legs.

The crowd exchange queries, their voices droning in commotion.

*A black dog on stage, on my birthday!* Trembling with rage, Master Chai braces himself with his dragon stick. *Worse than a broken cup.* He watches Charcoal happily

jump down from the stage, threading his way through the crowd, running towards the back of the hall.

To Mingzhi, his beloved eldest grandson.

Numbed to his feet, Mingzhi exchanges a quick glance with Little Sparrow on the stage. They look into each other's eyes, dull and lifeless.

For the first time, Mingzhi is punished: no dinner for the day, and he is not allowed to leave his room for the following days until the opera troupe has completed its performance. Likang and Da Niang are warned, too, to keep an eye on their son's behaviour, and a maid is assigned to keep track of and report on Mingzhi's whereabouts. His evening walk is only permitted if he is accompanied.

Worst of all, Mingzhi is forced to give up Charcoal. The master of the house insists: a black dog brings bad luck. Mingzhi begs: 'Let me keep Charcoal! I will keep him in my room; he won't get out again!'

Master Chai howls: 'I said no black dog in my house. Do you understand?'

His chest feels tight, and he clutches at his heart with one hand. Mingyuan steps forward and massages his grandfather's back and shoulders. Master Chai heaves a long sigh, feeling relieved. That he has a second grandson.

\*

Little Sparrow disappears from the stage after the unfinished first performance - a cruel punishment for a budding actor.

Longing for Worldly Pleasure replaces The Legend of Lady White Snake on the nights that. Golden Swallow monopolises the stage playing the nun, a solo performance.

His most faithful fan, Er Niang, glues herself to her seat, the best view in the front row, and fixes her eyes on her beloved actor.

*This is the best time of my life.* Thinking about Mingzhi being punished, Er Niang smiles, echoing Shi Fan, the little nun on the stage, and hums:

‘... I want to go down the mountain and seek a lover.

I don’t care if he beats me, scolds me, laughs at me, maligns me...’

From the stage Golden Swallow glances over, searching. Their eyes meet and they exchange looks.

\*

Mingzhi stares at the blank paper, all night, and writes nothing. The opera music roams around the mansion and travels to the west court. Golden Swallow’s singing, in crisp, clear, long and drawn-out words, is heard:

‘... It is only because my father was fond of reading the Buddhist scriptures

And my mother liked to intone Buddha’s name.

Every day they burned incense at the temple and worshipped Buddha.

After birth I was sickly,

So they dedicated me to the Buddhist faith

And made me live as a nun...’

Mingzhi imagines the unhappy, secluded nun sitting alone in her room in front of a set of *muyi*, tapping the wooden frog drums with a stick to give percussive emphasis as she chants sutras. Her daily task as a nun. Like a prisoner, counting her days.

Like him.

Mingzhi wets his brush with abundant ink, pressing it down forcefully on the paper, making a huge dot. Black. Hopeless. He flops in his chair and lays his face on the desk. His streaming tears wet the paper, the ink, messing up his face.

\*

The maid comes to check later, finds Mingzhi asleep in the chair. She pulls a blanket over him, puts out the candle and leaves.

Mingzhi drifts towards his cave-home. Little Sparrow stands smiling in the streak of sunlight, beckoning him to come closer, and Charcoal barks, running towards him. Speeding up, Mingzhi stumbles over a stone and falls.

Blank.

The world around him turns pitch-black. No Little Sparrow, no Charcoal. Mingzhi blunders about looking for his friend and his dog, knocking this and that, stumbling here and there. Then he stops as he hears the familiar tune of a bamboo-leaf flute, threading through the darkness.

Lying in bed Mingzhi rubs his eyes and shakes his head. He is fully awake now. The long trembling waves of sound continue. *He's out there!* Remembering his friend is leaving tomorrow Mingzhi's heart tightens. He breathes, short and panting.

Outside the window there is no trace of movement. All is quiet. It's almost midnight, and the mansion is asleep. Mingzhi does not hesitate for long. He cleans the mess of ink from his face and walks out.

In the bamboo grove by the river Little Sparrow sits waiting, eyes dark-ringed, cheeks hollow. *He is risking another punishment for himself only to say goodbye.*

Mingzhi feels a twinge of guilt, and is speechless, as is his friend, knowing they may not see one another again. He takes out the calligraphy set he has been keeping for days.

‘A late birthday present.’

Looking at the fine brush and the exquisite ink-set, Little Sparrow knows they are expensive. *I have nothing to offer him.* As he watches Mingzhi fiddling with his leaf-flute, Little Sparrow plucks a bamboo leaf then shows Mingzhi again how to fold it into a flute. Mingzhi tries and this time succeeds. His friend nods: ‘At least I have something for you.’

Mingzhi smiles thank-you, demands a bonus: to learn how to play. As he places the flute between his lips, he hears noises coming from the bushes close by. So does Little Sparrow. They exchange looks: *Are they here looking for us?*

For some moments they remain silent but nothing approaches. The noises in the bushes grow louder and clearer: they are the familiar voices of a man and woman teasing each other and laughing frivolously. The two friends exchange curious glances. Quietly and slowly they move forward, hiding themselves in the shadow of the bamboo grove along the way, then in a corner of the bushes. Peeping through the branches and leaves they see...

Er Niang and Golden Swallow.

The pair sit leaning against each other, Golden Swallow’s arm around Er Niang’s shoulders. In the faint moonlight, Er Niang’s up-tilted face looks dazed, flushed, her dreamy eyes staring up at her lover, listening closely to his tender murmurings.

They kiss.

Mingzhi and Little Sparrow shrink back, cheeks burning, eyes wide, staring at each other in disbelief. Mingzhi steps back. Fallen twigs crunch loudly under his feet in the silence of the night. Er Niang sits up in a fluster, her voice trembling: 'Who's that?'

From the bushes a stray cat meows as it darts past in front of the lovers, noisily rustling through the bushes. Golden Swallow laughs and pulls Er Niang back into his arms: 'Hey, calm down. There's no one here this late.'

Slowly Mingzhi and Little Sparrow retreat, wordless, pretending nothing has happened. Mingzhi mimes 'it's not safe here' to his friend and leads him up the hill. When they reach the ledge, Charcoal darts out of the cave and lopes towards them. Mingzhi gives him food, glad that Uncle Liwei has done what he asked, helping to shelter Charcoal in the cave.

By dawn Mingzhi is able to play a couple of tunes on the flute he folds. They leave the cave and part before the mansion awakes.

Mingzhi sneaks back into his room. Eyes closed, leaning against the closed door, he imprints a lasting image of his friend in his mind: an unhappy young man, with a sad, helpless look in his eyes.

Opening his eyes, Mingzhi sees his own taut face and red-veined eyes in the mirror.

*Is this how he will remember me too?*

His nerves twitch behind his temples.

### *Chapter Six*

Mingzhi spends longer hours in school now, reading and writing after the rest have gone home. The tranquil afternoons alone in the classroom comfort him, because *no one is watching*. Old Scholar Yan's disciple always brings Mingzhi lunch then retreats in silence, leaving him in his world of literature. He buries himself in it: from the ancient poems of the Xia, Shang and Zhou Dynasties to the verses of the Song Dynasty, hundreds of poems of the glorious Tang Dynasty and the prose of the later periods. School gives him the best excuse to keep away from the mansion with its many watchful eyes. He is safe under the umbrella of 'study', for which he is allowed as much time as he needs.

Taking advantage of this, on his way back from school Mingzhi makes secret trips to his cave and brings food for Charcoal. He plays with the dog, laughing and rolling on the ground. *The best time of day*. It passes quickly.

Day after day the dog grows, but Mingzhi knows the uncertainty of this happiness. He knows it is only a matter of time before his secret is discovered. So he knows he must make the most of it while it lasts. When he leaves it is always painful to see Charcoal whine, begging to go with him.

In the fields the poppy plants have grown into a sea of billowing green. It will be a couple of months before they blossom. Mingzhi likes the fresh smell of green leaves,

likes breathing them in just as much as he can before the flowering begins. It is also at this time of year that Uncle Liwei is able to join him in his evening walks.

On evenings like this, uncle and nephew take slow strolls across the bridge, past the fields and down to the river, where they sit for some time before returning. They talk of the day's events: school, Charcoal and the cave, Da Niang. Their roles have changed, however, as Uncle Liwei, now quieter, prefers to be a listener (the mansion and the opium trade, his only world, are not something he is proud of). And Mingzhi willingly shares his secrets and feelings with his uncle.

Sometimes they walk in silence, feeling the evening breeze, listening to the crunch of fallen leaves and twigs under their feet, the tiny movements of field mice, chirping crickets, running water, croaking frogs. The evening passes quickly.

Mingzhi values these comforting moments, the times he shares with his uncle. *Too short, too precious.* He knows these will end when the poppies bloom, when the field turns into a sea of dazzling bloody red.

He yearns for them to stop growing, for time to be frozen.

\*

Mandarin Liu visits again, this time to collect his share of the profits. For the entire morning he and Master Chai sit in the central hall. Gales of laughter penetrate the closed door. Two young maids standing outside waiting for orders press their ears to the door, whispering about their master's discussion behind their sleeves.

Abruptly the door is flung open. The girls dodge back, barely escaping a heavy blow. They are lucky too, to escape punishment as their happily smiling master sends them at once for Mingyuan.

\*

By afternoon the rumour spreads through the mansion: Master Chai's second son, Liwei, is engaged to Mandarin Liu's youngest sister, and the wedding will follow soon.

*Another convenient marriage.* The servants sniff as they whisper among themselves:

'An unmarried maiden in her early thirties? There must be something wrong with her.'

In the west court Er Niang is more excited about her dear son, Mingyuan, being sent for the first time to recite poems for his grandfather's most important guest. *Another big step forward.* Standing in the courtyard she raises her voice in the exaggerated drawn-out style of Peking opera in the direction of Da Niang's room: 'Heavenly God has opened His eyes at last, made the right judgement, giving Mingyuan his place on earth!'

Silence. Er Niang hears her high-pitched voice echo in the empty courtyard and her maid laughing under her sleeve. She rushes forward and slaps the girl: 'What is so funny? Silly girl.'

And she sends the maid off to prepare Mingyuan's favourite roast pork for dinner.

In her room Da Niang sits still, staring up at the altar. Strings of smoke sway upwards from the pot of burning joss sticks. Ascending. Dispersing. Blurring her eyes.

She has heard the rumour and the provoking shout.

The burned incenses are now teetering columns of grey ash, crumbling into the pot. A gust of wind wafts through the open window, sweeping some ash into Da Niang's eyes. She squints in pain, her tears squeezing out. *Where is he? Does he know about this?*

In front of her the Buddha image is a blur.

Unrecognisable.

\*

Mingzhi lies on the mound of dried reeds in a corner of the cave. He has collected reeds during his visits and piled them up to make a comfortable bed. Against his legs Charcoal sleeps soundly. In the inner corner of the bed lies the sandalwood box of his childhood toys – the grasshopper, dragonfly, rabbit and turtles - wrapped in the faded embroidered sheet.

Through the crevice the afternoon sun slips in, casting a long beam of light across his face, shoulders and hands and across the dog. Mingzhi feels the heat on his skin but lies still, not wanting to wake Charcoal. He feels it comforting though, the heat, as warm as Charcoal's soft, hairy body that lies against his bare feet.

*My companion.* Mingzhi gazes down. The dog's dark hair gleams in the sunlight. Suddenly the images of Er Niang's dreamy eyes and flushed cheeks in the moonlight creep into Mingzhi's mind. The lovers' murmurings. The hugging and kissing.

He feels his face burning.

\*

The maids swear to the servants surrounding them: their quiet, obedient Second Young Master has had a big row with his father, the master of the house. They busily describe the episode, interrupting each other.

'He said, "No, I'm not going to marry her," and our Master thumped his stick...'

The older girl says in her high-pitched tone.

The younger girl butts in: 'Our Master was louder. He shouted: "I've decided! That's it. Just go and prepare for the wedding."'

'And then....,' the older girl pauses. 'Guess what happened next?'

The servants urge: 'Hey, go on, tells us all about it.'

'You won't believe it...,' This time the younger girl is interrupted. 'Our Second Young Master, our soft-spoken Second Young Master, banged the desk and roared: "I said NO! How many times have I told you, I will never marry again. That is final."'

'And he rushed out.'

'Are you kidding?'

The two girls say simultaneously: 'I swear to Heavenly God that every single word is nothing but the truth.'

'Great! What a real man he is!'

The servants chuckle as they imagine their master furiously trembling and thumping with his stick.

'Wish we had seen and heard that.' They sigh with regret.

\*

Mingzhi comes home late, just in time for dinner.

'Aye, our Eldest Grand Young Master has been working hard lately,' Er Niang deliberately raises her voice in front of Likang. 'Looks like that Mandarin post is already in the bag for him.'

Mingzhi avoids looking at her, still embarrassed when he thinks about her intimacy with Golden Swallow. Ignoring her ridicule and his father's long face, Mingzhi sits down beside his mother.

Er Niang heaves a long sigh, keeping her eyes on Likang as she continues her monologue: 'Unlike my Mingyuan. All he can do is recite to Mandarin Liu.'

'Did you, son?' Likang smiles and gazes at Mingyuan.

His son nods. Likang happily picks out some streaky pork for Mingyuan. Er Niang smiles triumphantly and helps her son to some more of his favourite dish.

Mingzhi feels his mother's hand on his arm, and knows she is asking him to be tolerant. He pats the back of Da Niang's hand. *I know, I know.* Da Niang glances at him and smiles in understanding.

Mingzhi finishes his dinner as quick as he can, to make his time for a walk with his uncle. There is not much time left, as the poppies are budding.

\*

It is a stifling evening. Uncle Liwei is silent, his face is taut and his mind preoccupied.

They cross the bridge, walk past the fields and head towards the river, wordlessly.

Mingzhi is uncomfortable with his uncle's heavy air. He lags behind, thinking about the latest news from his maid. *I have to cheer him up.*

'Let's go and visit Charcoal. He will be happy to see us!' Mingzhi suggests.

Uncle Liwei does not answer but turns onto the path that leads to the hill.

Mingzhi follows.

Charcoal is overwhelmed. He barks, jumping up and down, trying with all his might to express his joy. Mingzhi throws a twig up high. Charcoal jumps up but misses it. He rushes to the fallen twig and grips it tightly in his mouth, strutting around with his tail held high, as if announcing himself a winner. Uncle Liwei, sitting in a corner of the

reed bed, laughs at the dog. Mingzhi laughs too, at his uncle's laughter, and hands him another twig.

Uncle Liwei throws it to the far end of the cave. Charcoal drops the twig he's been worrying in his mouth and rushes for the new.

Mingzhi observes his uncle from behind: his grey hair, stooped back and look of desolation. He bursts out: 'Why don't you remarry, Uncle? Don't you ever feel lonely without a wife and children?'

Uncle Liwei becomes very still. After some moments, still with his back to Mingzhi, he says: 'I don't need another woman or another son. I'm not alone. I have... I have you.'

'But...'

'It's getting dark. Let's go home.'

He walks out of the cave, hurries away. Mingzhi regrets his question. *He is angry with me.* He rushes to keep up with his uncle.

Behind him Charcoal barks, drops the twig he has just caught, whines and scratches the rocky ground, filling the cave with sharp and piercing squeals. Then he jumps on the bed, messing and scattering the reeds before running out of the cave, chasing after his master for the first time since coming here.

\*

Mingzhi sees only his uncle moving away from him, ignoring his calls. He chases him, a tall figure shuffling into the bamboo grove. Charcoal follows. *Wait!* Struggling forward, Mingzhi slips and rolls down the slope. Gets up again. Runs. Closes in. He reaches out and taps Uncle Liwei's shoulder. He turns round. A masked face! Shocked, Mingzhi

steps back, stumbles and falls. Charcoal comes to him, licks his face to calm him down. The masked man approaches them, puts his face close to Mingzhi's and removes his mask –

A blank face without eyes, nose or mouth!

Charcoal howls, long and piercing...

*What a nightmare.* Mingzhi sits up panting, his heart still pounding in his chest.

Charcoal's cry sounded so real, so close to his ears.

The dawn bells toll in the distant temple. Mingzhi rubs his eyes. *Time to get ready for school.* When the maid brings him his breakfast he catches the strange look in her eyes.

'Is there anything you want to tell me?'

She stammers: 'Eldest Grand Young Master... You... You'd better go to the main courtyard and... and... have a look for yourself.'

'What is it?'

She shakes her head, her eyes full of fear and her lips pursed tight.

Mingzhi rushes out.

In the middle of the central court lies something black and still.

Charcoal. Covered in blood.

'They told me and I didn't believe it.' Mingyuan, who has just entered the courtyard, gives Charcoal a kick. The dog doesn't move.

'He really is dead!' Mingyuan's cheerful shout fills the courtyard. He turns to Mingzhi: 'Well, don't look at me. It wasn't me. You know who ordered it.'

Standing still, Mingzhi hears nothing of Mingyuan's words. His grandfather's words buzz in his head: *I said no black dog in my house.* So loudly that he feels as if his head will crack. He squats down, holds his head in both hands and buries it between his knees.

\*

Mingzhi slips and falls on the dewy grass, rises, struggles on up the slope and slips again. His limbs are scratched and he is wet and muddy all over. His eyes are blurred and his mouth tastes salt. *Is it mud or sweat or tears?* He doesn't know and doesn't care. The only thing in his mind is: *keep going.* He struggles uphill, staring blankly ahead, letting his blind feet blunder on.

*Take me away, as far away as possible.*

\*

The whole mansion is shaken: the precious Eldest Grand Young Master has disappeared.

The first alarm is raised in the west court when Mingzhi fails to appear at the dinner table. Likang mutters about Mingzhi running wild and blames Da Niang for spoiling their son. He draws a deep sigh and retreats to his room. When there is still no trace of the boy at midnight, Da Niang, who has been craning her neck at the doorstep, helplessly sends her maid to Master Chai.

In minutes the mansion is lit up. The grandfather scolds Da Niang for delaying the news. All family members and servants are summoned to the central court. The enquiry begins.

According to the maid Mingzhi left for school that morning as usual. But Mingyuan adds at once: his half-brother never reached the school. The furious Master

Chai slaps Mingyuan loud on the face, angry with him for not saying so earlier. Er Niang's chuckles cease. The boy holds his cheek, shocked, unsure of what has happened.

Staring at the old man, who has locked both hands behind his back and is pacing the courtyard in agitation, Er Niang realises: *The eldest is still the eldest.*

Master Chai organises the servants into two teams, led by Liwei and Butler Fong, and warns: 'Do not come home without my grandson!'

It is dark and cold but the reeds keep Mingzhi warm. *How long have I slept? An hour, three, five or more?* His body aches; he tries to get up but it no longer seems to belong to him. Weak, weary, he sleeps again.

The water is lukewarm and Mingzhi swims in it, up and down, back and forth, moving in circles, turning somersaults. And he breathes in it, like a fish. *So comfortable, so free.* He sees an object approaching—black, hairy—it's Charcoal! Mingzhi beckons. Charcoal turns a somersault and swims towards him. Reaching out, Charcoal's body feels cold, sending a chill into his veins. He shivers, gulps water, panics. Hands swinging, legs kicking.

But he is sinking fast, drowning.

Then there are beams of light and noises, loud, familiar.

Everything vanishes.

\*

Liwei and his team find Mingzhi curled like a shrimp in a corner of the pitch-dark cave. The anxious uncle rushes forward, pats Mingzhi's cheeks and calls: 'Wake up! Wake up, Mingzhi.'

'Cold, cold...' Mingzhi murmurs, his eyes rolling up in his head. Liwei lifts him and shakes him. *Be strong, wake up.* His shivering body hangs heavy in his uncle's arms. Liwei struggles to carry Mingzhi on his back, staggering forwards and nearly

falling. The servants exchange puzzled looks: *What's wrong with him? He has always been so calm and in control.* They crowd forward to help. Liwei refuses at first but has to let them, as he is unable to manage single-handed.

\*

Mingzhi opens his eyes onto his mother's face: eyes red and swollen, cheeks hollow. *Where am I?* He takes a quick glance round: the same gauze net around the bed, the same walls, windows, chairs, desk and closet.

The same room.

*Back again.* He shuts his eyes tight, his face crumpling.

\*

After starving her for two days Master Chai sends Mingzhi's young maid back to her home village: the ultimate punishment for negligence. A servant boy is ordered to accompany Mingzhi wherever he goes. *There must be no more mistakes.* The facts about Charcoal and the secret cave have proved too much for the old man. The grandfather now knows he can't even fully trust Liwei. *Liwei, what has got into you?* He sighs. *What am I going to tell Mandarin Liu?* After moments of careful thought, he decides to delay the wedding arrangements for as long as he can. And Mingzhi must be ready for his exam as soon as possible.

Mingzhi spends even longer hours in school now, knowing this will be permitted if he is accompanied by Little Mouse, his servant boy. His grandfather's emphatic desire that he become a mandarin has given him a hint about power, authority and control.

*Yes, control. That's the one thing I need.*

Determined to excel in the civil service exam, Mingzhi buries himself in the world of knowledge, keeping busy with the Four Books and the Five Classics, memorising every word, every sentence.

With the first book *Daxue*, the Great Learning, he enters the virtual gate of the Confucian School, exploring the great master's principles. The second, *Zhongrong*, the Doctrine of the Mean, teaches him the correct course to be pursued and the fixed principles regulating all happenings and forms of being. These teachings direct him to distinguish right from wrong: for example, to be honest is right; to tell lies is wrong. All these principles attach themselves to his young heart as wisteria vines cling to the crevices in walls; they are as clear as the purple blossoms that brighten under the spring sun, guiding his moral judgement.

And he knows:

To be cruel to animals (Charcoal) is wrong.

To be cruel to human beings (the maid) is wrong.

To neglect the responsibility of parenting (fathering) is wrong.

To indulge in opium is wrong.

To cultivate opium and encourage addiction to it are wrong.

He knows also, he has to make wrongs right.

*I will, one day*, Mingzhi promises himself.

In order to accomplish his wish Mingzhi knows he must learn more, must master knowledge.

Digging into the third book, *Lunyu*, the Confucian Analects, he is fascinated by the great master's wisdom and compares it with Mencius's thoughts in the final book, the

Works of Mencius. He learns how they reacted in various circumstances, and is amazed by their intelligent and philosophical observations: every word is carefully chosen, every sentence has its hidden meaning, deep and vast.

He drowns in it.

Old Scholar Yan observes his favourite student closely, delighted about his soaring enthusiasm for study, but worrying too, that Mingzhi may be over-pressurising himself: the first to come to school and the last to leave; studies late into the night, according to the servant boy; controls the amount he eats to avoid after-meal tiredness that affects his learning. No games, no evening walks. Only books.

The old man sees changes in the young: more prominent cheekbones, darkened eyes; inside them a sea of knowledge, still accumulating though already making waves, waiting for the right moment to pour forth.

*He needs more.* Old Scholar Yan scratches his head, drafting out a long list of essay topics, assigning one every other day to Mingzhi, marking the essays handed in, discussing them with the young writer. Comments are given and suggestions detailed in the master's fine calligraphy, *xiaozuan*, on the final page. Long paragraphs at first, reduced to a couple of lines as the days go by. Finding flaws seems to take some effort now. The old scholar is amazed though a little apprehensive. *Soon enough he won't need me any longer.*

Da Niang boils ginseng tea in the morning and birds' nest soup at night, brings them to her son, sitting quietly and watching him drain them.

Morning after morning.

Night after night.

Season

after

season.

## *Chapter Seven*

### **Pindong Town, 1892**

Morning in Pindong Town is a bright, colourful picture of noisy, crowded streets. With hurtling traffic of carts, cows, donkeys and horses. Pedestrians. Bustling hawkers. Haggling customers.

Singsong girls beckon prospective clients from under the red lanterns at brothel doorways.

Caged magpies hang high in the teahouses above the heads of their boastful, spittle-showering masters. Their songs hover in the clear blue sky.

Hollering, gong-banging buskers: puppeteer, fire-eater, sword-eater, goldfish-swallower, tightrope-walker. Baring their upper bodies, letting their sweat run down, so that their tanned skin gleams in the glorious spring sun.

Mingzhi walks into the picture. Little Mouse, his young servant, tags along.

Clink! Clink!

Behind Mingzhi a donkey cart is pulled to a halt. As he turns to look back, the brass bell hanging at the front of the cart shouts into this puzzled young man's ears:

'Clink-clink! Clink-clink! Clink-clink-clink!'

From the driving seat a stout, swarthy peasant brandishes a crop, urging his donkey onward and waving the other hand at Mingzhi, as if herding cattle: 'Shoo-shoo! Shoo-shoo!'

Mingzhi watches as the donkey comes towards him. Little Mouse tugs his master's sleeve to pull him away. Both stumble and fall backwards onto a doorstep, panting, pale-faced, feeling a burning pain in their buttocks.

'Aiya, young master, look at you... What a mess. Come in and let us massage you.'

*Such a sweet voice.* Mingzhi glances up.

Under a huge red lantern shines a heavily powdered face. She is joined by companions with equally colourful faces and wide smiles. Their mouths cry simultaneously: 'Yes, please come in, let us comfort you.'

Already there are hands on his sleeves, arms and face, like an octopus, seeking every opportunity to grip every inch of his skin. He blushes. *Strange women touching me!* He pulls away, struggles to rise, manages a couple of backward steps, turns and runs. Little Mouse follows.

A storm of giggling bursts out behind them. Mingzhi glances back. The women flap their hands, beckoning and blinking coquettishly. The young man turns and runs faster, to another burst of chortling.

Taking refuge in a teahouse Mingzhi dusts his clothes and collects himself. Little Mouse finds them a vacant table at a corner by the balcony on the first floor, overlooking the main street.

Mingzhi leans against the wooden balustrade, looking down at the bustling scene below.

Pedestrians are still rushing. Horse or donkey or ox-carts push and jingle their way through the crowd, trot-trot-trot, clink-clink-clink, between rows of stalls flanking the street.

The stalls.

Hungry eaters sit or squat around a big, steaming cauldron at the soybean and pancake stall, watching closely as the middle-aged hawker slips one piece of dough after another into the hot, golden oil. Their watery mouths hang open as the pieces frizzle and somersault in the sea of burning oil, swelling into bulging golden pancakes beneath whiffs of steam and smell. Ready to be eaten. And the smell lures more passers-by into joining the breakfast queue.

Women, young and old, gather round the textile stall, selecting their favourite materials: sky blue or ocean green or rosy red or soft yellow, plain or dotted or checked or flowery, every colour and pattern.

And men, lowering their heads, quietly squeeze in and hide among the crowd before the Magic Tonic for Men stall, trying their best not to be discovered by their acquaintances. However, the short, well-built stall owner is determined to make himself and the surrounding men the centre of attention. This mini-Hercules bangs his gong and claps his clapper:

‘After drinking my Magic Tonic,’

*Clap-clap!*

‘You’ll be as lively as a magic dragon!’

*Gong!*

‘After drinking my Magic Tonic,’

*Clap-clap!*

‘Your woman will be as tame as a kitten!’

*Gong! Gong!*

‘After drinking my Magic Tonic,’

*Clap-clap!*

‘The world is yours for the taking!’

*Gong! Gong! Gong!*

Mingzhi takes a deep breath.

Below him is a world of smell, colour and action.

Real life.

A warm feeling arises inside Mingzhi; his eyes brim with tears. *My first step out, after all these years.*

Watching his master, Little Mouse shakes his head. *Oh, poet.*

He is accustomed to these sudden solemnities. Although his young master is eighteen, two years older than he, he is always immersed in his own world. A flash of rainbow after a downpour, or fallen leaves in the courtyard, or the carcass of a lizard between the door panels of a wardrobe, these small things can make Mingzhi tearful, contemplative for half a day. And there’s always sadness in his eyes. *He has read too much about the autumn wind, withered flowers, whirling snow and the waning moon.*

Little Mouse shakes his head once more.

Soon the gong is banging again. Little Mouse peers down the street, happily taking sips of warm tea while tapping out the rhythm of the Magic Tonic ditty.

Mingzhi's hungry eyes drift about with the eddying crowd. One moment here, the next there. So much to see. They stop suddenly, attracted to a patch of silky light blue shining in the morning sun. In front of the textile stall, a girl in a blue dress - sixteen or younger - examines material held out by her younger, more drably dressed companion – probably her maid. She quietly touches the bolt of pink silk, concentrating with a demeanour so graceful that her busy, noisy, rough surroundings seem to have frozen and faded away.

Leaving only her, with her placid smile.

Then she turns away, and the maid follows. Mingzhi cranes his neck, sees a corner of shiny blue disappearing into a sea of dull, plain cotton.

*Who is she?*

Mingzhi's young heart ripples.

\*

Night falls. All is quiet.

Mingzhi sits in his room in the teahouse-lodge. In a corner Little Mouse is curled on a straw mat, sleeping soundly. Outside the window, high in the sky, a lone star twinkles like a knowing eye, seeing through Mingzhi. *Are you my lucky star?* The wise eye keeps blinking, now bright, now dim, as if to say: yes, no, yes, no.

His fate is a secret that the faraway star is forbidden to tell. Mingzhi must decode its signs for himself: yes or no, yes or no.

He frowns. *Tomorrow is the day.* His heart pounds.

‘You will pass, I’m sure.’ On their last meeting Old Scholar Yan reassured Mingzhi. Especially when he found out that the chief examiner was an old friend of his, Scholar Dai, a fourth rank Imperial Scholar.

‘He is a genuine scholar, just and fair. He will like your work, I know.’

Even so Mingzhi can’t help worrying. The title of *xiucai*, ‘intellectual’, he shall attain on passing this first exam at district level will not grant him a position in the civil service, but it qualifies him for the provincial level exam. At the provincial level, only half of the *xiucai* will be awarded the title of *juren*, ‘recommended man’, and these lucky ones are at least eligible for low ranking official positions.

*I’ve still to get through the first stage.* Mingzhi knows this is a decisive day. A fail means wasting another year and a half on a re-sit, and a diminution of his confidence.

So it is a big day, a big occasion, especially for grandfather Master Chai. *But for all the wrong reasons.* Mingzhi sighs lightly, shakes his head as he remembers the ceremony yesterday. The prayers in front of the ancestors’ memorial plates at the ancestral hall. The throwing of *bagua*, the divinatory blocks. And the smile on his grandfather’s face later, as wide as the divinatory blocks on the floor, resembled the smiling faces of the Chai ancestors.

‘A good omen,’ the old man said. His laughter ran wild between the pillars and the beams, swirling in the airy hall.

Mingzhi looked around from his kneeling position, glancing through the portraits of the Chai ancestors hung around the walls. One after another the old men in their identical long, snowy beards and pursed lips stared down at their descendant. Mingzhi

shivered with a sudden chill. *Are they really smiling in their hearts? Can I trust their blessing?*

Confused, he looked on, and felt a pat on his shoulder. Standing next to him, his uncle smiled, gripped his shoulder. Mingzhi felt it, understood his uncle's message: *you can do it*. He touched the back of Uncle Liwei's hand and smiled a thank-you.

And now, as he stares at his open palm Mingzhi remembers the warmth Uncle Liwei's hand exuded. *I shall not disappoint them, those who trust me*. He takes out a book. A gust of wind from the open window chills him. Mingzhi pulls his overcoat from his luggage, puts it on, feeling the silk lining warm and soft against his skin. *Mother*. It was Da Niang who carefully packed his luggage the night before his departure.

He feels a sudden thirst for a sip of bird's nest soup, longing for the taste of the translucent jelly, sweetened in melted rock-sugar. Soft and soothing.

And warm.

Mingzhi shivers in another sudden gust of night. He closes the window, returns to his book. In the corner Little Mouse turns over, muttering meaninglessly then falling deep into sleep again. Mingzhi glances around, does not understand how the boy can feel so much at home, can sleep so comfortably. Master Chai insisted Mingzhi spend the night prior to the exam at Pindong Town, to save him from starting the journey at dawn and arriving at the examination hall tired and weary. But Mingzhi knows sleep will evade him tonight.

The candle burns low. Mingzhi lights another and starts to leaf through his book.

In the flickering flame, his lean, lonely shadow sways on the whitewashed wall, late into the night.

\*

Early morning, and the examination hall is already full. Mingzhi sits at the back of the hall, behind hundreds of candidates. Noises buzz but subside moments later when a faint voice shouts from the front of the hall. Mingzhi cranes his neck for a glance of Chief Examiner Scholar Dai, but sees only the many heads and bodies in front of him. He moves his head from left to right, glimpses only a hem of the silky black official gown at the far end of the hall.

And soon the exam begins. Mingzhi buries himself in his exam paper.

*It's not that difficult, really.* He has completed the first round, the most important of the three rounds of examination: the understanding and interpretation of the Four Books and Five Classics. As he has been memorising them day and night, the sentences and passages and their definitions have engraved themselves in his mind like catalogues neatly arranged in the library, only waiting to be called up. The second round, versatility in the command of various literary forms, doesn't take him much time either. Having completed a poem, Mingzhi concentrates on finishing the eight-legged styled essay, the most classical form of prose, in the final round.

The plateful of ink dwindles as he repeatedly wets his brush and goes on writing, and empties when Mingzhi soaks his brush a final time and marks a full stop.

*Done.*

Putting down the brush he heaves a long sigh, yawns, and does a last check-through of his paper: nothing to add and nothing left out. Having arranged the pages Mingzhi looks up.

Above the many heads now bent over their papers, at the far end and the front of the hall, sitting at the desk in the middle, the man in his official gown, the chief examiner, is no stranger but Mandarin Liu.

Mingzhi freezes.

Glancing around the hall Mandarin Liu catches sight of Mingzhi.

*Aye, so there he is, the old man's grandson.* He rubs his jaw with the back of his hand in slow motion, then smiles a cold smile of *wait-and-see* as he holds the gaze of the gawking young man at the end of the hall.

Mingzhi shudders, his body drenched in a cold sweat.

He now knows his fate.

None of the residents of the Chai Mansion will forget Mandarin Liu's last visit to the Mansion three months ago.

It was a quiet afternoon. In the room where the most influential man of Plum Blossom Village and the most powerful man of Pindong Town shared their laughter four years ago as they arranged to forge a closer bond through a marriage plan. A plan which has never been carried out: Liwei being busy with the poppies, or away on rent-collection trips, or there being a sudden illness of Master Chai or Likang or Liwei, or the coincidence of an inauspicious lunar year. Year after year excuse after excuse has been given, again and again the wedding delayed.

By the time of his last visit, Mandarin Liu had heard enough excuses.

And so, that last meeting, the two servant girls heard not laughter but angry shouts, accompanied by sounds of banging and clattering through the room's closed doors.

‘No more excuses!’

Mandarin Liu flung open the door, rushed out and left the Mansion with his escorts.

He has never returned since.

It was a humiliation too hard for the Mandarin to swallow, the breach of a marital agreement. *These Chais, they are too much.* ‘You’ll not get away with this! Just wait and see!’ were Mandarin Liu’s last words before storming out.

And he hasn’t had to wait long. Here is his chance. He has found his scapegoat.

Mandarin Liu watches Mingzhi like a hunter weighing up his prey. Mingzhi feels a sharp blade slicing him to pieces, and his heart bleeds.

\*

‘No, not him!’

Master Chai flops down into his dragon chair and thumps the dragon stick on the floor. It trembles in sympathy with his tremulous hand.

‘What terrible timing!’ Back from his spying mission, Master Chai’s resourceful servant narrates the story he has gathered from workers in the government office of Pindong Town. The respected Imperial Scholar Dai, worn out by the long journey from the Imperial City, fell ill upon his arrival at the official residence.

‘He struggled to get up that morning but collapsed on the floor.’

The young servant mimics the motion, as if he had witnessed it on the spot. A natural performer he is, though not appreciated by his stern-faced master. The old man bellows: ‘Get to the point!’

The young man drops his eyes and shoulders, and blurts out in one breath: 'They said Scholar Dai asked Mandarin Liu to help in sending for another fourth ranking scholar, the same rank as he is, from the capital; but Mandarin Liu insisted on taking the Scholar's place, though he is only ranked seventh and not an imperial scholar.'

*He planned it all.*

Master Chai heaves a long sigh, recalling how he had repeatedly told his former good friend and prospective in-law about Mingzhi's sitting the exam. *That cunning man must have taken note.*

He stares blankly ahead. On the sculptured pillars at the far end of the hall, his favourite green dragon stretches out its head in high relief. Its bulbous eyes look up to the ceiling, as if yearning to leap up into the sky. The promise of hope. Like his for Mingzhi.

Taking a deep breath, he lifts his stick and thumps it heavily to the floor, stopping his body rearing forward. *Something has to be done.* The office will take a month to finalise the result. There's still time.

Master Chai scratches his now silvery white head. The young maid quietly and deftly replaces the untouched *o-long* with a fresh, warm cup. After three cups of cold tea have been taken away, the Master smoothes his goatee, sits back and takes a sip of the fresh cup of warm *o-long*. *That greedy shark, I know how to hunt him.*

As the maid leaves with orders to summon Liwei, Master Chai makes a mental calculation of the revenue from the last harvest, and is glad of the booming profits, and their usefulness.

\*

Mingzhi has remained in his room since returning from Pindong Town. Crouching in his bed, refusing dinner, not wanting a sip of tea.

Da Niang brings in bird's nest soup, places it on the table and calls her son.

Mingzhi turns his face to the wall. His wet cheek presses against the tear-sodden pillow, cold against his burning eyes. They are swollen, his eyes, and he knows it. Determined to hide his crying from his mother, he covers his head with his blanket, does not answer, knowing that his croaking voice will betray him.

Through the layer of cotton he hears his mother's words, soft and gentle: 'It doesn't matter. You can try again. It won't be him next time.'

*You don't understand, mother.*

He has spent years waiting for this first opportunity. Remembering the days and nights of ceaseless study, a sudden wave of exhaustion seizes him. His eyelids droop. He hears Da Niang's sigh and her footsteps slowly drifting out of the room, away from his senses. The door closes. And now there are other sounds, right outside his room. A man's voice, vague and distant. Soft whispers, his mother's and the man's, muffled and unclear. Mingzhi tries to sit up, curious. But he is too tired: the sleepless previous night, the exam, the journey and his worries have tired him out. He sleeps.

The man with the blank face returns to his dreams, his voice warm and soothing, whispering in Mingzhi's ears: 'Be patient, my dear.'

Mingzhi feels comforted, and is eager to speak to him, this strangely familiar stranger. But he is walking away. Mingzhi lurches forward, grasps the man's shoulder. He turns back, now wearing a face... Oh, no, it's her, the girl in the blue dress.

She smiles, clean and placid.

Mingzhi reaches out, his fingers skim her delicate face, so soft, so smooth, but in seconds it grows distorted, like an image in the water that ruffles away.

Blank. Nothing's left.

\*

Liwei returns with the two chests of cash, two hundred taels in total. Still sealed; unopened. Mandarin Liu has refused to see him.

The tremulous Master Chai points his finger at Liwei and blurts out: 'This is all your fault!'

He thumps his dragon stick and storms off to the ancestral hall. Servants are gathered and instructions given: they are to ensure candles are lit and joss sticks burnt ceaselessly from morning till night. The Chai ancestors must feel warm, respected and cared for in the nether world, so that they shall protect their descendants with all their might.

In the west court Liwei observes his nephew in the flickering candlelight, notices his prominent cheekbones and dark-ringed eyes, and feels sorry for him. Mingzhi pats his shoulder, forces a smile, his voice weak and tired: 'It's okay, Uncle. I'll try again.'

Walking Uncle Liwei to the door, Mingzhi hears his father, snoring away rhythmically in the next room. What he doesn't hear are the noises from two doors away.

Mingyuan and Er Niang.

'Serve them right, for not letting you take the exam along with him.'

'How could they say I'm not ready? Let's see how ready he is!'

Sharing a laugh of elation, the mother and son toast each other in cups of warm *wujiapi*, having an early celebration late into the night.

In the ancestral hall the worried grandfather kneels in front of the altar, praying to the guardians of the Chai clan.

Ceaselessly.

Mingzhi is still in bed when the news comes: his name came up first in the scoreboard.

Master Chai orders a ceremony to thank the Chai ancestors. First a quick round of ear-shattering firecrackers, then more joss sticks and silver papers are burnt and candles lit. And chicken and duck and pork dishes, of course. The delighted grandfather cannot stop smiling: 'Let them have a big feast in the nether world. They've worked hard to make the impossible possible.'

*And they will have more to do.* Master Chai knows Mandarin Liu must be furious, and will think of other ways to satisfy his rage. His revenge will come sooner or later. Only the mighty Chai ancestors can protect the family.

The old man suddenly realises he needs to order more joss sticks and silver paper.

In the kitchen, while the servants are milling about building the fire on the hearth, chopping chicken and duck and pork, and mixing up spices and sauces, the resourceful servant squeezes in and sniffs: 'As I say, the right person to thank is that Scholar Dai.'

Immediately everyone stops their work in hand and gather round this garrulous spy.

'Everybody in the government office knows it: as soon as Scholar Dai got better, he demanded to read all the papers.'

'So what?'

‘So what? He recovered our Eldest Grand Young Master’s writing from the disqualified lot, fell in love with it and put him first.’

‘How could Mandarin Liu allow this?’

‘As I say, Mandarin Liu is only a seventh ranking officer, three grades lower than the fourth ranking Imperial Scholar. He has to do what he’s told...’

He stops instantly as Butler Fong enters with a rigid face: ‘Stop gossiping and get back to work! Everything must be ready by noon.’

\*

At the dinner table, for the first time Likang pours a cup of *wu jiapi* for Mingzhi. Er Niang and Mingyuan look on. The roast pork, braised duck and boiled chicken seem tasteless, and too tough to swallow.

Mingzhi watches his father drain the wine. He holds his for some moments in his hands before taking his first sip. The liquid slips down, burning along his tongue and throat. Mingzhi keeps his mouth shut, keeps himself expressionless. Moments later he takes a mouthful and finds it more bearable this time.

‘That’s my son.’

His father grins and fills his cup. This time Mingzhi downs it without hesitation.

Turning around, he catches his mother’s worried eye.

\*

Mingzhi tosses about in his bed, drifting in his dream and feeling hot, burning hot. His dream is noisy; he hears only voices, familiar voices, but sees nothing. He is no longer a child, a man says. I’m worried, a woman whispers. Her voice is soft and gentle, and her face gradually surfaces...

The girl in the blue dress.

She turns and runs on seeing Mingzhi. He hurries after her but she is yards ahead.

Mingzhi keeps running and sweating.

Hot, burning hot. He feels as if some part of his body is bursting.

\*

Old Scholar Yan, now shrunken and toothless, wobbles his way to the Chai Mansion.

‘Your grandson needs to learn more,’ he says, and his wheezing fills the empty hall in the east court. ‘He needs to attend an advanced institution.’

Master Chai contemplates the venerable scholar’s suggestion: to send Mingzhi to the school in Pindong Town run by a former student, a *jinshi* holder, who has gained a reputation for his well-structured curriculum and team of experienced tutors.

Taking sips of tea, Old Scholar Yan rubs his back with one hand, and waits. But not for long. Before the tea turns cold, the Master concludes: this learned man knows best. He knows what’s best for Mingzhi.

Old Scholar Yan leaves in a sedan ordered by the Master, in which the old man keeps smiling and nodding, while the sedan bearers exchange puzzled looks: *However wise he is, the old man is indeed too old now.*

\*

When the news reaches the west court, the young servant Little Mouse capers about, delighted at the opportunity to get away from this remote village, this mansion with its stifling rules. A chance to be free.

In the midst of his excitement, he catches sight of his young master sitting in silence, and stops instantly.

*Everything has come too soon, too unexpectedly.* Mingzhi feels his heart kicking and tries to hold it down. Seeing Little Mouse, who has begun to pack his clothes, he knows it's real. *I'm really going away.* Mingzhi's eyes gleam; his expression changes in seconds. Little Mouse watches and tries to figure out if it shows puzzlement, happiness or relief.

Outside, Mingyuan, just back from the east court, glances through the open window as he passes and sees his half brother in a joyful trance. Some kind of sour fluid rises from the pit of Mingyuan's stomach, reaches his chest and fills it up.

Hearing footsteps Mingzhi glances up. When their eyes meet Mingyuan looks away instantly and hurries off with heavy footsteps.

Reaching his room he wrenches open the door, darts in and punches the wooden wall, hard.

Bang!

'Calm down, son.' Er Niang who has been lagging behind, wobbles forward on her bound feet. She understands her son's fury: their request for Mingyuan to enrol in the town school has been rejected by his grandfather.

'This is unfair! Why can't I go to the school, too?'

Another 'Bang!'

'Be patient, son. You will have your chance, too. As the old man says, you just have to do well in the exam. And I know you will.' Er Niang pats her son's shoulder, 'You will do better than him, I know.'

Mingyuan sits by the bedside, grasping the bed post with both hands, so tightly that it shakes.

\*

Mingzhi pays a visit to Old Scholar Yan, to thank him for his advice to Master Chai.

The caring teacher refuses the red thank-you-packet his student presents. Mingzhi kneels before him and kowtows to show respect.

Old Scholar Yan pats Mingzhi's head. 'Study hard and follow your destiny. That's what I want from you.'

He stares at the young man, now a head taller than him. *He is a grown man now, ready to go.* He sighs: 'Your life is not here. You have a bigger world ahead of you.'

The old man's eyes gleam under his drooping eyelids, as if hiding a secret. Mingzhi looks puzzled, but Old Scholar Yan stays silent and smiles a mysterious smile instead.

*You will find out yourself. It won't be long.*

\*

They play a game of Chinese chess, uncle and nephew, on the eve of Mingzhi's departure for Pindong Town.

It's a breezy evening. Begun just after dinner, the game takes longer than usual. Every strategy is thoughtfully planned and every step carefully considered. Silent moments pass between each move. Little Mouse who waits at one side to refill their tea when needed, stands nodding his head as he dozes off.

After four brews of chrysanthemum tea, Mingzhi makes the final move and takes away Uncle Liwei's last piece from the board. The silence breaks.

'You're playing much better than me now.' Liwei smiles at his nephew.

He arranges the jade-carved pieces and the chessboard neatly in their box, closes it and hands it over to Mingzhi. ‘Take it with you.’

Mingzhi holds the box in both hands and stares at the marble cover, with the *xiangqi* characters ‘Chinese chess’ gold-inscribed in the middle of it, in ancient script.

‘It’s meaningless to have a chess set without a partner to play with.’

‘You will find one there, a new partner in the game at your new place.’

A moment of silence.

Keeping his eyes on the box, Mingzhi runs his fingers over the golden pictography.

‘Maybe. But it won’t be the same,’ he says.

Uncle Liwei looks into Mingzhi’s misty eyes. He pats and grips the young man’s shoulder. *You have to be strong, Mingzhi.*

Mingzhi holds the box tightly and feels it heavy in his hands.

In her room Da Niang overhears the uncle and nephew, their voices filtering through the planked wall, like whispers, soft and gentle.

She remembers Mingzhi’s birth: how she listened from the adjoining room, like now, to his catlike infant cry, his yawns and sighs.

*My son.*

A wave of warmth surges through her. *Oh, the soup.* Da Niang gets up and hurries to the kitchen, decides to add some red dates to her son’s bird’s nest soup. His last homemade nourishment before leaving home. *Wish I could think of more ingredients to put in.*

Mingzhi notices the slices of red dates floating in the soup. He takes slow sips, rolls the dates on his tongue and feels their refreshing taste. Watching him, his mother smiles, but quickly turns solemn.

She fiddles with the chess box on the table. *Liwei's*. Her fingers follow the character inscriptions.

‘This looks like an elephant,’ she points at ‘*xiang*.’

‘You’re a genius, mum. That’s the character for “elephant”. It’s pictography, the way our ancestors wrote five thousand years ago.’

Da Niang raises her eyebrows, curious.

Mingzhi smoothes a piece of rice paper, grinds some ink and writes, showing his mother how the character was transformed, stage by stage, from the original shape of an elephant to the present written character.

She examines them, from the most modern form to the most ancient.

‘This is amazing.’

Her forefinger follows the curves of the original pictography and the wet ink smudges the tip of it.

‘The origin of the word,’ she mumbles, as if in deep thought. ‘The origin...’ *of a human being. Of you.*

Mingzhi watches his mother. She raises her palm and contemplates her finger. A layer of black smudges over the fair, delicate skin.

*No, I can't tell him.*

‘Mum, you’re tired. Please have an early night. I’ll go to bed soon, too’

‘I’m fine. My son, though I’ve never known how to read and write, I know one proverb at least: *yinshui siyuan*.’ She holds Mingzhi’s hands. ‘Well, my dear, you’re a learned person, tell me what it means.’

‘Literally, it means, “always keep in mind the source of water that gives you life,” which also means “one should never forget his origins”.’

‘That’s right, son. Never forget your origins. That’s what I want you to keep in mind.’

Mingzhi’s brows furrow. He is confused. Feeling his mother’s hands shake, he turns his and envelops Da Niang’s cold hands in his palms, trying to warm them up.

‘I will, mum. I’ll always remember everything you say to me.’

### *Chapter Eight*

Mandarin Liu sends his man: asking for twenty per cent of the opium revenue, overriding the previously agreed ten.

Master Chai frowns, can do nothing but grit his teeth and tell Liwei to do as the Mandarin demands.

*Something has to be done.* The old man's hands grasp the armrests tightly, his eyes fixed on the dragons on the pillars, on their angry stares.

\*

Unloading Mingzhi's luggage, Little Mouse asks for instructions.

Taken aback at first, Mingzhi then realises he is in *his* room, without Master Chai, without Likang, Liwei or Da Niang.

*I am in charge!*

Mingzhi takes a glance around, clears his throat and gives a barrage of orders: clothes on the shelves of the wardrobe (outerwear on the top shelf, formal dress, *magua*, on the second, followed by casual wear, undergarments, socks and gloves); books in the bookcase, arranged by author, genre and period; rice paper stacked neatly on the left hand corner of the desk and on the right the ink set and brush.

Everything is placed according to his instructions.

Mingzhi takes up his box of childhood toys, shakes it and listens to the clinking of his little things. His smile fades, as he knows the bamboo leaf flute is silent. Quietly he puts the box in the lowest drawer of the wardrobe.

The accommodation Butler Fong rented for him on Master Chai's orders is a self-contained room attached to a four-courtyard building, with its own entrance through the back garden. The maid from the main house brings in daily meals for the young master and his servant, as arranged by Butler Fong

Determined to take the provincial level exam next year, Mingzhi resolves to follow his routine as strictly as before: school in the morning and afternoon, revision at night.

He takes breaks in between, though, taking strolls around the back garden in the evening breeze after dinner. Lets the slivers of catkins from the fluttering willows shower his head and shoulders. Watches them ruffle the small pond in the corner. Squats down to see the red carps darting around under the water, turning somersaults and blowing bubbles, *pop-pop-pop, pop-pop-pop*.

One quiet night, sitting at his desk next to the open window, Mingzhi hears the sounds of splashing water. He imagines the forever-energetic fishes playing hide-and-seek and chasing each other.

The young man smiles, has the sudden urge to record this moment. He smooths out a piece of rice paper, grinds some ink and writes, swiftly, in *caoshu*:

### **Little Hut of Leaping Fishes**

With Little Mouse's help, Mingzhi hangs the scroll on the wall above his desk, then steps back, fixes his gaze on it, smiling.

The rapid, cursive strokes of calligraphy resemble the movements of fishes: pushing themselves out of water, jumping high, turning somersaults, moving any way they want, as free as their spirits.

As free as Mingzhi's.

*This is my world, my Taohua Yuan.*

Little Mouse sees his master's eyes gleam in the yellow kerosene light, notices they are wet, brimming with tears. He quietly retreats to his corner.

\*

Mingzhi likes his little hut, likes spending long hours there, studying.

The longing for bird's nest soup subsides. Nightmares retreat. The faceless man, the drowning, climbing and running, become vague. And the girl in blue visits more often. She smiles with deep dimples on her cheeks. Mingzhi drowns in them, and wakes in the morning with a smile lingering at the corner of his mouth. The day grows brighter, and he is energised.

\*

Mingzhi finds it difficult to keep to his routine. It's different, this school. Preparation for exams forms only part of the curriculum, not all of it. Head Teacher Scholar Ning - a former student of Old Scholar Yan - encourages the students to discuss the issues of the day, to express their opinions in their weekly reports, which he marks personally. They are to observe the major happenings in the capital and other parts of the country, are told about the existence of foreign devils, and wars going on somewhere with barbarians.

Mingzhi doesn't pay attention.

*What have these to do with me? They are so far away.* He is reluctant to know more, fearing that his studies are being side-tracked. He writes his commentaries half-heartedly, submits them only to fulfil the requirement, and spends far more effort on the study of literature and Confucian ethics, and on practising his classical prose.

*Time is too precious to waste.*

However, vague images of big, white, hairy, animal-like men drift through his mind sometimes. Questions emerge: What do they look like? Where are they from? Why are they here? To find answers to his questions means spending time talking with people, something he avoids.

Mingzhi chooses to suppress his curiosity, to keep his mind on his books.

\*

The town centre is a long street lined with shops. In between the shops, narrow alleys branch out. On both sides of the alleys, houses with one, two, three or four courtyards line up, separated by stone walls.

Living in a corner of a four-courtyard house, Mingzhi studies day and night, quiet and contented.

In the morning, walking out of the alley into the street is like returning to the real world. At first he is attracted to the colourful, lively scenes. Eyes strain for more: strange people—the various buskers and hawkers in outlandish clothes—from Yunnan, Shanxi, Sichuan, Mongolia, almost all corners of the country, and ears are pricked to catch their unfamiliar accents: some high-pitched, some ranging across more than eight tones, some sounding like drunken gibberish. He imagines the places these people come

from, the *feng* and *shui*, the geometrical combinations that nurture their appearances, their speech.

He observes them from a distance, never approaching or stopping to ask questions. Avoids getting too close: the flame from the fire-eater's burning torch seems too fierce, the heat too searing; the pectoral muscles of the martial arts master dance like a pair of restless mice, and his scarred face looks atrocious, his kicks and punches too powerful, his movements too agile.

They are part of a picture from which Mingzhi is excluded, of which he is only a spectator.

Day in, day out, when the eyes and ears have captured enough, curiosity subsides. Everything becomes a nuisance: the hustle and bustle, the rich smell of boiling oil, the business of threading his way through the crowd. His pace quickens each day, though still it slows down when he passes by the textile stall, searching for a glimpse of the blue dress that seems to have evaporated. Merged with the greasy air. Gone.

A corner of his heart is emptying out. He can feel it, the hole, bored right through, but he swiftly covers it up with an enormous sign which says 'EXAM'. Nothing must distract him.

\*

Mingzhi spends his first Sunday in Pindong Town in his little hut, studying. On his second, he decides to explore the town and its surroundings. *A breath of country air will refresh my mind.*

He wakes Little Mouse, sets out early in the morning. Emerging from the alley, Mingzhi stands in the main street, deciding on his destination: eastwards to the serpentine

country path or westwards, where more houses are to be seen along the street. Facing west, he catches sight of tall, swaying reeds, and knows the river is close by.

Immediately he gestures to his servant: 'Let's go.'

The path winds along the river, which is hidden under the overgrown reeds. It is a breezy morning, billowing reeds assail him with the smells of river soil and green leaves. His literature-sodden mind is baptised, refreshed. Poems and prose in ancient calligraphy dart through it as he walks, flitting one after another, vivid as on the original pages. When there is no trace of other pedestrians, he croons the tunes of the poems, and admires the echoes they make in the empty wilderness.

He strolls slowly at first; his footsteps are as light as his heart. No more pointing fingers, no more gossip. *I am just an individual here in Pindong Town, like any other anonymous man in the street.* The burden of being the Eldest Grand Young Master of Landlord Chai lifts.

He smiles and his pace quickens. A bamboo container of drinking water in his arms and a bundle of books on his back, Little Mouse must jog now and then to keep up with his master, and is already panting heavily.

A hill is in sight, covered in dense woods. As he turns a corner, Mingzhi catches a glimpse of bright green at the hilltop, the tiled roof of a temple. Its red-painted walls and the fine relief sculptures on the roof stand out from among the luxuriant pines, cypresses and bamboo growths, and the misty air. Two leaping dragons, one at each corner of the eaves, strive to thrust their wriggling bodies and open mouths from the wreathing cloud into the sky.

So fierce, so powerful.

Mingzhi stands for some moments, admiring.

Later as he approaches the foot of the hill, he discovers a path leading upwards, carefully paved with rock pieces to form steep steps. He climbs the first few steps, looks up, and finds them smooth and clear all the way to the top. A busy route apparently, presumably the only way to the temple.

‘That... must be... the Green Dragon Temple!’ Puffing and lagging behind his master, Little Mouse, who has just noticed the building, calls out in fits and starts.

Mingzhi remembers the woman servant from the main house who once told them about this famous place of worship, about the Goddess of Mercy who grants the requests of Her pious worshippers, from an abundant harvest or a flourishing business, to getting the right bride or bridegroom or a son to continue the family line. People are said to have come from all quarters just to get Her blessings. ‘Go and burn some joss sticks, She’ll bless you for your exam,’ the woman had said in a serious tone.

EXAM!

The word swells and grimaces in his mind like the ferocious dragons on the temple roof. Mingzhi realises that half the day is gone, and he should return to his books.

‘Get out of the way!’

The hoarse voices of men break the tranquillity. Two sedans are swaying towards Mingzhi. He dodges, stumbling into the bushes at the side of the footpath.

An outburst of laughter follows. The sedan bearers turn and sneer at this fragile bookworm as they ‘hi-yo’ and ‘hoo-ha’ away.

The first sedan passes. The passenger, an elegant middle-aged woman stares ahead without glancing at Mingzhi. He rises to his feet and brushes the dust and dirt off his clothes. The second sedan approaches. Mingzhi hears soft giggles. He turns to look.

The girl in blue!

Only she is not wearing blue now but silky pink, reflected in her cheeks, the lovely colour of a healthy young girl.

Mingzhi stands gawking, prompting another fit of giggles from the girl. Her eyes brighten, above them eyelids with a single crease tilted up at the outer ends; her lightly rouged lips stretch and curl upwards, and her dimples sink deeper.

*Her smile...*

He keeps staring. But the young girl looks away at once, covering her mouth with a hand, suppressing her smile, as if realising that she has gone beyond the limits prescribed for a well-bred young woman.

As the sedan comes closer, Mingzhi catches a glimpse of the nape of her neck, a patch of milky white.

*Her delicate skin.*

Then she passes, leaving a whiff of fragrance in the air. The smell of jasmine. Gentle, feminine.

*Her smell.*

Mingzhi does not know how he got home, but once there with a room full of books, he fixes his mind on only one thing: the exam.

At night before bed, though, he promises himself a weekly Sunday morning walk, and maybe a visit to the temple at some point.

Later that night, the smell of jasmine lingers in his dreams.

\*

There is a bigger crowd at the textile stall this morning. Mingzhi peers over the jostling heads. Bolts of material piled high on the display table. The stall owner, as tall and scrawny as a bamboo stick, shouts himself hoarse:

‘Cheap textiles from England!

Made by automatic machines!

Good value for money!’

His rusty voice breaks through the crowd, pulling in more curious passers-by for a glance at the so-called *yanghuo*, foreign merchandise.

A middle-aged woman blurts out: ‘Hey, Old Bamboo Cane, what’s so good about foreign textiles? I only want the stuff from Nanchang District, excellent hand-made quality.’

‘Aye, I offer you a good bargain and you ask for trouble. As I said, Mama Zhang, even if you’re willing to pay me double there’s no way I can get you any.’

‘Have you been making too much money lately, Old Bamboo Cane? Does my cash mean nothing to you?’

‘Don’t get me wrong, Mama Zhang. The women in Nanchang have put away their spinning machines and stopped their weaving, too. How can they compete with the foreign devils’ evil engines? Who would want to pay more if they can save a bit of money?’

The foreign devils’ evil engines in a foreign land!

What do they look like and how do they work?

In Mingzhi's mind's eye there are giant steel frameworks operated by huge, hairy barbarians. Bolts of cloth spring up from the machines every second, one after another, and are stacked on top of one another, piling up high. Suddenly one of the bolts falls over, knocking against his shoulder.

'Ouch!'

Mingzhi rubs his shoulder and shakes his head. Only then does he realise that it's Little Mouse who has been patting him.

'We're going to be late, Eldest Grand Young Master,' the young man grins and leads his dreamy master away.

\*

On the third weekend, Butler Fong arrives early in the morning on Master Chai's orders, and finds both master and servant still in bed.

The dutiful butler passes on his old master's reminder to the young: he must come home once a fortnight, as instructed.

*Home?* Mingzhi sits at the edge of his bed, rubbing his eyes, trying to collect his memories.

Little Mouse, after getting a knock on the head from Butler Fong, slips away with a contorted face, suppressing the pain, and returns with a basin of water.

Mingzhi washes his face. The water sends a chill through him. He shivers. The bleakness of the mansion slowly wriggles its way into his memory, crawling over him from head to toe. He is fully awake now.

*Time passes so quickly.*

Master Chai orders a dinner with his eldest grandson, to check on his progress. Mingzhi keeps his answers short and precise, keeping his eyes on his bowl of rice, avoiding the sharp stares being shot at him. When all questions have been asked and answers given, the spacious hall falls into a deep silence, broken only by the occasional sounds of munching and gulping, amplified in Mingzhi's ears.

Mingzhi finishes his food as quickly as he can. He drains his tea, and becomes confused as he feels it cold, which is just not possible.

*It's been three weeks; such a long time.*

As soon as Mingzhi returns from the east court, Da Niang comes to see her son, observing him under the yellowish candlelight. To see if he has lost weight, or is suffering from malnutrition, or has not been keeping himself tidy.

Her clean-shaven son stands tall, bright-eyed, smiling: 'I'm fine, mum.'

The maid brings in tea sets, preparing to pour them tea as usual. Mingzhi waves her off. Da Niang reaches for the teapot but Mingzhi has got it. For the first time he pours his mother a cupful.

Da Niang takes a slow sip. Warm. Their favourite *longjing*. Staring up, she sees calmness in his smile.

*He's grown.*

Her eyes are welling.

Uncle Liwei calls, and Mingzhi leaves with him for a game of chess. Da Niang waves them off. In the distance the two departing silhouettes are almost identical.

'I'm sure I'll get you this time.'

‘No, you won’t. Not even if I let you make five moves before me.’

‘You’ll regret saying that.’

‘I mean it...’

Their voices gradually subside as they disappear into the courtyard. Da Niang sits staring into the darkness, until the maid comes to clear the table.

\*

Mingzhi’s excellent result in his first monthly assessment has won him a scholarship of four taels.

He stares at the four pieces of silver on his palm, thinking about what they mean. Little Mouse counts on his fingers: ‘Enough to pay for your tuition fees and daily meals, but not the rent. It’s an expensive room, this one.’

Mingzhi carefully wraps up the money in his kerchief and keeps it in his sandalwood box, promising himself that he will top his class from now on.

*Soon enough I won’t need money from home.*

\*

‘The foreign devil is in town!’

Little Mouse rushes in, his freckled face flushed and his eyes sparkling. Mingzhi looks up from his book.

The servant lays their dinner basket on the table. ‘I wish I’d seen him myself!’ He unloads the dishes. ‘They say he came this afternoon.’

Mingzhi puts down his book and pours himself a cup of tea.

‘I don’t understand!’ At the dinner table Little Mouse scratches his head and points his chopsticks in all directions: ‘Apparently he said he is a messenger of God. How can he be a devil then?’

Mingzhi, who has insisted the servant eats with him after they moved here, points at the bowlful of fried pumpkin with dried shrimps and streaky pork: ‘Your food is getting cold, it won’t taste good that way.’

‘Aren’t you curious, Eldest Grand Young Master?’ Little Mouse pokes the pumpkin pieces with his chopsticks before picking one up.

‘What an old pumpkin!’ He raises it and examines its long, hair-like fibres. ‘They say he has hair like this all over his face.’

Suddenly Mingzhi grabs the bowl of pumpkin: ‘I’ll have it all myself if you’re not eating.’

‘Hey--’

Little Mouse lurches forward, stretches out his arm and aims his chopsticks at the bowl in Mingzhi’s hand. Mingzhi moves it away. Another attack is launched. This time Mingzhi leaves the table, still clutching the bowl. The servant comes after him...

The game of tag ends with the servant clearing up a mess of broken bowl and mashed pumpkin from the floor, before the two finish their bowls of plain rice by soaking them in hot tea. They are pleased with their newly invented recipe, though.

When night falls, Mingzhi is back at his desk. Only the sounds of leaping fish keep him company.

Along with the splashes of the leaping fish, a white, hairy man swims into his dreams. His face is deathly pale, his eyes dark and hollow, like two powerful whirlpools, spinning fast, pulling Mingzhi into them. Mingzhi struggles, legs kicking, hands waving, groping for something solid... Books, a pile of them! He frantically grabs and throws them into the holes, filling them up.

The waves subside. The hairy man is gone.

Beyond Mingzhi's books, beyond his knowledge, scholars from the Neo-Confucian School of Statecraft, led by Kang Yuwei and Liang Qichao, sow the seed of reformation. It sprouts swiftly, only waiting for the right moment to thrust northwards to the Imperial city.

Everything changes.

\*

Returning from a fortnight's errand in the provincial capital, Head Teacher Scholar Ning scurries into Mingzhi's classroom. The class watches him fling a stack of paper onto the table. The papers slip, and are strewn across the floor.

*Our weekly commentaries!*

The young men hold their breath, waiting. Scholar Ning glances at the half-shaven heads before him.

'Do you consider these texts to be social commentaries? These sweet and flowery phrases?'

Silence.

'Can someone tell me why are you here?'

Still, silence is his only answer. He flops into his chair, rests his elbows on the desk, and waits.

From a corner a tiny voice raises: 'To study and prepare for our exams.'

A tide of nodding heads washes across the room. And someone adds: 'To secure a post in the civil service.'

'You bunch of useless bookworms!'

Scholar Ning gets up, bracing himself against the desk, puffing.

'Are you still indulging yourselves in daydreams about the past, about the years of the glorious Qianlong period, when you bookworms could pore over classical literature day and night? That was once upon a time, when the Great Qing Empire stood firm as the centre of the world, when the foreign devils bowed and kowtowed to our emperor. But now...'

He looks his students in the eyes; they look away, uneasy.

'They are here, the white men, more and more of them, taking territory after territory, and hungering for more...'

The young men duck their heads lower, avoiding his stare. Exasperated, Scholar Ning's words come faster, assailing them with his anger: '... Listen to the screams and groans of our soldiers as their ships are bombed and burnt, and they're forced to surrender. Treaties are signed, lands handed over. The French landed in Annam, the British took Burma, the Russians grabbed the northern region, and the Japanese have joined the queue too, fixing their eyes on Korea!'

Bang!

Shocked, the silent audience glance up from under their eyelids.

Scholar Ning, a hand still on the desk, raises his voice: 'And you, the educated ones, our hopeful new generation, you bury yourselves in the old classics like ostriches with their heads in the sand...'

He pauses, heaves a long sigh. Slowly, in his deep, hoarse voice, he says: 'How are you going to sit your exams if China no longer exists?'

Looking up, Mingzhi sees that his head teacher's eyes are brimming with tears. The young man sweats profusely, feels the heat inside his body, his veins, where the blood stirs, running wild. In his mind's eye he sees the map of a mutilated China, bloodstained, broken up and labelled with unknown characters.

That evening Mingzhi sits at his desk before the open pages. In the subsiding daylight, dotted lines of black ink swim before his eyes, like armies of ants, marching up and down. Jostling. Slithering. Accelerating. As he blinks, the columns double up. Treble. Overlap.

*How am I going to sit the exam if China doesn't exist?*

Yet Mingzhi shakes his head and tries to shrug off his troubled thoughts. Little Mouse brings in a kerosene lamp. Mingzhi turns it up to maximum brightness.

A wash of clear yellow floods the room. Mingzhi wipes his face with a moist towel, then fixes his eyes on his reading.

That same night in the central hall of the Chai Mansion, shadows of dragons in high relief dance on the whitewashed walls in the flickering candlelight, flanking Master Chai and his two sons.

It is a rare tea-meeting after dinner. Master Chai relaxes in his chair, Likang slouches in his while Liwei, arms folded, sits straight up to attention, trying to read the

old man's mind. But the master of the house takes his time, slowly sipping his favourite *o-long*. Warm, of course.

Finally he puts down his tea and broaches his plan: to have two seasons of poppies. No more paddy, the old man has decided.

Likang smiles broadly, and his brother frowns.

*It's too risky!*

Liwei knows his father is annoyed at Mandarin Liu for robbing him of a larger proportion of his revenue, and is eager to recover the unexpected loss.

'We should grow our own grains,' Liwei says hesitantly.

'Use your brains, Liwei! It's so much cheaper to buy from another province.'

'What if something happens, a drought, a famine? We'll all die of hunger if we don't have our own stock of crops.'

Thump!

The hand that holds the dragon stick trembles. The old man's face turns taut.

'Shut up! Watch your mouth and no more talking back!'

Liwei's open mouth snaps shut; Likang, relaxing in his chair, says in his peculiar slow drawl: 'That's right. Don't you see it? The more we plant the more money we get. That's the magic of opium... Ah-ha--,' he yawns. 'Excuse me, time to go... Oh, yes, definitely more poppies.'

Still yawning, Likang drags his lazy bones back to the west court for his magic pipe.

Master Chai throws out his last words: 'Do as I say. I'll expect a double harvest this year!' He thumps his stick all the way to his room.

Standing still, Liwei feels the four walls detach themselves, drift about, and the dragons on the pillars lunge at him, their sinister faces swaying before his eyes, their enormous mouths wide open...

Two huge holes, dark and bottomless.

Where hope sinks quietly all the way down.

But then something strikes him. *Oh yes, there's one bright light, in this abyss, this gloomy mansion.*

Mingzhi.

Thinking of the young man, Liwei's pursed lips crack a little, tilting upwards. He longs for a game of chess; just the thing on a night like this.

Ten miles away, his chess partner holds his head down with both hands, forcing his eyes to focus on the calligraphic words.

Sunday again and it's Vesak, the birthday of Buddha. The temple is crowded. Worshippers fill the front courtyard and the main hall: buying joss sticks, burning them, and holding them close to their chests as they pray before the statue of the Goddess of Mercy. Sticking them into the giant brass pots when they've finished. Smoke, thick and stifling, swirls inside and outside the main hall.

Mingzhi's eyes are blurred and watery, and he keeps sneezing. *Where on earth has he gone?* In the courtyard he stands on his toes, trying to peer over the shuffling heads into the main hall where Little Mouse has disappeared. A burly man blocks his view, and he is elbowed from the right and then pushed forward from behind. He stumbles, bumping into the burly man, who turns to stare at him with bulbous eyes. Mingzhi shrinks back, lowers his head and squeezes his way out of the crowd.

The back garden is quiet; only a handful of people are walking about, admiring the blooming flowers of spring. Scurrying in, Mingzhi wipes the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve and then looks up—

In the far corner, next to the ornamental landscape and the pond, stands the girl in blue!

She is admiring the little white jasmine blossoms, growing in luxuriant abundance on the branches. Her face moves close to them, and her fingers gently touch the petals.

Mingzhi's heart throbs. He steps out but stops at once; his foot hovers in the air, and is pulled back seconds later. *What should I say? What can I say? What will I say?* He scratches his head, constructing phrases in his mind, but his scholarly eloquence seems to have vanished, and he is unable to form a single decent sentence. Still, he strolls forward, pretending to admire the ornamental landscape.

'Young Mistress.' The plainly dressed girl he saw at the textile stall enters through the moon gate, walking towards her mistress. 'Madam says it's time to go.'

*She is leaving!*

Mingzhi anxiously rubs his fingers. Seeing her coming forward he steps to one side and bumps into a tree. Some sprays of blossom flutter to the ground. *Jasmine!* Swiftly he picks one up and as the girl passes by, holds it out in front of her. Instinctively she holds out her open palm, and the little blossom falls into it. She glances up to see an embarrassed young man, who says 'for you', quickly and softly, then scuttles away.

*The feeble bookworm on the hillside.* She remembers.

The petals feel soft in her palm.

'What happened, Young Mistress?'

Without answering, she smiles quietly, blushing.

Mingzhi finds Little Mouse and rushes him down the hill.

'What's going on?'

His master ignores him, hurrying ahead. Little Mouse skips a bit to keep up.

They run helter-skelter down the hill and are soon on the path by the river. Though panting heavily Mingzhi heaves a long sigh. *It's safe now.* Still walking, he turns to beckon to Little Mouse, who lags behind.

‘Watch out!’

Too late. Mingzhi’s right foot misses the firm ground and plunges into a puddle.

‘Ahh!’

He lands heavily on the gravel, one leg in the puddle and the other on the path, and pain shoots through his body. Little Mouse helps him up.

‘Ouch!’

A tearing agony in his right ankle forces him to sit down again. Little Mouse takes off Mingzhi’s shoes and watches the gradual swelling of his ankle.

*What to do?* Little Mouse paces up and down, scratching his head, while Mingzhi massages his ankle, then stops as it aggravates the pain.

‘Can I help you?’

*What a strange accent...* Looking for the source of the voice, the young master and servant are taken aback. ... *From a strange man!*

The man is tall but a little stooped. His face is pale—no, translucent, for his veins are visible. His short hair is oddly yellow, and his body hair flashes like gold in the afternoon sunlight.

Little Mouse shouts: ‘The foreign devil!’

The man smiles and looks Mingzhi in the eyes, deep blue meeting dark brown. Mingzhi reads his gaze: *Concern, sympathy.* He feels the warmth in it, and relaxes.

Father Terry's house, which is also a church, is nearby. He carries Mingzhi to it on his back. Behind them Little Mouse tags along in a fluster, unsure if he should stop them and rescue his master from the foreign devil or just follow along tamely.

Before he can make up his mind, they are already settled in a small, cosy room.

The priest applies an ointment to Mingzhi's ankle and bandages it neatly. In his awkward Mandarin he asks Mingzhi not to massage or rub it. The young men look doubtfully at the thickly layered white cotton. For an injury like this, the traditional Chinese medical practitioner will twist and rub and massage. To keep the nerves in place, they say. Father Terry smiles, seems to have read their minds, and says they should let the torn muscle tissues recover by themselves and not damage them further. Tells them he studied medicine in England—where he comes from—before leaving for Rome and becoming a missionary. And that he learned Mandarin after arriving in China five years ago.

Now that he is feeling better, Mingzhi glances around.

There are books, hundreds of them, displayed neatly on the shelves against the four walls. Some are in Chinese but more are in thin, cursive characters that he doesn't recognise. He picks one up. Among the pages of this strangely lettered book there are illustrations: a man riding in what looks like a metal cart (if it is one) without a donkey or cow or horse but supported only by two large metal wheels (why doesn't he fall?); linked compartments with wheels running on tracks and puffing smoke (a metal dragon?); and a huge boat that is puffing smoke (it must be steaming hot in there)... Lines of captions (presumably) crab-walk underneath the pictures.

*What are these things? I wish I could read about them.*

A hairy hand reaches for the pages, a finger points at the pictures.

‘A bicycle. A train. A steam ship.’

Names that Mingzhi has never heard. The priest goes on speaking in smooth-toned unrecognisable syllables. Mingzhi stares blankly at him.

‘It’s English, my mother tongue.’ His saviour smiles. ‘Feel free to come round when you’re better.’

*He knows. He’s a scholar too.*

\*

Little Mouse holds his palm up and grits his teeth (to stop himself from chuckling): ‘If I ever tell Master Chai or Butler Fong about your meeting with the foreign devil, may I be struck down by the Thunder God, and may my body burst into pieces and be scattered all over.’

Mingzhi asks his servant to repeat the words, leaving out the last line. Tells him to stop laughing, too. This time Little Mouse takes his pledge more seriously, and Mingzhi nods, satisfied. He knows Little Mouse will keep his promise, but does not know that his servant only decided to keep the secret the moment he had his first taste of foreign candy. The sweet, sticky, tongue-melting chocolate was too good to resist, and it would be too stupid not to have any more. There is a big jar full of it on Father Terry’s desk.

Mingzhi checks his carefully bandaged ankle, and applies more ointment through the seams at the edges. The swelling is easing, he can feel that. *Grandfather will be furious if he finds out.* For him, traditional Chinese medical treatment has always been

the only answer to any illness. *But this works.* He looks at the bottle of yellowish liquid given by Father Terry.

*Not a devil after all, the white man,* both the master and his servant conclude.

\*

Evening, and Mingzhi is revising the literature of the Song Dynasty. The poems of the famous Two Lis, Li Yi and Li Qingzhao, are essential reading. Both were talented and had a similar fate: they had a joyful first half of their lives but suffered later, lived the second half unhappy and finally died in despair. Li Yi, the last emperor of the dynasty, was held as a prisoner when the country fell into the hands of his enemies; while Li Qingzhao, the woman poet, drifted about during the war with her abusive second husband.

*How vulnerable human beings are, unable to decide their own fates.*

Careful study of their poems allows Mingzhi to differentiate their earlier works from later ones, which are depressing. Autumn. Fallen leaves. Withered flowers. The waning moon. Chill evenings. Bleak corridors. Empty courtyards. Dilapidated pavilions. Desolate gardens. Taking readers deep into their world of despair and hopelessness, sharing their pains. *These are the best of their works,* Mingzhi recognises: *the products of their sufferings.* It is their pain that has made their poems immortal. But were their sufferings worthwhile? Certainly they didn't choose to experience the pains so as to be remembered. *But were they able to make choices at all?*

He is confused. For the first time the young man feels reluctant to read on. He pushes his book away. The pages swiftly turn over, then come to rest. On the open page

there is Li Qingzhao's *Shengsheng Man*, 'Every Sound, Lentamente,' Meilian's favourite poem.

*Eldest sister. My once happy and careless eldest sister.*

Mingzhi recalls those days when they read poems together in his secret world. His nerves twitch behind his temples, a gnawing pain. He wonders if his sister were a poet, what would her poems be like? As sad but also as good as Li Qingzhao's?

He has a sudden urge to see her, to talk to her, his eldest sister.

\*

Seeing Meilian has become difficult since Mandarin Liu and Master Chai fell out. Visits from members of the Chai family have been rejected. Mingzhi knows this well, does not wish to offend Mandarin Liu and embarrass himself.

The government office, where Mandarin Liu and his family live, is on the main street, not far from Mingzhi's school. Whenever he passes by, Mingzhi peers past the guards and through the open door, but is always disappointed. No trace of Meilian. Only doors and walls, layer upon layer. Like a prison.

*So near and yet so far.* Mingzhi sighs and paces the room, limping slightly as he goes. Looking at his restless master, Little Mouse quietly sneaks away, picking at his ears as he tries to pick his mousy brain. It doesn't take him long to come up with an idea.

'Birds of a feather flock together,' that's his theory, from which he deduces that most servants, no matter who they work for, like making friends with one another. They like to get together and exchange gossip and cunning tricks. And they are always inclined to help each other out.

Despite his master's sneers, Little Mouse is soon proved right. The maid from the main house, who sometimes brings them meals, knows the servants of the government office well. As soon as his ankle is fully recovered, Mingzhi gets the maid to deliver a message to make an arrangement to meet Meilian.

\*

The moon is full. In a back lane a door creaks open. Mingzhi sneaks through. The middle-aged maid who lets him in leads him through a long, zigzag corridor to the pavilion in the garden.

Meilian is waiting there, his eldest sister, slender as ever.

Mingzhi's eyes well up, and his sister weeps. Her face is as pale as the feeble moonlight. Mingzhi remembers their last Mid-Autumn Festival together, her smiling face under the clear, full moon. He pats her shoulder. *I know, I know.* But this only aggravates her sobbing.

‘Cousin sister-in-law!’ a girl shouts from inside the house.

‘Young Mistress, you can't see her now...’ the maid standing guard at the moon gate tries in vain to stop the intruder.

The girl in blue!

Eyes wide open, she stops at the threshold of the arched door, staring at them.

Meilian scuttles forward and grips her arm.

‘It's not what you think, Sister Jasmine. He is my brother, Mingzhi.’

Very slowly the girl nods, seeming to trust Meilian. She looks closer, and recognises him, the feeble bookworm on the hillside.

*Cousin sister-in-law? So she's related to Mandarin Liu – his brother's daughter!*

‘I’ve made you this.’ The girl hands Meilian a garland of jasmine. ‘Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone.’

She leaves, and a whiff of jasmine lingers behind her.

Meilian stares at the carefully threaded flowers in her hands. ‘Jasmine, that’s her name. She’s the only one here who’s nice to me.’

But her brother seems not to be listening. He is standing stock-still; his gaze has got lost in the faraway darkness, taking his soul away with it, along with his adolescent romantic fantasies.

\*

He weeps, curling up like a wounded animal under the blanket, stuffing a corner of the blanket in his mouth to muffle his sobbing.

*Why? Why must she be Mandarin Liu’s niece?*

He bites the cotton hem in his hand, and the fingers that hold it, but does not feel the pain. Numb, like his heart.

No more dreams. The smell of jasmine is dissipating, evaporating into the night sky.

\*

Mingzhi’s Sunday morning walks now end with an afternoon in Father Terry’s study. The timing is just right. When he and Little Mouse arrive at the priest’s doorstep puffing and panting, hungry and thirsty, Sunday Mass has just come to an end. There is always some leftover food set aside for them.

Food is the bait Father Terry uses to attract some attendees to his service. Poor peasants from nearby villages willingly glue themselves to the pews for the entire

morning, staring blankly at the priest with his babbling about God and Satan, waiting for the moment when he says lunch is ready. Then they leave, happily, not only with a full stomach but also a bagful of rice or flour or sugar.

‘This foreign God is not so bad after all,’ they say, on their way to the Green Dragon Temple, to burn some joss sticks for the Goddess of Mercy. To thank Her for granting them their wishes, getting them the meal and rice or flour or sugar.

Father Terry knows this but lets them.

‘It’s only a matter of time.’ He is optimistic: ‘God is patient with his children.’

And so, he has never urged Mingzhi to attend Mass. He knows he is different, this young man; knows he needs something else.

Knowledge.

Mingzhi begins his English lessons.

‘This is the only way,’ his blue-eyed tutor explains, ‘that you can learn from my books.’

Mingzhi can only agree. He is more than happy to learn something new, something most people around him do not have access to, know nothing about.

*This is a challenge,* he tells himself.

It’s completely different, this language. The writing crab-walks from left to right, linking hands, joining one word to another; and with the speech, his tongue is twisted and curled and stretched and held, his mouth twitches and wows, and he has to er and ssh and fi and ke and te.

And he returns home exhausted, with a maimed mouth and twisted tongue.

But Father Terry likes his student, praises him for learning fast and mastering the pronunciation. Assures Mingzhi that soon enough he will be able to read the books on the shelves, and discuss them with him in English. Mingzhi can only grimace, sticking out his tongue and panting like a dog. Glancing around, the four walls of books beckon and wink at him, luring him back to his elementary reading and exercises, the checking of dictionaries and the memorising of vocabulary.

\*

With school, anyhow, Mingzhi has never been neglectful. Five months on, he has monopolised all the four-tael scholarships.

Head Teacher Scholar Ning always brings them news: more factories are built, weapons in Hanyang, machinery in Kunming, and textile and iron mills in Guangdong. More railways are laid. They are invited in this time, the foreigners, he says, German, American, British, the so-called experts.

*A Self-Strengthening Movement with the aid of foreign strength!* Mingzhi smiles quietly. In his mind he busily translates, spells, pronounces. *Weapons. Machinery. Textiles. Iron. Railways.* And illustrates. Giant machines, rolling incessantly, and thump, thump, thumping fast, drowning out Scholar Ning's accounts of another form of invasion. Father Terry's voice surfaces: *This is the march of time.* Calm and steady, humming in Mingzhi's head.

Autumn, and the school breaks for harvest. Mingzhi returns to the odour he hates. The familiar sights of paddy-threshing are replaced by the drying of opium. Pungent black blocks, hundreds of thousands of them, cover the fields, reconstructing the rural landscape. Gone is the golden yellow paddy, the flakes of bran drifting in the morning rays, the smell of freshly-threshed rice.

Mingzhi stays in his room. No chess, no evening walks. Keeps himself busy with his books: mostly Chinese texts but a couple in English, too, carefully hidden in the bottom of his chest, under layers of clothes. He takes them out in the quiet night and reads them into the small hours.

Always, there is another lighted window in the west court a few doors away from Mingzhi's. The yellowish rays from the two windows thinly penetrate the darkness, like two sleepless eyes. In his room Mingyuan is studying hard, too, determined not to lose out to his half-brother.

During the day, however, Mingyuan takes to following Uncle Liwei, learning his trade from him. His mother orders: 'Get a grip on the business, you'll have control of it in the end.' Her son nods, agrees. Grandfather Master Chai is delighted, praises his second grandson for his initiative. Mingzhi says nothing, cares only for his books. Da Niang is silent, too, keeping herself in her room, chanting sutra, while Uncle Liwei, now

even busier, is happy with Mingzhi's lack of interest in the family business. *He doesn't need this, his world is not here.*

Before the sowing is completed, Mingzhi urges Little Mouse to pack his luggage. He gives an excuse to his grandfather: to complete the essays specially assigned by Head Teacher Scholar Ning, and leaves.

\*

Scholar Ning does have an assignment for Mingzhi. The school founded by the reformers in the neighbouring provincial capital has become the head teacher's model: the culture of debating social and political issues, the details of their debates, and the learning of western knowledge from translated texts. The latter fascinates him most of all, opening his eyes to the outside world. When the first edition of a journal published by the reformers' school reaches him, Scholar Ning decides to publish his own in-school quarterly journal.

His best student, Mingzhi, is designated editor-in-chief on his two-man editorial board. Teacher and student cut articles out of the journal from the reformatory school and other publications, and invite contributions from other scholars. Copy them down word by word, in neat calligraphy; each manages five copies of a single two-fold (four page) broadsheet paper a day. After a fortnight of hard work, the first edition of a hundred copies of the journal is produced, just in time to greet the students returning from their autumn break.

The journals are sold out in half a day. And the cost is covered with the minimum charges carefully calculated and imposed for this purpose. There is a demand for more copies. Scholar Ning gathers another ten of his favourite students with excellent

calligraphic skills, working overnight, producing another hundred copies of the same edition. All these are sold out, too.

*A great success.* Without a second thought Scholar Ning buys printing equipment in town with the extra income from the first instalment. An editorial committee consisting of five sub-editors, led by Mingzhi, is formally established. A free hand is given to Mingzhi, while the head teacher oversees his work.

Although he feels honoured, Mingzhi is not without worries. Extra responsibilities mean that there is less time for study. But he is excited, too. Happy to be the first to read the journal from the reformers' school: Kang Yuwei's forceful, critical comments; Liang Qichao's outstanding literary style, his gentle yet persuasive debating skills; and the new knowledge contained in the translated western articles. He learns swiftly as he searches through the pages for suitable extracts. His thirsty brain absorbs fast, filling up, saturated with knowledge.

He plans his time carefully: still studies at night, though cuts back to five nights a week, and spends the other two working on the journal; still goes to Father Terry's on Sunday, learning English. Still bags the scholarships.

With the use of printing blocks, the production of the journal becomes easier, faster. Now Mingzhi has time for other editorial plans. He begins to take extracts from Father Terry's books, translates and finds space for these short pieces of information in his publication.

He is careful, though, pretending these are extracts from the newspapers from the provincial capital, as he does not want to reveal his knowledge of English. *No point, and too risky if the news travels to the village.* He tries to avoid making himself too

conspicuous; is content just to see the translated pieces printed in black and white, and his fellow students studying them, getting new knowledge, gathering in groups and exchanging opinions about them excitedly.

Mingzhi quietly enjoys his little secret.

Scholar Ning trusts Mingzhi, says nothing, but signs and approves every proof he reads. Surprised at the high quality of the publication, he is proud of the editor-in-chief he has appointed.

\*

Evening, and the editorial meeting has adjourned early. There is no trace of Little Mouse in the front square of the school where he usually waits for his young master. After waiting a while, Mingzhi decides to walk home alone.

The night screen swiftly rolls down. Head lowered and arms folded on his chest against the chill winter wind, Mingzhi hurries forward down the quiet street, past the many tightly shut doors and the lighted windows through which whiffs of meat soup are wafting. *A bowl of warm soup is just what I need.* Mingzhi sniffs as he looks up. The lane leading to his little hut is in sight; he presses his rumbling stomach, quickens his pace and turns the corner.

A back lane, narrow and almost pitch-black. The only light comes from the far end, through a curtained door, where yellowish light casts a faint glow across the dark lane. Like a tired eye, delivering a touch of bleakness. *Not the right way.* Mingzhi is about to turn away when a man bursts through the curtain to the lane. A huge shadow that shrinks gradually as it blunders in the darkness towards him.

Mingzhi hears the man muttering in snatches: 'A magic puff after dinner, and you'll be as happy as the celestial beings!'

The man, as scrawny as a skeleton, lifts his eyelids as he approaches Mingzhi, and shouts in enchantment: 'Hey, you should have a go, young man! Life is shit without it!'

He holds his hand out, reaching for Mingzhi, who instantly steps back. Stumbling forward, eyes rolling back, the man falls on the ground and does not move. In an instant the sound of snoring is heard.

Mingzhi looks at the source of light. After some moments of hesitation, he walks to it, and peers through a corner of the stained curtain.

A smoke-shrouded room lit by the faint glow of a kerosene lamp. Cloudy, obscure. A seemingly unreal picture, where vague figures loom. Men, about ten of them, lie sideways in a row of wooden beds, each holding a long pipe, puffing. With their dreamy eyes half-closed, they seem to be wandering in fantasy lands.

Opium.

In the yellowish blur, the men share the same jaundiced face, the same high cheekbones and sunken, dark-ringed eyes.

Just like his father.

Abruptly someone bumps into him. A man is being thrown out.

'Clear your debts before you step in here again!'

A burly man, apparently the steward of this opium den, pulls at the collar of his defenceless victim, shouts abuse at him, pushes him to the ground. The poor man can do nothing but groan, as he drags himself to his feet.

'Let me have a puff, just one puff, please...'

‘A puff? That’s what you’d get!’ The steward spits on him, then retreats into the smoky room. The curtain flaps behind him.

*Opium.*

Mingzhi feels his stomach twitching and realises he is very late for dinner now.

*My dinner... is paid for with money from the opium harvest...*

Very slowly he walks away, head lowered, weighed down with thought.

‘Eldest Grand Young Master!’ Little Mouse runs towards him, huffing and puffing, and grumbling. ‘I’ve been searching high and low!’

But his master keeps walking and hears nothing of Little Mouse’s grievances.

\*

Mingzhi counts the money accumulated from his scholarships, knows nothing can be achieved with it yet. *The exam next spring.* That’s the only way out.

It won’t be long, he knows. Another harvest, he only has to bear it for another harvest, and all will be over soon after spring.

## *Chapter Nine*

### **Plum Blossom Village, 1893**

When a sea of pinkish red begins to billow in the early spring breeze, in the Chai Mansion the master's elated laughter echoes through the central hall. *A double harvest at last!* He strolls amongst the pillars in the hall, imagining the dragons hooray-hooraying as they dance around him, and decides: a celebration is to be held, and a grand one, to mark this milestone.

\*

Lagging behind, Little Mouse scratches his head as he stares at the back of his master, hurrying ahead. For the first time Mingzhi is eager to get home! The month-long spring holiday to be spent at the mansion seems too long even to Little Mouse himself; it must be much worse for his master who has to sit his exam after the break. *Why has he changed?* Little Mouse keeps scratching his head, leaving not the clues he looks for but flakes of dandruff falling in the morning rays.

'Hey! Hurry up, will you?'

Red-faced, sweat streaming, puffing, panting, and frowning, Mingzhi anxiously beckons for his servant to speed up.

\*

*He isn't here.*

Mingzhi searches every corner of the south court: underneath the huge banner of NORTHERN OPERA TROUPE, between the colourful flags and bunting and the many carts and trunks, and among the actors, musicians and apprentices who are busily unloading and unpacking the carts and trunks. Apart from a couple of new apprentices there are familiar faces, but not *the one*.

Little Sparrow.

Lips sealed tight, gazes averted; all members of the Northern Opera Troupe will only shake their heads when asked about the young actor. As if he has never existed.

*What has happened to him?* Mingzhi balls his fists, face crumpled.

‘Can I help you, Eldest Grand Young Master?’

The troupe leader smiles a sly smile. Mingzhi feels his palms clammy with cold sweat.

‘But I think your grandfather will be of more help to you than I will.’ The man winks.

*Grandpa?* A huge question mark rises, swelling, occupying Mingzhi’s mind, and soon his head is aching.

\*

The peasants are overwhelmed: The Northern Opera Troupe will perform for them in the open field, for three days! Butler Fong announces: A special treat from Landlord Master Chai for the first double harvest.

While the workers are busy setting up the stage, the peasants are busy, too, tattling about it excitedly.

‘I say, Old Chan, I’ve told you to stop grumbling, we can buy rice and flour from the landlord anyway. And we get to see free opera!’

‘Yes, I like to see opera too; but all these years—from my great grandparents’ great grandparents to my parents—we’ve been growing our own food, it feels stupid to work on a piece of land without getting anything edible out of it.’

‘You worry too much, Old Chan. Town people get their opium, Landlord Chai gets his money, we get our food from him—and now the opera, too! Isn’t it wonderful?’

‘Aye, we’ve been working hard from dawn to dusk day after day, shouldn’t we get some entertainment?’

‘That’s right. What do you think the troupe is going to perform? Golden Swallow’s favourite, Longing for Worldly Pleasure?’

‘That I don’t know, but I know I long to see him, that pretty, dainty singsong actor!’

The skinny peasant grimaces, stretches out both arms and mimics Golden Swallow waving his long, flowing sleeves, eliciting a burst of laughter from the crowd. Their laughter echoes through the valley, the fields, the hills and the Plum River, blending into a lively picture of joy and contentment.

\*

Not everybody is as happy as the villagers, though. In her room Er Niang twitches her rouged lips and stamps her feet, resenting Master Chai for his decision. Resenting the innocent peasants, too, for their enthusiasm for opera. Blames them for the fact that the performance exclusively for the mansion has been reduced to four days.

*Only four days!*

Imagining the delicate Golden Swallow performing for crude, shallow peasants who shout and whistle and yell and applaud in the wrong places, Er Niang feels as if there are numerous columns of ants marching briskly inside her stomach, up and down, sideways and slanting, in straight lines or slithering. Crowding, itching.

*I have to see him.*

She takes a deep breath and holds her chest with both hands, trying to tame the hundreds of thousands of unsettled ants inside her.

\*

The unsettled ants are crawling inside Mingzhi, too.

On the first three nights of the performance Mingzhi stays in his room, studying - preparing for the exam is always the best excuse - or pretending to do so, while Little Mouse paces the room, agitated. The music is too pleasant, the songs too seductive and the story intriguing. Little Mouse yearns to see the lead actor's performance, his facial expressions – the tilting of brows, the darting of eyes, the twitching of lips; the waving of his long, flowing sleeves; his delicate, skilful body movements; and his colourful, splendid costumes.

His young master does not budge, staying put at his desk; but the open pages before him are colonised by the tiny ants, dense black dots on yellowish paper, blurring his eyes, muddling his mind.

*Where is he? What has it got to do with grandpa?*

Questions without any clues to possible answers. Mingzhi's head is cracking, yet he struggles not to reveal his torment to Little Mouse. But this servant of his, though as

smart as his name, has been too distracted by the music and songs and stories and the scenes of opera he imagines. And so he has overlooked his distraught master.

*A real bookworm he is, ignoring such great performances from such a great opera troupe.* Little Mouse keeps grumbling and bleating in silence as he paces the room, or cranes his neck at the door in the direction of all the enchanting sounds from beyond it.

Come the fourth night, when Mingzhi tells Little Mouse to go and enjoy his favourite opera, Little Mouse thinks nothing but leaves at once.

‘Be careful. Remember to hide yourself at the back!’

Slipping away on his agile mousy legs, Little Mouse disappears even before Mingzhi finishes his words.

Outside the window a full moon hangs high, clean yellow against the dark blue sky, reminding Mingzhi of his eldest sister, and of his first meeting with Little Sparrow. He has a sudden urge to take a walk: across the bridge, to the river, by the bamboo grove.

The west court is empty. Mingzhi knows his mother has no excuse to escape the opera though she would prefer to stay in her room. Likang has his pipe with him and a special seat with a slanting chair in the front row, determined not to miss this fascinating show. In his smoke-shrouded hallucination, colours and images onstage are intensified. Splendid. Like fairy tales. And Er Niang and Mingyuan, that pair of enthusiastic opera lovers, are always first in their seats, an eager audience.

All is quiet outside. Mingzhi heads for the path leading to the river. As he walks alone, the evenings he shared with Uncle Liwei creep into his mind. His uncle’s gentle, caring words blend with the night breeze, the rustling leaves, the crushing of gravel and

fallen branches beneath his feet, the running water. The familiar warm, calming voice, which he yearns to hear now. But Mingzhi knows his dutiful uncle is now fulfilling the duty of a good son, accompanying his grandfather to admire the performance. After all, it is the result of his own hard work they are celebrating.

*Is it a result he is happy with?*

A wave of sympathy pours over him. Mingzhi sits on the stump by the bamboo grove, fingering the leaf-flute given by Little Sparrow. Thinking. He is confused: *Uncle Liwei could have made his choice; he could have left.*

Mingzhi knows his uncle is more capable of being independent than anyone else. *But why didn't he go?* In his open palms, the flute that once was green and fresh is now dry, brownish and crumpled. Dull. Like Little Sparrow's life in the opera troupe. *My friend... He might have escaped the troupe to live a new life.* Mingzhi now feels relieved: if his conjecture is correct he should be happy for his friend. *Why doesn't Uncle Liwei do so, too?* He thinks it over again and again: the mansion, Grandfather Chai and the few people in it—what has held him? But no explanations are forthcoming. The tiny ants inside him scuttle in all directions, and the persistent low, droning croaks of the frogs add to his frustration.

Still, there is no answer.

A sudden sweep of breeze refreshes his mind. The moon has slid to the western hill, half hidden behind the lush shade of the mulberry trees. And Mingzhi realises he has been sitting here for a long time. *Too long!* He gets to his feet at once. The show must have ended a while ago, and Little Mouse must be worrying himself to death over his master's disappearance!

Mingzhi is about to leave when he hears noises. Frivolous laughter. A man's and a woman's, familiar, coming from the bushes, as those on the night he last met Little Sparrow. He knows at once: *It's them again*. He moves stealthily away, making a big circuit to avoid the bushes.

In the dark silence Mingzhi sneaks in through the side door and closes it behind him.

'On a beautiful night like this, it's a shame to stay in your room. Isn't it, Eldest Brother?'

Mingyuan. Standing in the shadow of the overgrown willow.

Thinking about Er Niang's rendezvous with Golden Swallow out there, Mingzhi becomes speechless. He tries to smile but only manages an awkward expression. There is suspicion in Mingyuan's gaze.

'Thank God you're back!' Little Mouse darts out, still kneading his fingers. 'I'll be beaten to death if someone finds out you'd been out alone!'

'So I'm back now.' Seizing the opportunity, Mingzhi hurries back to his room with Little Mouse. The pair of sharp, staring eyes remains at his back, and he feels it.

\*

At midnight the mansion is wakened to startling news: Er Niang and Golden Swallow have been discovered. Adultery. They are tied up and locked in the storeroom, and will be punished in the morning according to the custom: *jin zhulong*, to be drowned in the river in separate pig cages.

In the east court, Master Chai stands firm in the courtyard, while the troupe leader pleads: 'Golden Swallow is too precious to the troupe. Didn't you admire his performance?'

Master Chai thumps his dragon stick, turns his back on the hook-nosed man. *No compromise. The rule must be followed.*

The troupe leader raises his voice: 'I've done you a favour, dismissing Little Sparrow as you ordered. You owe me one!'

'I don't owe you anything; I paid you for what you did. That little rascal should never have entered my house and corrupted my grandson!'

*Little Sparrow...*

Mingzhi stares at his grandfather, whose face shows no expression. The troupe leader points his finger at Master Chai: 'You! Don't think you can do anything you like with all your money! Let's see how you end up!'

He storms away, and hurries his troupe to pack up and leave at once.

The servants are shocked into gossiping in sibilant whispers. Likang lets out a loud humph and urges Da Niang, who is in tears, to return to the west court with him. Liwei lowers his head, wordless.

Just wakened by his maid, Mingyuan rushes to the storeroom, tries to break the lock with an axe but is stopped by the servants on Master Chai's orders. Despite his yelling and howling, the old man does not yield, and Mingyuan is dragged away and locked in his room. His grudging eyes fall on Mingzhi as he passes by, and he screams: 'It's you, I know it's you!'

Mingzhi stands stock still, feels the hatred in his gaze. He shudders.

*It wasn't me. I've done nothing!*

Little Mouse holds his master's arm and leads him to his room. Mingzhi's face is pale: 'Grandpa's going to kill them... They're going to die!'

*I should do something.* He glances at Little Mouse.

With Little Mouse's help, Mingzhi lets his half-brother out through the window, hands him a bulging cotton pouch of his scholarship money. Reminds him to return to his room afterwards.

Mingyuan drones, his voice dry and cold: 'Don't you pretend. I won't thank you for this.'

Mingzhi shudders again.

\*

In the morning, various stories about the runaway adulterers are exchanged among the villagers. The most convincing version is that the troupe leader sneaked in later that night and retrieved his precious actor. And in the gossipers' minds there is a picture of the furious Master Chai thumping his stick so hard on the ground that the dragon tail breaks off, detached from its head.

'Shame on Landlord Chai, shame on Chai's clan,' an elderly villager sighs. 'Who knows what else they've been covering up behind those high walls?'

A younger peasant chimes in: 'That I don't know; the only thing I know now is that the Northern Opera Troupe is gone!'

'Aye, this is predestined. If you're not meant to have something, you'll never get it. Poor people like us were never intended to enjoy the opera.'

'Hm, opera or no opera, life goes on. You still have to work, still have to feed all these hungry mouths at home!'

Immediately all resentment is reduced to silence, and the peasants can only shake their heads and sigh.

\*

*Where is he now?*

Mingzhi feels weak as he thinks about his friend's fate. GRANDFATHER is an enormous dark shadow looming in the heavy air that hangs over the mansion, plunging down on his chest, pressing him flat. He becomes breathless.

In the dark there is a pair of ghastly eyes. Sharp. Piercing. Scanning him all over, looking for loopholes. Yet Mingzhi's worries for his friend have blinded him to the threat.

\*

Mingzhi notices how Mingyuan has changed. The angry grandfather's anger extends to the only son left by his adulterous daughter-in-law. Mingyuan is no longer asked to recite for Master Chai's guests, nor does his interest in the opium trade please the old man, and he is excluded from the family dinner on several occasions. Likang says nothing. That second wife of his has shamed him, and seeing Mingyuan reminds him of this shame. Da Niang, of course, is in no position to say anything, nor is Liwei. Mingyuan now keeps himself more to himself. The west court becomes quieter without his elated laughter, boastful talk and abusive shouts at the servants.

Mingzhi feels for his half-brother, takes the initiative to approach him and discusses his studies with him. The sharp edges between them seem to have softened.

Mingyuan accepts his half-brother's overtures and spends time with Mingzhi practising calligraphy, revising texts. A perfect combination of activities at a perfect time: he will take his first exam next month while Mingzhi sits his second.

When Mingyuan comes, Little Mouse crouches in a corner, waiting to serve them tea or help grinding ink. But most of the time he watches Mingyuan closely with his mousy gaze fixed on Mingyuan's watchful, secretive eyes, scrutinising the room or darting a warning stare at Little Mouse.

This faithful servant is glad that as days pass, his master shows no signs of wishing to share his knowledge of English with Mingyuan. Only revises his foreign readings in the small hours, alone. Mingzhi has decided from the beginning: *Not to reveal this foreign learning to anyone in the mansion.*

Like little spirits of the night they plunge in from the dark sky through the open window. Hanging in the middle of the room. Lining up. Mingzhi counts and identifies: Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Neptune, Saturn and its ring, Uranus. They take up their positions, rotating, and the moon revolves around the Earth. Then the fireball hurls itself in, blazing, lighting up the room, and the planets gravitate to it as they circle around it. Round and round and round, getting closer and closer and closer—and bang after bang they crash into the glowing flames, one after another. Explosion after explosion, blinding the eyes.

Splashing debris.

Drifting ashes.

Blank.

Mingzhi wakes at dawn with a stiff neck. He fell asleep at his desk last night, his face laid between the open pages of Father Terry's book of astronomy.

Crouching in a corner Little Mouse is still in dreamland. *He must have fallen asleep waiting to serve me.* Mingzhi feels a twinge of guilt; quietly and carefully he pulls a blanket over his loyal servant.

Streaks of morning break through the clouds that wreath the eastern hill. There are patches of red and orange and yellow against the dark blue, not fully wakened sky,

reflected on the western hill. Mingzhi watches as the dark grains gradually fade away and the hill comes into focus.

An old pine tree stands alone on a ridge.

*The cave. Charcoal. Little Sparrow.*

Scenes of his past flit by, frame by frame.

*Mama Wang. The secret world behind the curtain. Da Niang. Uncle Liwei.*

*Meifong. Meilian. Old Scholar Yan.*

Mingzhi's chest feels tight. He is desperately in need of fresh air, a walk in the country, and he does not hesitate.

As soon as Mingzhi leaves the west court, Mingyuan steps out of his room and sneaks into Mingzhi's.

*He must have something, some secrets, something from the town...*

Mingyuan searches high and low, carefully to make no noise. And there on the desk, he sees it—

*A foreign book!*

Mingyuan can't believe his luck. His heart pounds heavily, and he is about to grab it when Little Mouse stirs and murmurs: 'Go away! You little rascal!'

Panicked, Mingyuan retreats at once. Eyes still closed, Little Mouse tosses, dreamily muttering some words, then falls asleep again. Through the window the sunlight has now slanted onto his blanketed body. He feels warm, too warm. In his dream something is on fire, the room is ablaze, the flames are reaching for him; and someone is watching, laughing, the voice sounds familiar—

Little Mouse sits up, panting heavily. The blanket slips, drops to the floor. He glances around—

*Eldest Grand Young Master?!*

\*

A rare visitor to the west court, Master Chai's arrival in the early morning creates a commotion. Curious servants lock their curious gazes on their master and his escort Butler Fong, and Mingyuan who tails along. *A special mission team on a special mission!* They busily whisper among themselves as the three hurry past, and look on, awaiting the next episode.

Thump, thump, thump... Master Chai and his stick find their way to Mingzhi's room. The door is flung open.

Mingzhi, who returned from his walk just moments ago, turns pale as he remembers his book and his walking out alone.

Mingyuan rushes forward: 'Here, on the desk!'

There is rice paper, brush and the ink-set in the right hand corner, the Four Books and Five Classics in the left.

'It was there, the foreign book!' Mingyuan insists. 'He must have hidden it!'

*My half-brother.* Mingzhi heaves a sigh, his heart twitching.

Half leaning against the door Da Niang watches. Eyes locked on her son, one hand gripping the doorframe, the other clutching the hem of her sleeve. Worry creeps over her face, carving deep creases between her brows.

Glancing at her, Mingzhi feels his heart twitch again. He is worried about his mother's worry for him.

Master Chai signals Butler Fong to search. The drawers; in and out and on top of the wardrobe; under the bed, the blanket, the pillow.

The chest.

Mingzhi holds his breath.

The first drawer. Gowns are pulled out, scattered on the floor, crumpled up.

The second.

Third.

Butler Fong pulls out the last drawer. Mingzhi's heart leaps into his throat.

The contents are emptied on the floor.

Mingzhi closes his eyes, expecting a heavy blow from his grandfather.

Moments pass; nothing happens. Slowly he opens his eyes, sees only the mess of his undergarments strewn about, and the three searchers scanning the room for possible locations they might have missed. In a corner Little Mouse stoops, picking up his master's clothing. Quietly, behind Master Chai, Butler Fong and Mingyuan, he tilts his face to Mingzhi, winks and smiles a mousy smile: *Relax, I've sorted them out!*

Mingzhi breathes, relieved. But Mingyuan does not; his voice trembles, the tone shrill and flustered: 'It was here, it must be here somewhere...'

Mingyuan's sudden fear now makes him forget that the master of the house is there mastering the situation. He hurries forward, sweeps the desk, the top of the wardrobe and the chest with both hands. Brushes, paper, inkstick, inkstone and bowls, the Four Books and Five Classics fall to the floor. There is a cracking of inks and bowls, a scattering of paper.

And nothing more.

He rushes to the wardrobe—

THUMP!

Mingyuan freezes. His grandfather's face is taut, his body rigid.

Master Chai storms away without uttering a word or taking a look at Mingyuan.

An embarrassment. That he has taken a jealous boy's baseless accusation seriously. Has acted too hastily. For a man of his age, and the master of the Chai family, this is beyond a joke. He can see the maids sniggering and whispering behind the doors and windows. It is the son of that adulterous, runaway woman who has caused him this embarrassment.

*An abject liar. Like mother like son.*

The angry old man thumps his anger along his way back to the east court with his new stick, a new dragonhead, made of brass, making heavy blows to Mingyuan's heart.

Mingzhi watches Mingyuan leave the room. Head lowered, shoulders drooping, wordless. Just when he reaches the threshold, Mingyuan turns, grits his teeth and darts a fierce glare at Mingzhi.

*You better watch out!*

Mingzhi reads his half-brother's thought; a chill crawling up his spine. The brittle bridge between them breaks to pieces like the ceramic ink bowls on the floor. Irreparable.

*Another week.* He is glad that in another week he will be gone again, and he can't wait to leave. For his Little Hut. Then the city and the exam. And what comes after.

\*

The punishment for Mingyuan is no specific punishment. Put simply, he is ignored, excluded, uncared for.

Left alone.

Which is, in fact, the cruellest punishment he could have expected.

As if he is no longer part of the family, invisible, an apparition ambling through the bleak mansion, lurking in the dark. Peering in on the activities from which he is barred: family dinners, festive praying at the ancestral hall, learning his trade with Uncle Liwei, as Master Chai has instructed that Mingyuan shall not get involved in the family business.

He is not entirely forgotten, though. The sibilant whispers behind him when he passes by, the hands-on-their-mouths sniggering maids and their *looks* that say ‘you deserve this’ or ‘we’ve been waiting for this for too long.’ In them he sees CONTEMPT, which swells up inside him like a giant spider, pressing against his stomach, a heavy load that will not go away.

He breathes heavily, needing fresh air, needing space, needing to release the weight in his stomach, and he screams inside: *I’ll get it all back! Everything that belongs to me! I will!*

\*

From under the Buddha on her altar Da Niang retrieves the books Little Mouse has entrusted to her protection.

‘Be careful, son. You might not always be this lucky.’

Mingzhi nods, taking the books from his mother. There is the grey ash of joss sticks on the cover, a vague smell of the incense that his mother has been burning. He is inside them now, her room, the smoke screen, and the warm, pleasant whiffs of sandalwood.

‘But I don’t understand...’ The creases between her brows persist. ‘Why don’t you just concentrate on your studies, your exams?’

Mingzhi lowers his head and answers evasively: ‘I know, mum. Sorry for making you worry.’

*I’m sorry, mum. I can’t. I can’t leave all this new knowledge behind me.*

Mingzhi burns joss sticks and prays with his mother. As he kneels he looks up at the Buddha, His kindly face indistinct in the drifting smoke.

\*

Mingzhi has obtained his grandfather’s permission to leave three days before the second level examination for the title of *juren*. A night in Pindong Town, then a day’s journey to the provincial capital. They will spend a night there, resting and getting ready. Little Mouse is as impatient as his master, their luggage neatly packed, stored in a corner, only waiting for their departure tomorrow at daybreak.

Knowing that his master is worried about the English books, Little Mouse comes out with yet another mousy theory: The most prominent location is the most invisible one. While someone as knowledgeable as Mingzhi begins to scratch his head over this theory, Little Mouse pulls a large piece of cotton from the drawer, wraps the *illegal* books in it, then ties the bundle to his shoulders. He proceeds to pick up the bigger piece of luggage with his hands.

The bundle sits small on Little Mouse’s back, almost unnoticeable, with only a tiny strap of cotton running across his chest, while the luggage looks weighty, prominent.

Mingzhi now understands, but is still unsure.

‘Trust me, Eldest Grand Young Master.’ Little Mouse pats his chest, and Mingzhi says no more.

Because Master Chai has a relapse of rheumatism, dinner with the master is cancelled. Because Likang is busy filling up his appetite with opium, only Liwei, Da Niang and Mingzhi make it to the so-called family farewell dinner. And because of all this, the dinner is held in the north court, Liwei’s residence, for the first time. Let me be your host, he says. Da Niang lowers her eyelids and nods lightly; Mingzhi smiles and leaves with Uncle Liwei to help him make arrangements. Little Mouse follows.

Taking her time, Da Niang goes to the kitchen and checks the clay pot of bird’s nest soup she has kept simmering on a low fire, adds a few pieces of rock sugar to it, estimates the remaining time till it is ready. Reaches for the jar of rock sugar again and adds another piece.

*He likes it sweet.*

She makes a mental note to remind Mingzhi to leave room in his belly for the nutritious soup, as she stirs the contents once more before leaving.

\*

The north court is quiet, even quieter than the west. So when Liwei proposes a toast, his voice echoes in his living room, loud against the usual silence of a widower’s residence. Within seconds the room has suddenly come alive. Mingzhi holds up his wine in response to his uncle’s call. Da Niang makes an unsuccessful attempt to refuse the liquor. There is laughter, raised voices and intimate exchanges between mother and son and uncle.

For the first time Mingzhi sees his mother drain a cupful of wine. Her face flushes pink-red in the candlelight. And her eyes gleam, bright, watery.

*She is beautiful, my mother.*

Mingzhi keeps staring. And if he is paying enough attention, he will notice another pair of gawking eyes.

Uncle Liwei.

Da Niang has certainly noticed, and lowers her eyelids again as she says: ‘Can we have our dinner now?’

The maid brings in the dishes Uncle Liwei has ordered.

*Salted radish omelette!*

Spotting the plateful of it, Mingzhi smiles like a child.

‘I can’t believe my luck! It’s my favourite, Uncle Liwei!’

‘I...’ His uncle hesitates. ‘Is it? What a coincidence!’

Smiling to himself, his uncle glances up, catches a corner of Da Niang’s smiling eyes.

\*

Certainly the west court is quieter than the north tonight, especially when most of the maids have retreated to their residences.

In the darkness, a door creaks open, a shadow darts in. And out, a moment later.

\*

Red. The couplets, the lanterns, the candles, the fireworks. Smiles on all faces: Master Chai’s turns to joyous laughter, loud in the quiet ancestral hall; Likang’s with a wide, upturned mouth, an exaggerated expression of his elation; Liwei’s amiable, warm,

encouraging; Da Niang's diffident, gentle, but Mingzhi also sees contentment in her eyes. The pride of a mother for her son's success.

*Why is mother in the ancestral hall?*

Mingzhi's question is left unanswered when the men begin to toast him, again and again, and Mingzhi drains one cup after another.

'It's your day,' they say.

*Yes, I'm a juren, I'm getting my Mandarin post!*

Emptying his wine he feels the liquid burn all the way through his tongue, his throat, his stomach. There it stirs, boiling, seething, pressing upwards—

Mingzhi wakes in the darkness of midnight. He curls up and holds his stomach tight with both hands but the acute pain does not ease. As if the intestines have twisted, jumbled up, entangled. And his head is cracking open. He moans.

'What's wrong, Eldest Grand Young Master?'

Little Mouse rises from his corner, lights the candle, and is shocked to see Mingzhi's sallow, crumpled face. He pours him a cup of warm water. Mingzhi takes a sip, tries to swallow it, then something forces it up into his throat. Sour, sickening, comes rushing up... He vomits. Little Mouse fumbles for the spittoon under the bed and holds it for Mingzhi.

The pain comes in fits and starts, like washing being wrung, tightening and loosening. Pain and ease. Pain. Ease. Pain. Ease. And in between, he vomits again and again. First the dinner he has eaten earlier that evening: the yellow, milky mess of salted radish omelette, a dark pool of braised chicken and Chinese mushrooms; then yellowish fluid, thick and sticky, and later watery.

*Never been like this before.*

Little Mouse scratches his head: *What should I do? What can I do? I have to do something!*

He puts down the spittoon and rushes out before Mingzhi can stop him. He calls for Da Niang as he hammers on her door, loud in the midnight silence, waking not only her but almost the whole mansion.

\*

The doctor from Pindong Town feels Mingzhi's pulse and diagnoses: an imbalance of *yin* and *yang* in Mingzhi's intestines and stomach caused by contamination, which in turn causes imbalances in the circulations of *qi* and blood. He concludes that Mingzhi must have been going to bed at odd hours, and is suffering from not enough sleep.

Master Chai listens closely as the doctor suggests: the patient is to consume a herbal remedy as prescribed, and rest while taking other nutrition to help restore both *qi* and blood.

So the decision is made: Mingzhi will stay at home for another month.

'No!'

Mingzhi struggles to sit up, and in a fluster grabs the bundle by his bedside.

'I have to go, I have to sit the exam!'

Plunk!

The bundle falls open. Copies of books scatter across the floor.

'What are these?'

Little Mouse scurries forward but Master Chai has picked one up. Little Mouse closes his eyes; Da Niang, sitting in a corner, turns pale. Mingzhi falls back on his bed.

The room swims before him. Master Chai's critical eyes and stern face drift about, blurring his eyes, his mind. He feels weak, a bottomless exhaustion, and he sinks into it.

Everything turns black.

Standing outside, half-hiding and peering in through the window, Mingyuan smiles. A smirk that has rediscovered its master after a long absence.

*This is an unexpected bonus.*

Thinking about Mingzhi sipping the bowl of sweet, smooth, tasty bird's nest soup last night, Mingyuan smiles again. The nutritious soup cooked with the love of Mingzhi's mother, laced with special ingredients Mingyuan has blended in with the loss of his own mother and his degraded status in the mansion.

Quietly he retreats. He has got what he hoped for, and more.

\*

Two days later when Mingzhi has stopped vomiting, Master Chai makes his grandson swear an oath to their ancestors. The boy will never again touch any foreign books from any foreign devils. The burner used for burning silver paper is conveniently employed to dispose of the forbidden texts. Mingzhi witnesses the cremation of the source of his new knowledge. He stares at the burner as the blazing flames gobble up his precious reading. The pages frill, loosen, and the heat flicks them over, the corners roll up in a red glow, which spreads fast into the rest of the pages. They turn black in seconds, crumbling into ashes.

*Will they return to their original forms in the nether world like the silver paper?*

*Will the ancestors collect and consume them? Will they too learn English?*

Mingzhi glances around at the many pictures of his ancestors, their snowy beards and stern faces, and suddenly feels absurd. This whole thing. His family.

‘HaHaHaHa! HeHeHe!’

His laughter resounds through the hall, shrill, hysterical.

‘Stop it! Shut up!’

Master Chai keeps thumping his stick but Mingzhi cannot stop, laughing his heart out as if in a trance. Uncle Liwei steps forward, feels Mingzhi’s still feverish forehead and shakes him by the shoulders. Eventually Mingzhi pauses, his bleary eyes search, find his uncle’s anxious stare, and he bursts into tears, howling as loudly as he laughed. He lays his head on Uncle Liwei’s shoulder. His uncle pats his back, soothes him and leads him away.

\*

Before dawn on the third day, Mingzhi listens as Mingyuan rises early and leaves his room, the west court, the mansion. He knows his half-brother is leaving for Pindong Town, to sit his first level examination. Alone. Without an extra night in the town prior to the exam.

*I should be taking mine too...*

Because of the delay, because the provincial level exam is held only once in three years, it will be another two years before Mingzhi can sit it.

*A long wait, far too long.*

Mingzhi’s stomach cramps, his head is aching again.

\*

In the far end of the quiet courtyard, a snail is struggling to climb up from the foot of the wall. Mingzhi squints from his window at the tiny speck, moving so slowly it seems to be motionless.

When life is reduced to only the room, studies and herbal remedies, each day goes by as slowly as the crawling snail. Every inch it moves takes a supreme effort, for one false move, one wrong judgement, may have dreadful consequences.

Yet it moves on.

\*

Late spring, and it's an unusually noisy morning. Mingzhi hears the commotion, and Little Mouse returns with the news: Mingyuan has obtained his *xiucai*.

Mingzhi is glad for his half-brother, and so is Master Chai. A third place, though not first, is good enough to let the grandfather regret his neglect of the boy. He is thrilled, for there is now a better chance of having a Mandarin in the family. *Two is always better than one*. As he clears his mind, the master recalls Meifong's death and Mingzhi's recent illness, and knows he shouldn't give up on Mingyuan.

The changes are immediate and dramatic. The thank-you prayer at the ancestral hall marks the milestone, although there wasn't a prayer for the blessings of the ancestors before his exam. Of course Mingyuan does not object. He happily plants his footsteps on the ground of the clan's most sacred place, standing tall, feeling himself surrounded by the spirits of past generations of the Chai family, to which he belongs.

Then the family dinner of celebration and farewell.

Both Mingzhi and Mingyuan will attend the school in Pindong Town.

\*

Master Chai lets Mingyuan lodge in the hostel, while Mingzhi, with Little Mouse tagging along, holds on to his Little Hut.

Mingzhi's tightened brows relax. He is glad to avoid Mingyuan's watchful eyes, to enjoy his little freedom.

'Beware of the real spy,' says Little Mouse, who is meant to be spying on Mingzhi.

\*

Mingzhi confers with Scholar Ning. He will only continue editing the journal if he can remain anonymous. His Head Teacher promises never to reveal it to Mingyuan. It is a secret between them. With other editors leaving the editorial committee, giving their busyness as an excuse, Mingzhi remains the Head Teacher's right hand man, and a thoroughly reliable one.

It is still a publication of good quality, still selling fast and read by almost everyone in the school.

Including Mingyuan, whom Mingzhi has found reading the journal on the bench under the willow tree in the front courtyard of the school. Engrossed in it. Thinking of how the result of his hard work has attracted Mingyuan and supplied him with new knowledge, Mingzhi smiles to himself, quietly enjoying his little secret.

Most of the time he does not interrupt Mingyuan, sparing himself an unfriendly stare, or a false smile if his half-brother is in a better mood. Mostly, Mingzhi prefers to walk away unnoticed, with mixed feelings.

*We're brothers.*

Still, he is happy for Mingyuan when he sees him befriend his fellow students, hanging about in a group. Knows his half-brother is not lonely, and is fitting in well. A natural communicator.

The boundary between them is defined, like unspoken rules that both of them know well and abide by. While accidental meetings at school are unavoidable, outside the school, they keep out of each other's way. Have never arranged to meet up, never interfere with one another's business.

Determined to overtake his half-brother, Mingyuan concentrates on his studies, working hard, and paying no attention to Mingzhi's doings. This, in fact, suits Mingzhi well. He is able to steal occasional Sundays off to visit Father Terry, and continues his learning of English and the modern knowledge it brings with it. He never brings home any books, though. He is more careful now, making his visits irregular, and will only stay in Father Terry's little study.

\*

When the summer issue of the journal is ready for printing, Mingzhi is surprised at how quickly time has passed.

*Six seasons, just another six seasons, Mingzhi counts on his fingers. And I must make it this time.*

## *Chapter Ten*

### **Second Level Examination, Spring 1894**

Outside the office of the examination board in the Provincial Capital, a crowd of expectant scholars gathers. Tiptoeing, peering through the open door, exchanging words. Getting more anxious as the two long, bulky strings of firecrackers hanging down the gatepost are ignited, burning and cracking away at once. Amid the ear-shattering clatters, an official sedan is carried out, led by a band of trumpet and gong, a retinue of four officials carrying enormous lotus candles, and a rear-guard of armed Officials. Showering in the whirling red paper flakes of firecrackers, swaying in the loud music.

Swarming forward, the scholars follow them all the way to the government office, their eyes fixed on the chief examiner in the sedan and the red scroll in his hands.

Which tells their fates.

Mingzhi lags behind the crowd. Little Mouse follows him closely, watching his every move. Mingzhi rubs his eyes; already red, they are now getting bleary. In front of him the growing crowd shuffles along under a tide of noises – voices raised above the shrieking trumpet and rumbling gong – that buzz in his ears. But Mingzhi hears something more: the pounding of his heart and the beating of his pulse, loud against the silence beyond the noisy crowd.

The waiting exhausts him more than the exam itself. Time has been a tiny worm inside him, wriggling, chewing at the corners of his patience and confidence, bit by bit. Chewing at his sleep, his appetite, his interest in chess, his enjoyment of country walks. As the restless worm twisted on, Mingzhi could bear it no more and steeled himself to ask for Master Chai's permission to leave for the provincial capital. To witness the announcement of the results for himself.

Mingzhi walks on. Heart pounding. Pulse beating. Sweat streaming.

The sedan stops in front of the government office. After exchanging bows with the waiting Governor, the chief examiner presents him with the scroll.

The crowd of scholars jostle forward as the scroll is pasted on the wall, struggling to get a good view of the results: between heads, over shoulders, under armpits. Craning their necks, tiptoeing, squeezing through. Some cheer, some sigh, some smile, some weep, some laugh hysterically, some burst into howling sobs, some bang their heads against the wall, some are carried off on the shoulders of others, hooraying away to celebrate their success.

'He's there.'

Little Mouse points to the crowd.

Mingyuan. Elbowing his way towards the results on the wall, flanked by two friends.

Mingzhi stays at a distance from Mingyuan, from the crowd, and waits. He is eager to find out the results for himself but nervous, too. Knows he will be unable to cope if he fails. Prefers to wait a little longer. *When no one is watching.* He stands there for what feels like ages, until the crowd begins to disperse. Until Mingyuan walks away

with his head down. Suddenly Mingyuan stops and looks around, searches, and sees Mingzhi across the street. Their eyes meet, and Mingzhi sees in his half-brother's gaze, not hate, not anger, but coldness. Unfeeling.

He shivers in the spring sunshine.

\*

Mingzhi rubs his eyes, checks again, and is certain now: He is listed 5<sup>th</sup>. One of the fifteen thousand qualified *jurens* nationwide, and ranked fifth among the less than a hundred provincial qualifiers.

Mingyuan isn't one of them.

Mingzhi now understands—that stare—and forgives his half brother.

*He must be upset.* He feels for Mingyuan, imagining him wandering the streets, alone and dejected.

\*

The public house is almost full. Successful scholars gather: toasting, congratulating, laughing and chattering excitedly.

In a corner Mingyuan throws a slice of braised pig's ear into his mouth, munches noisily and empties a cupful of wine. His gang of friends cheer, and the cup is immediately refilled.

'Who cares about the results? Let's enjoy ourselves.'

'That's right. As the proverb says, "Drink now and forget about tomorrow."'

Mingyuan raises his cup and drains it again.

'To hell with the exam!'

Another cup, and he glances around with bleary eyes: the many joyful faces surrounding him with their laughter seem to be jeering at him. He points his heavy fingers in all directions: 'To hell with them!'

His drink-sodden face flops onto the table, and he mutters, almost inaudibly: 'To hell with him...'

\*

The office of the examination board has been busy since early morning. One after another the freshly qualified *jurens* stream in to pay their respects to the chief examiner. Excitement hangs in the air of the waiting room, in the gossip of the lucky scholars about the exam, the results, even the candidates themselves.

'Look at the young man in the corner, the one in a white gown.'

'What about him?'

'I bet he's the youngest of us all.'

'He does look young. I've never known anyone to get his *juven* before 30.'

'If he is the youngest, then he must be Chai Mingzhi.'

'The one who's ranked 5th?'

'Must be him!'

'A *juven* at 20? I'm embarrassed for myself!'

'Hey, don't start that, I'm not much better than you.'

Mingzhi feels his cheeks burning, wishes he had a nook to hide in. Averting his eyes, he takes up a book and buries himself in its open pages.

It is a long wait and Mingzhi gets his turn at noon to present his two-tael red thank-you envelope.

Imperial Scholar Dai looks with admiration at the young man before him, knowing he is one of the youngest, and checks the name on the calling note. He smiles as he remembers the disqualified paper he picked up three years ago in Pindong Town.

‘I’ve read your work long before this.’

Mingzhi stares at the kindly scholar, startled, but recalls at once the rumours Little Mouse related to him. *It’s him, my saviour, the friend of Old Scholar Yan.*

Mingzhi bows in reverence, his voice clear and sincere: ‘Many thanks for taking a liking to my essays.’

Imperial Scholar Dai nods, immediately taking a liking to the writer of the essays, too.

*A well-mannered young man. He is as elegant as his prose.*

He keeps smiling, and his equally well-mannered daughter comes to his mind.

\*

‘He is home! Our *juren* is home!’

The servant who has been waiting at the main door, shouts long before Mingzhi enters the mansion. Immediately, there is the clattering of firecrackers, banging of gongs and the fluttering of red paper flakes. In seconds, all the servants of the mansion have crowded to the door, led by Liwei and Butler Fong, smiling and cheering, welcoming Mingzhi.

The news has whirled around the village in the wake of the messenger, travelling from village to village to deliver results to the qualifiers. This lucky messenger, who was here a day before Mingzhi, left the mansion with a fat red envelope after a substantial meal. And a big grin that never left his face. The best reward he ever had in his years of

service, he told the servants, said they were fortunate to work for such a generous master. *A generous master?* The servants could only smile bitterly, and watch the lucky man belch with contentment as he walked away.

Indeed the new *juren*'s grandfather is overwhelmed with pride and joy, pacing the ancestral hall, while Likang celebrates the good news with extra puffs of opium, immersed in the image of his son descending from iridescent clouds. In the west court, Da Niang chants to pay tribute to Buddha for granting her wish.

Walking through the courtyards led by Liwei and Butler Fong, Mingzhi knows what awaits him. His grandfather. The ancestral hall. The ceremony, again. And the insatiable ancestors, waiting for a big feast of braised duck, boiled chicken, whole roast pig with rice and wine. With the smell and smoke of joss sticks and the glow of candlelight.

A sudden flood of exhaustion sweeps over Mingzhi. He needs rest. A long, deep sleep.

\*

The corridor is dark and Mingzhi keeps walking, imagining the bright, wide mandarin courtroom ahead. There is light at the far end, flickering. *It's there, my destination.* He blunders on for half a mile, then a mile, another, three. Five. First scurrying, then plodding, then dragging his weary feet. But the corridor seems endless, and the walls begin to unfold themselves, narrowing in, sandwiching him. Cold and damp against his warm body, and he is locked between them, unable to move, to scream, to breathe.

There is a beam of light. A face emerges.

Mingyuan, in a mandarin costume. He closes in—

‘Huh!’

Mingzhi wakes in the darkness, panting, his nightgown clammy with sweat. Knees encircled in his folded arms, he sits thinking, realising he has not seen Mingyuan since he came home.

\*

As soon as he arrives at the mansion Mingyuan is summoned to the east court. Still thrilled with Mingzhi’s success, the grandfather is not unkind. And so Mingyuan is lucky to escape punishment for dawdling in the city, and a reprimand for failing the exam. He is to re-sit, much to his delight.

*Another two years by myself in Pindong Town.*

Mingyuan’s mind moves fast, working out his plan.

\*

Da Niang rewards Mingzhi with a sandalwood-beaded bracelet blessed by a Buddhist monk from a distant temple. Mingzhi slips it on and observes the tiny beads, threaded with love, encircling his thin wrist. He wraps the bracelet in his hand, feels the beads smooth in his palm, and brings it close to his nose, inhaling the faint scent of sandalwood. Then smiles and says thank-you to his mother.

He is now a head taller than her. Da Niang notices that Mingzhi has grown out of adolescence. She takes a closer look at him, his fine features and bright eyes under thick, clear eyebrows.

*Who will be the lucky girl?*

A suitable match from the village is impossible. As Likang cares little for anything but his opium, Master Chai will certainly be the one to make the arrangements.

And that worries her.

*How I wish his father could have a say.*

Da Niang sighs, tells herself she will pray for her son.

Lying in bed, Old Scholar Yan stares from under his heavy lids for some time before he recognises Mingzhi. Once a proud student of his.

Mingzhi kneels and kowtows, says thank-you to his old teacher. Old Scholar Yan draws a hand from under the blanket and waves wearily for him to rise. Mingzhi stays put.

‘The great master says, “Being your teacher for a day, he is your teacher for life.” And that’s what you are to me,’ Mingzhi says in reverence.

The feeble old teacher nods, grins a toothless grin with his withered lips. His hand droops in the air, a layer of wrinkled bark over shrunken twigs. Abruptly his chest heaves, and he coughs violently, his hand groping for the spittoon under the bed. Mingzhi reaches for it, holds it up for his teacher. Into it Old Scholar Yan coughs out a sticky, yellowish lump of phlegm.

Mingzhi helps his teacher to a cup of tea, and watches him take slow sips. The room is dim and stuffy with the smell of books. Aged, tattered books. There is a shelf packed with them and there are heaps on the floor and the desk, coated with dust. Inside the covers, silverfishes swim freely through the pages, happily gorging on thousands of years of ancient knowledge. Minute insects with the wisdom of the great sages. Living between the pages in a dim and stuffy room, as contented as their emaciated master.

These are the only possessions of the old scholar, who, having decided in his early years to stay in the village educating rural children, refused to take further exams and secure the post of mandarin.

*And he has given me the chance to be one.*

Something surges inside Mingzhi, something sour, sticking in his throat, nose and eyes, and he struggles to prevent it from spurting out.

*I'll visit him whenever I can,* Mingzhi promises himself, not knowing that this will be his last visit.

\*

The following week Old Scholar Yan is treated to a funeral procession led by a band of trumpets and gongs. Master Chai orders it, as he suddenly remembers to pay his respects to the respected scholar of Plum Blossom Village.

Mingzhi does not join the procession. He knows his teacher would have preferred a quiet farewell, like the life he had lived.

After the salt boat has carried away the spring harvest, Liwei spends more time with Mingzhi. *Before he leaves again.*

Uncle and nephew resume their evening walks. The nephew is keen to give his uncle news from the city, the new knowledge he has learned. The construction of railroads and new roads, the use of foreign machines in modern factories: textiles, steel mills, weapons. He tells his uncle there will be no salt boat soon.

‘Time has changed, Uncle Liwei. Even the teachings of Confucius are being reinterpreted!’

Shocked at Mingzhi’s last words, Uncle Liwei trips over an exposed root and stumbles. *The tradition shall not be changed.*

He begins to worry.

\*

Days pass, and the letter of appointment never arrives.

Not all *jurens* will get a post at the office. Mingzhi knows this well. *Am I the unlucky one?* He worries, and starts preparing for the third level exam as planned. He knows that even if he is assigned a post, he can achieve nothing much as a lower ranking Official. He needs more: needs to attain a *jinshi*, to take the palace examination. To get into the Hanlin Academy and become a member of the imperial think-tank. To advise the Emperor on the administration of the country, the drawing up of laws and policies.

But Master Chai is anxious. All he wants is a Mandarin title, regardless of its ranking. He speculates: has the messenger lost his way? Met with an accident? Have the letters or appointments been messed up? He becomes edgier as the days go by, and falls into frequent rages. His targets, needless to say, are the servants. A spilling of tea, a crease on the master's gown or a speck of dust on the table incurs a punishment. They hold their breaths, tiptoeing through the frostily silent east court, fearing that even a sneeze will get them into trouble.

They crane their necks at the doorway for the messenger to come to their rescue.

\*

In Pindong Town the messenger stops by the government office to deliver the list of newly appointed officials under Mandarin Liu's charge. Inside the wax-sealed envelope is a list of five names, written in neat *kaishu*, the regular script. CHAI MINGZHI stands out, striking the mandarin's eyes, together with his title: Reserve Official.

Mandarin Liu sits in his square, solid plum wood official chair, fiddling with his bristly chin, thinking. Moments later, he leans back, beckons his servant and orders a substantial meal for the messenger. With chicken and duck and pork, and a big pot of wine, of course.

*A treat too good to resist!* Overwhelmed, this lucky messenger stays on, enjoying the feast, and is happy to let the servant of the generous mandarin take care of the letters in his charge.

\*

Finally a letter comes from the Imperial City. Master Chai hastily tears it open. His expression changes in seconds as Liwei reads through it. First a frown, for it is not the

long awaited posting, then a grin: the fourth ranking Imperial Scholar Dai suggests a marriage between Mingzhi and his 17-year-old daughter. Should the Chai family accept this suggestion, a formal proposal including Mingzhi's birth date and time is to be submitted to Imperial Scholar Dai for consideration.

As Liwei reads on, the edges of Master Chai's lips gradually turn upwards.

*A connection with a fourth ranking mandarin!*

An opportunity too great to be missed! Immediately Master Chai urges Liwei to reply to it: a yes, naturally, and a go-between will be sent at once to present the proposal.

Liwei says hesitantly: 'Shouldn't Likang or Mingzhi be consulted first?'

'Consulted? For him to say no, like you?' Master Chai raises his voice: 'I'll make no mistakes this time. Mingzhi will do as I say!'

The reply has to be carefully and skilfully drafted. Master Chai cracks his head. A marriage proposal is for certain but there will be no wedding until Mingzhi takes his place in the office. Until he is in a position to match the bride's. A crafty old scoundrel, Master Chai knows where a fourth ranking mandarin stands, what his authority is capable of. He knows also that the members of the prestigious gentry class seek an equal match. Like the old saying, 'A bamboo door matches with a bamboo door.' A couple are only matched if their family backgrounds or social positions are equal. He understands the Imperial Scholar may have an eye for Mingzhi in view of his future, but the marriage will only be possible if their positions are levelled, and with Scholar Dai's authority, he shall see to it.

Master Chai has only to remind him.

\*

In the midst of the hustle and bustle over Mingzhi's marriage arrangements and the worrying about the official appointment, Mingyuan quietly leaves for Pindong Town when the school reopens. With a dark shadow in his face and a heavy cloud in his stomach that refuses to go away.

Determined to cheer him up, his pals drag him to the public house and order for him streaky pork, braised pig's ear and chicken feet to accompany the wine. After a few cups his stomach does lighten though his face remains gloomy. As they loiter in the street afterwards, Mingyuan feels something crawling in his veins, restless, waiting to burst out. He needs to do something. Needs to release that *something* in his veins. In the darkening evening, there is light coming through a curtained door, through which noises filter.

He heads for it, followed by his friends.

A gambling den. Shrouded in smoke and noise. Filled with crowded tables. Red-faced, sweat-streaming, chain-smoking fortune seekers throw their cards and dice and strings of cash, shout and cheer and yell and curse and spit. A picture full of noise and action, which stirs up that *something* inside Mingyuan's veins. It turns and twists and burrows, striving to burst out, to release itself.

Mingyuan ducks under the curtain, plunging himself into the smoke and noise and excitement he now desperately needs.

\*

The arrival of the professional matchmaker Mama Zhang in the mansion concludes the speculation that has been brewing for days. *There will be good news soon: an*

*engagement, after which a wedding will follow.* Excitement spices up the dull, bitter life of the servants, making them forget about their difficult master and find excuses to visit the east court. To spy for first hand information.

In the east court.

A hand on her waist, Mama Zhang claps her chest with her bamboo fan: ‘Aiya, don’t worry, Master Chai.’ Still fanning, she twists her rounded body and winks at the master. ‘I’m at your service. I’ll keep everything in order and win you a well-behaved daughter-in-law.’

She flaps her fan at Master Chai’s shoulder—Oops!—then holds it away as the stern-faced master turns his back on her.

‘No messing around here,’ Master Chai’s serious tone freezes the room. ‘Just get the job done, and you’ll be well rewarded!’

Expert in the rituals and proceedings of marriage and weddings, this garrulous and sweet-tongued middle-aged woman has been specially recruited from Pindong Town. With a mission of extreme importance: to present the marriage proposal.

A list is drafted: the proposed bridegroom’s exact date and time of birth sealed in a red envelope; a jade bracelet from among the heirlooms of the Chai family as the engagement token (should the proposal be accepted); a finely crafted marble vase for the prospective father-in-law; and for the prospective mother-in-law, a bolt of Suzhou silk. *At least that will show the Imperial Scholar we are level with him in terms of material wealth,* Master Chai thinks proudly. And red pleasing-envelopes for the servants of the prospective in-laws (to gladden their hearts and so sweeten their mouths), of course.

Nothing more, nothing less. Just enough to impress the Imperial Scholar. To demonstrate the Chai family's sincerity, prosperity and generosity.

When all is ready, the mission team, led by Mama Zhang and Butler Fong, leaves for the Imperial City on its extremely important mission. With a bundle filled with red envelopes, the jade bracelet, the marble vase, Suzhou silk and the red envelope. By the time they step out of the main door, the intelligent spies have gathered enough intelligence to heat up the mansion.

\*

Mingzhi is reading by the window when Little Mouse rushes in.

'Hey, you're going to be a bridegroom, a New Man!'

Mingzhi ignores Little Mouse's teasing. He lays down his book and stares out into the courtyard.

At the top of the old willow, two tiny, rounded sparrows are capering and chatting incessantly as they prune each other. Wings flapping; pecking busily, as if saying, 'I'm clean, you're not; I'm clean, you're not; ...'. After some moments they fly away almost simultaneously in the same direction.

Then comes a pair of dragonflies, one red, the other greenish grey, shuttling between the cascading twigs and leaves, chasing each other. Dashes of red and greenish grey flit here and there. One stops, the other freezes, and moves again only when its partner resumes its flight, before they overlap in the air. Greenish Grey on top of Red. Tail to tail, abdomen to back.

*Even a dragonfly makes its own choice.*

The morning breeze sends over whiffs of fragrance. Oleander, peony and cockscomb - his grandfather's favourite flowers, found in most of the courtyards - rich and strong, rush into Mingzhi's nostril. He sneezes, loud in the tranquil room.

Little Mouse brings his pale-faced master a kerchief, a cape to drape round his shoulders and a warm cup of tea. He thinks Mingzhi might have caught a cold in the morning chill. *No wonder scholars have always been associated with feebleness, and are called defenceless bookworms.* Little Mouse watches Mingzhi quietly sipping his tea, does not know it is his heart that is making him weak. That he misses the faint, soothing scent of jasmine, and yearns for a sniff of it.

That long lost scent of jasmine.

\*

As Master Chai has conjectured, Imperial Scholar Dai does wish for a son-in-law with an official position; however, contrary to the master's expectation, the Imperial Scholar also wants more. At least one more exam, at least a *jinshi* if not a Hanlin Academician, before the wedding can take place. *He can do more and he should.* The Imperial Scholar knows the young man's capabilities, trusts him, to such an extent that he will entrust his only daughter's future to Mingzhi.

The proposal is accepted—for, according to the fortune teller, the dates and times of the prospective couple are immaculately matched, a god-sent match—though on the condition that Mingzhi is to attain his *jinshi* as soon as possible. *It's only a matter of time, not a big problem, so long as the match is granted.* The happy grandfather keeps his promise, generously rewarding the professional matchmaker for professionally accomplishing this extremely important mission.

When Mama Zhang has delightedly twisted her bulging waist away (bulging not only with excess fat but also abundant tael), Butler Fong is finally given his chance. He relays Imperial Scholar Dai's advice: 'It would be wiser if Mingzhi did not take up the post offered to him now, but continues with his exams.'

*The post? Has Mingzhi been offered one? Where the hell is the letter of appointment then?*

Mist gathers in Master Chai's mind, and a vague speck of light glimmers through it, indistinct, but clear enough to hint of something, or someone. *Yes, someone.* And he will find out more.

\*

Mandarin Liu slumps in his chair; in his hand is a letter he has just read, now crumpled in his fist.

It's an enquiry from the Imperial Court about the recently assigned official posts, mentioning Chai Mingzhi, one of the newly appointed Reserve Officials, and questioning the delay. Mandarin Liu is reminded also, that this negligence of duty has been noted, and that he is to call Mingzhi in with immediate effect.

*All right. A Reserve Official can be on reserve forever. Let's see how much patience you have.*

Mandarin Liu begins to work out his plan, rubbing at his ears as they itch unceasingly, and wondering who has been talking about him behind his back. If the mandarin were smart enough he would get the answer—

Master Chai. His long-term foe, the shadow glued to his back that he can never shake off. Who has been cursing him incessantly from Chai Mansion.

\*

‘Damn the cunning fox! Damn it!’

Master Chai keeps thrusting his stick into the hard soil of the courtyard as he curses Mandarin Liu, but only manages some shallow jabs. He thrusts harder and hurts his wrists. The ground merely sinks a little, not deep enough to match the spikiest thorn that penetrates his insides.

Mandarin Liu.

The thorn that stays put in his flesh.

*Let the balls roll. Let's see how long you can hold out.*

Master Chai thinks as he makes his way back to the central court and sits himself down in his dragon chair. He is confident now. A connection with a mandarin of higher ranking has proven useful. He picks up the reply from Imperial Scholar Dai, remembering its contents, which Liwei read to him earlier. The result of a simple enquiry to the Imperial Scholar, which confirms his guess: Mandarin Liu has sabotaged Mingzhi's appointment. Master Chai would have been more delighted had he known that with his letter also, the alarm has been raised. Mandarin Liu is now marked, under observation.

Nor does the old man doubt that it won't take long for Mandarin Liu to find out that Master Chai is behind all this.

\*

An hour passes, then two. Three. Mingzhi sits in the silence of the empty waiting room, questioning himself, regretting coming. But he realises that he has no right to regret since it was never his choice to be there. He glances around for what seems to be the

hundredth time. On the wall above him hangs a horizontal board inscribed with

*Gongzheng Bu'a:*

**Fair and Just**

Words of praise for a government official. For Mandarin Liu.

Mingzhi stares at the words, the strokes that form the words. Clear gold against a glossy black board: big, bright and shiny. So hard and long he stares at them that the strokes seem to be detaching themselves, drifting about, making faces at him.

Reconstructing themselves into *Bu Gongzheng'a:*

**Unfair, Unjust**

Bigger, brighter, shinier.

A sudden whiff of jasmine comes through. A glimpse of silky light green flits through the door. Mingzhi rushes out of the room. At the end of the corridor the hem of a long dress disappears round a corner.

From the other end a servant approaches and takes Mingzhi to Mandarin Liu.

\*

Master Chai rages again: Mingzhi has been sent home without getting a post. He is to wait until a suitable position arises, according to Mandarin Liu.

Mingzhi quietly retreats as Master Chai hurls his cup to the floor, shouts for the maid to get him a fresh, warm cup of tea, and swears he will get the Imperial Scholar to see that Mingzhi gets his post.

Mingzhi shuts the door on his grandfather's rage. Standing in the courtyard the afternoon sunlight enfolds him. Warm, comfortable. He glances up. The sky is a clear, soothing blue.

*No post for me!*

He walks swiftly away, with steps as light as his heart, leaving behind him the long wait the day before at the government office in Pindong Town and the sarcasm behind Mandarin Liu's smiling facemask. The fake sigh when the mandarin said that there wasn't a position, and assured Mingzhi that it won't be a long wait.

*I don't mind waiting, actually.*

The same rare smile that puzzled Mandarin Liu on their meeting returns to Mingzhi's face.

\*

The night is gradually coming to an end, but not the game. The pieces make slow progress. Between moves there are long pauses for talk and thought. And tea to refresh the players' minds.

'You have to be firm,' Uncle Liwei fills Mingzhi's cup. 'And stick to your decision.'

*What about you, Uncle? Don't you have your own decision to make?*

Questions linger in Mingzhi's mind but are unable to find their way out.

Candlelight makes a sharp contrast between Uncle Liwei's black and white hair; casts shadows in the creases on his forehead, between his eyebrows, at the outer edges of his eyes, beneath his cheekbones.

Mingzhi inhales deeply, then breathes out, long and deep. His chest feels clearer, lighter.

*No, I won't spend my life here.*

He makes a swift move, flies his Officer across the enemy's boundary and sets him down with a loud thud. Uncle Liwei darts a puzzled glance at Mingzhi. On the beam above a frightened lizard drops its tail as it flits past.

A headless, bodiless tail flaps on the ground. Fast at first, then slow, then motionless. Its master has freed itself, and doesn't turn back for a second look.

\*

That same night in Pindong Town, Mingyuan shouts and cheers and curses in the gambling den. Eyes follow the dice; ears pricked for their rattling.

Red-faced.

Sweat streaming.

Voices hoarse.

Little Mouse opens the door. Everything is as before: the desk, the bookshelf, the wardrobe, the bed. The horizontal writing on the wall above the desk:

**Little Hut of Leaping Fishes**

*Back again, to my Taohua Yuan.*

Mingzhi notices the now yellowish paper, its flapping edges and fading ink. Immediately he takes out his four treasures for calligraphic writing: inkstick, inkstone, brushes and paper. Little Mouse grinds a bowl full of ink; Mingzhi smoothes a large scroll of rice paper, picks up the biggest brush and rewrites the name of his home. Bolder, firmer and bigger this time. More prominent on the whitewashed wall.

He is glad to be back, a result of his future father-in-law's influence on his grandfather, insisting that Mingzhi should concentrate on the third level exam rather than wasting time on a minor post. Master Chai's request to put pressure on Mandarin Liu has been denied.

For certain, a scholar is more sympathetic with his own kind. More understanding. But Mingzhi is unsure about the marriage, the bride-to-be he has never met.

He tries to keep his mind on his studies. *It might not happen in the end*, he tries to convince himself.

At night, the sounds of splashing fishes soothe him as he immerses himself in his Four Books and Five Classics. And sometimes, whiffs of jasmine too, faint on the night breeze. They refresh him, keeping him awake, clearing his mind.

\*

Mingyuan feels his pockets. Empty. Gone, his school fees and rent.

*I have to win them back! I will win them back!*

Hands rubbing, eyes peering through the crowd at the busy table, he wishes he had the money to place more bets.

‘Need some cash, Young Master?’ A middle-aged man approaches. *Ying Su*, Uncle Eagle. Mingyuan recognises him, a regular here though he is rarely seen gambling, only walking about with his sharp eyes staring like an eagle targeting his prey. Or conferring quietly with gamblers in dark corners. And now Uncle Eagle fixes his gaze on the piece of jade attached to the belt tassel hanging down from Mingyuan’s waist. ‘I can get you some.’

Mingyuan follows him to a table in a corner, where Uncle Eagle writes him a contract: Mingyuan is to pawn the jade for 10 taels.

‘It’s worth more than that!’

Uncle Eagle holds out 10 pieces of silver in his palm: ‘Well, do you want it or not?’

Mingyuan stares at the silver.

*Come on, Mingyuan, luck is waiting for you...* From the crowd-surrounded table the God of Gambling is calling. Without a word Mingyuan signs the paper and grabs the money, hurries to answer that heavenly call.

\*

Sunday afternoon and Father Terry's study is cosy. Mingzhi listens as his teacher reads from an outdated *Prince of Wales Island Gazette*. The 'Prince of Wales Island' refers to Penang, a small island in the Straits of Malacca, somewhere in the southeast, Father Terry explains. It is one of the Straits Settlements – Penang, Malacca and Singapore - the three cities in that region under direct control of the British Empire.

*The British Empire?*

Mingzhi's eyes open wide. In his mind, as in that of the general population, there is only one empire: the Qing, and it is the centre of the world.

Eager to know more, he urges Father Terry to read on.

The news reports carry nothing but the arrival of the new official so-and-so in the Malay states, the setting up of new schools by the British colonists, the activities of missionaries, the trading of pepper, cocoa, rubber and forest produce.

Mingzhi pictures a land covered in forests, rubber estates, cocoa and pepper plantations. Swarthy, naked, short but well-built indigenous people trudging bare-foot through the rainforest. Running streams, splashing waterfalls. Birdsong under the clear blue sky.

The afternoon passes.

And there are more Sunday afternoons to come, more news awaiting Mingzhi as he waits for spring. The next exam.

\*

The *Prince of Wales Island Gazette* does not report on the factories mushrooming in the north, in the Land of the Dragon. Nor will it, later, show any interest in covering the

trampling of the dwarf ghosts, the Japanese, on the face of that so-called Centre of the World, treading over the Chinese-occupied peninsula of Korea. And the crumbling of the reformation led by the intellectuals, which Mingzhi will soon witness for himself.

## *Chapter Eleven*

### **Third Level Examination, Spring 1895**

In the Chai Mansion, the ancestral hall is warm and smoky. Candles have been lit and joss sticks burnt for seven days and nights.

‘Never stop unless I order it.’ Master Chai drops his words after praying to the ancestors for their blessing. Mingzhi, their hopeful descendant, the would-be pride-of-the-Chai, is now sitting his exam in the Imperial City.

It is smoky in Da Niang’s room, too. Peering in through the window, Liwei finds a smoke-shrouded body kneeling in front of the altar and hears the soft chants of sutra. Eyes closed, Da Niang sees Mingzhi in her mind’s eye: writing incessantly, sweating, biting his lip. She keeps her fingers on her sandalwood rosary, trying to count the images away but feeling as if she is counting the words her son is writing. She frowns. Her fingers move faster and her arms grow tense, bringing the rosary closer to her face. The soothing smell of sandalwood reminds her of the bracelet she gave Mingzhi, made from the same beads. It is now clasped round her son’s wrist. She inhales, taking in the smell, and goes on chanting.

There is a sound of coughing. Liwei springs away from the window. Likang’s asthmatic cough has become a permanent feature of the west court, and is becoming more

frequent, more ferocious. Liwei sighs. *If only he would give up opium.* He shakes his head, feeling absurd, as he is just leaving for the fields.

The poppy fields.

\*

In another smoky place in Pindong Town, a dispirited Mingyuan puts down a jade pendant from his estranged mother's collection and signs yet another pawn-deal with Uncle Eagle.

The dim light of the gambling den casts a shadow over Uncle Eagle's hooked beak and the elated smile beneath. As he watches Mingyuan approach the tables, his shrewd eagle mind moves fast, guessing at the next possible valuable Mingyuan will bring, and its value.

His smile widens.

At a table, the handful of cash he now has straightens Mingyuan's back. The desire to win lurches into the dice, luring him with seductive smiles: *Come get me. Come get me.*

He plunges forward.

*Here, I'm all yours.*

\*

In the examination hall in the Imperial City, answer sheets are collected, counted and checked. The candidates are dismissed. Swarming out of the examination hall they gather in groups, discussing the questions and their answers. Expressing their joy, regrets or doubts, their eyebrows raised or knitted tight.

Mingzhi walks away from their excitement. His head swims in the droning of the crowd. Three tedious rounds of writing and answering questions in eight days have worn him out: brain racked, eyes strained, fingers stiffened.

Spotting his master, Little Mouse comes running and smiling, takes the calligraphy set from Mingzhi and walks beside him in silence.

Mingzhi runs his fingers over the sandalwood beads around his wrist, thinking about his mother praying for him at home.

*Another month, and I'll know my fate.*

As he walks Mingzhi stares down at the flagstones swimming under him, the ground of the ancient city of the dragon. The fine, smooth surface polished by age, by centuries of footsteps trampling across them. By generations of emperors in their dragon palanquins, their entourages, their soldiers. By mandarins of all grades, scholars and commoners. Merchants and travellers. Trotting or strutting or scurrying, scuffing away the roughness under them with every step.

With each step Mingzhi feels the hard yet smooth surface beneath the thin soles of his shoes, and recalls the proverb Old Scholar Yan passed on: ‘With patience, “an iron bar can be ground into a needle.”’ He knows he has only to wait. A month is just long enough for sightseeing in the Imperial City. This is his first trip and he should make the most of it. His pace lightens and he beckons Little Mouse, knowing that with his mousy wits he must have gathered plenty of information for a tour of the city.

\*

Morning, and in his room Mingzhi hears a commotion from the ground floor, the dining area of the public house in which he stays. There is no sign of Little Mouse. Mingzhi

walks out and joins the other guests, leaning against the banister surrounding the corridor, looking down into the dining area below. At the tables, heads shuffle, newspapers are held open, fingers point at lines on the pages. Words are exchanged, faces redden, voices are raised. Veins pulsate in straining necks.

It's *Shanghai Sheng Bao*, one of the major newspapers that carry reports from foreign journalists. Mingzhi can barely make out the title logo, and the headlines are columns of ants slithering with each movement of the hands that hold the papers. He cranes his neck, straining his eyes.

'Here you go, Eldest Grand Young Master.'

Acrid smells of ink and oil assault Mingzhi's nostrils. He sneezes. Under his nose is the *Shanghai Sheng Bao* held out by a frowning Little Mouse.

'They say the Japanese are coming. Are they?' Little Mouse does not smile. 'We won't let those Shorties step on our land, right?'

Mingzhi looks at his servant and is surprised to see worry in his face for the first time. He wishes to find words of comfort but as he reads on, the image of a hundred-thousand-strong Japanese army waiting to invade from Tianjin ties up his tongue. He doesn't wish to tell him that the army will only retreat if the treaty is signed, and with that Taiwan will be in enemy hands. He quietly folds the newspaper, hands it back to Little Mouse and returns to his room. It's time for his morning routine of calligraphic exercises.

\*

The first piece of rice paper is scrunched up, tossed in the bin. The second, too, without much writing on it. And the third. Mingzhi tries, again and again, and more papers are

discarded. For the regular script, *kaishu*, the strokes join together in one swift movement, so that the intended formal, square effect of the characters is reduced to an unrecognisable mess. Switching to *caoshu*, this supposedly forceful, rapid and cursive style of writing turns languid and weak. Lazy lines lie loosely, squinting up at him with sleepy eyes.

Scrrunch! Another piece of paper is thrown away, another victim of his unsettled heart. And the plate of ink, too, empties in seconds with every quick soak of the fine brush, the same brush that has transcribed his thoughts onto pages of excellent essays. It is now betraying him, resisting his control, as if determined to create words of its own.

Standing to one side, Little Mouse, head lowered, keeps grinding ink and peeping out at his master from under lowered lids. Waiting for his next move.

Outside, the commotion gets louder. This time it comes from the window facing the main street. The high-pitched shouting of slogans is echoed by more shouting. Mingzhi frowns. He puts down the brush.

In the street dozens of people congregate, mostly scholars. Mingzhi recognises some of them, the *jurens* from all over the country who have come for the exam and are now awaiting their results.

‘Stop the Japanese! No treaty!’

The scholars, looking feeble in their plain gowns, cry themselves hoarse. Gusts of spring breeze paste the hems of their long clothes against their legs. Their eyes are red; some are in tears. Mingzhi knows that among them are *jurens* from Taiwan, weeping for the future of their homeland.

*What do they plan to do?*

Mingzhi peers ahead. In the near distance, the Forbidden City sits quietly within its four walls. High and heavy in thick layers of stone. Keeping all noises at bay.

\*

The scholars have indeed come up with a plan: A petition, a joint statement from the *jurens*!

Mingzhi is intrigued but excited, too. Intrigued, for this is a new term in his vocabulary, and it has come alive; excited, for it is said that Liang Qichao, whose social commentaries have deeply impressed Mingzhi and made the author an idol among intellectuals, is penning the petition: A Plea to the Emperor. To be signed by the remaining *jurens* in the city.

*What will he write? What can he say to the Son of the Dragon? Will the young Emperor listen to him?*

Mingzhi yearns to read the contents, the voice of the respected Liang, of all the scholars and the people.

\*

At first he wants to find out more, and sits for long hours in the dining area at lunch and dinner, pricking up his ears, listening intently for news about the petition and the peace talks. But disappointment drives him back to his room. Only speculation and rumours spew from the spit-spattered mouths. An army that will flood the Imperial City is described. An even bigger and stronger Chinese force comprising heavily equipped naval vessels and well-trained troops seems to be looming, as the ignorant public swear their commitment to the Kingdom of the Dragon. The efforts of the reformers are dismissed.

‘With a team of four hundred Hanlin Academicians behind him,’ they say, ‘Do you think the Emperor will listen to those bookworms?’

Mingzhi decides to take his meals in his room, stops listening to hearsay and only scans the *Shanghai Sheng Bao* for the latest development.

At night, when all noises cease, Mingzhi returns to his books, trying to keep up with his scheduled studies. But on the open pages, the ancient wisdom of the great masters transform themselves into lines of question marks, big headed hooks with heavy dots. *Is there going to be war? Will I get my results in time? Are the scholars going to cause trouble? Will this affect my plan to become a Mandarin?*

He rubs his eyes and shakes his head. Reads the passages aloud but there are cynical faces between the words: ‘Yes, you feeble bookworm, get back to your books. It’s the only thing you can do.’

*Is that so?* Mingzhi thinks about the petition. It is said that the initiators are visiting all the scholars to get their endorsement. *How many have signed it? Aren’t they worried about being blacklisted? Shall I put my name down, too?*

A big headed hook with a huge final dot lunges into Mingzhi’s dream that night. Black and heavy, pressing against his heart.

\*

The men close in, each with a huge scroll in hand, holding them up high and releasing the ties. *Flap!* Giant pages filled with signatures unroll, loud in the silent darkness. Mingzhi shudders, struggling to pull himself away from the four walls of scrolls falling onto him: hands pushing, legs kicking ...

‘They’re here, Eldest Grand Young Master!’

Mingzhi wakes, heaving, his heart still pounding from the nightmare.

‘They?’ He kneads his temples, confused.

‘The scholars.’ Little Mouse helps Mingzhi dress before leading the young men in. ‘With some papers to show you.’

Mingzhi swiftly smoothes his gown as the Guangdong *jurens* enter. He looks at the group of four, at the similar looks of intelligence tinged with worry on their youthful faces, at their identical plain gowns. Mingzhi knows they are not much older than he is. *Yet they are fighting for the nation.*

*And me?*

He sits down heavily on his chair. The leader smoothes out the scrolls on the desk: the Plea to the Emperor that Mingzhi has been longing to read, and the signed sheet.

Mingzhi takes his time, going through the passages word by word. Admires the skill of Liang’s writing, the way he avoids harsh phrases and introduces a long list of suggestions for reformation: rejecting the treaty that demands reparations and secession of territory to the enemy, and instead, strengthening the armed forces, are among the priorities.

Little Mouse scratches his head, does not understand why his young master is taking so long. He pours another round of warm tea for the visitors, not understanding either why they are being so patient, as he knows they are visiting door-to-door.

The long list of signatures lies quietly before Mingzhi. Different calligraphic styles, different sizes. Unfamiliar names from regions both familiar and unknown. With

the same forceful strength against the soft paper, as forceful as their determination: pleading to uphold the nation's dignity.

*Will they be able to make a difference?* The cynical faces he has seen in the dining area appear between the characters, grimacing, mocking him. Then one stern face emerges, his grandfather's, prevailing over the rest. He reads the old man's writhing lips: *This is nothing but a convenient record for the authorities to use if they wish to take action against scapegoats.*

Mingzhi shakes his head and all the faces vanish in a blink. He sits for a long time, staring at the documents. He feels the twitching behind his temples, the dampness on his forehead and upper lips, the itching of his back. Behind him, he knows the men are watching, so is Little Mouse, waiting for his order to grind ink.

It never comes.

\*

Sitting in the open carriage Mingzhi glances around: shops and stalls, alleys and main streets, government offices and temples, the usual busy traffic and crowds. And no scholars. *Where are they? What are they doing now?* He is curious, but relieved too. After the *jurens* left yesterday, the sight of plain long gowns has begun to agitate him, making him uneasy. He thinks they know: the odd one out, the one who didn't sign.

*Maybe they have gathered enough signatures.* His heart lightens as the horses trot on, and he is glad of his decision to take the ride, to be away from Little Mouse's silent resentment. Normally chatty, Little Mouse has been quiet, but Mingzhi can read his mind, his desire to get involved generated more by mob emotion than by patriotism. *What does he know?* Mingzhi shakes his head, determined to leave the matter behind.

The weather is glorious, perfect for a walk in the outskirts. Mingzhi asks the driver to head westwards for Xiangshan, the Fragrant Mountain. Along the way, before they enter the desolate suburbs, new buildings mushroom between older blocks. Fresh golden inscriptions on black signboards gleam in the morning sun. The city has never stopped developing, he notices, as if no serious threat has ever occurred, and will never happen. *Maybe they've been over-worried. Maybe the Japanese aren't so daring. Maybe the matter has been sorted. Maybe ...*

'Never give up Taiwan! Save our homeland!'

A loud cry, piercing through all the street noises. The carriage is passing by the House of Minnan, a Taiwanese clan. At the doorstep a young scholar breaks down in tears. He is supported by his companions, about thirty of them. Each wears a long, white cotton strip of mourning round their waists, grieving in advance for the death of their homeland.

*It's really happening.*

Mingzhi sighs. His shameful list of 'maybes' is deleted, pushed out of his mind. Quietly he orders the driver to turn back and returns to the public house.

\*

Early morning, and Mingzhi is out in the street. His eyes are red from a night of tossing in bed.

'Hurry up, there's still time!' Little Mouse, yards ahead of him, beckons. Smiling, excited.

At a distance Mingzhi sees the scholars swarming out of the House of Xinhui, a clan of Guangdong. *This is the day; they're leaving!* His heart tightens. Seeing the Guangdong *juren* who approached him with the petition, he hurries forward and waves.

‘Wait for me!’

Breathless, puffing. He looks at his tremulous hands. *Please stay still when I sign my name!*

\*

It's the day for receiving public appeals, and the government office is already packed with commoners nursing petty grievances. The scholars appear, nearly two hundred of them, heading for the front door. They stare ahead with bloodshot eyes, bleary from weeping and worrying.

Tailing them, Mingzhi is thrilled to be a part of it. He remembers how he caught up with them and signed the petition. Remembers his calligraphic name - **CHAI MINGZHI** – in thick black ink that seeped through the thin paper. The last name in the long list, in humble script but strangely prominent, standing out. Like an unprepared, fresh recruit going into his first battle.

That's what he feels like now, as he follows the army of scholars towards their destination.

In the street, curious onlookers gather, exchanging speculations.

Clink-clink!

A passing carriage jerks to a halt. The driver noisily pulls the bell and curses incessantly. More carriages and carts are blocked; more ringing and swearing.

Ahead of him, Little Mouse squeezes his way forward, turning back occasionally to wave at him: smiling, eyes sparkling, brows raised. Happy to be part of it, proud of his master's last-minute involvement.

'Hey, what're you up to, blocking the traffic?' A guard shouts from the doorstep of the government house.

The cart bells ring louder, the impatient drivers boo, and the onlookers jeer. Some scholars answer, loud or low, in different voices, tones and accents. All these noises blend into an unrecognisable, dull drone, filling the air between the buildings that flank the street, amplifying in Mingzhi's ears. His head begins to feel heavy.

In front of him, the scholars march forward, the hems of their long plain gowns flapping ferociously in the northerly spring wind. A flock of inauspicious white crows.

His brows twitch, and he slows down, unsure if he should continue.

He lags further behind.

The group crowds towards the government house. Thump! The main door is shut tight in a fluster, and the guards stand in a row of four, blocking the entrance.

'Don't make trouble here! Disperse now and go home!'

One of the scholars shouts: 'We're here to submit a petition!'

The guards remain unmoved. The scholars close in, demanding admission.

'Stay where you are!' More warnings from the anxious guards, yet the crowd ignores them and shows no sign of retreating.

'Yes, keep going!'

'Knock the door down!'

'Teach them a lesson, those arrogant men!'

The on-looking crowd cheers, encouraging the scholars, waiting for a crash. *How exciting!* Already, they are bothered by the rumours about the Japanese invasion, and a wonderful free show like this is just perfect for releasing their frustration.

A scholar at the front is shoved aside, but more move forward to take his place. Angry stares confront four pairs of defensive eyes.

The air of tension hangs low, boiling up, waiting to explode—

The side door is lightly pushed open. A man walks out, wearing a gown embroidered with a white roc - a fifth-ranking official.

The noise of the crowd subsides. A scholar steps forward, holding out the scroll containing the petition.

‘Too late for this, young man,’ the official says. ‘The treaty is signed.’ He goes back in and closes the door behind him.

*Signed?*

An outburst of hysterical howls rises from the group of Taiwan *jurens*. Already, some have collapsed on the ground, beating their chests, swearing to protect their homeland. Others console them, helping them up. The crowd peers and points at them, but they are quiet now, the onlookers, leaving only sighs and whispers and the heart-tearing cries to flood the spring air.

Mingzhi quietly retreats; Little Mouse follows closely. Street after street Mingzhi walks, yet the wails of despair follow him, trembling in his ears. He quickens his pace.

*WhatcanIdo?Whatdoyouwantmetodo?*

Loud noises rumble in his head, striving to drown out the cries of sorrow. He breaks into a run.

\*

More news is circulated: the Emperor's official seal has not yet been set on the treaty, though the details have been agreed.

*There is still hope.* The scholars run about, spreading the news. More meetings are called, more *jurens* are approached. More petitions are signed, brought to the government offices, and rejected, again and again.

\*

Mingzhi moves to a quieter corner of the public house, avoiding other scholars. He spends most of the time in his room, reading and writing. Little Mouse stays with him as he has to, but Mingzhi senses that he is half-hearted. That his mind is somewhere else, in a place unknown to Mingzhi. It isn't the amount of inkstick Little Mouse has broken that bothers him, but the way he stares with faraway, anxious eyes.

He begins to worry.

\*

The street leading to the government office is busy, and the carriage in which Mingzhi and Little Mouse are riding moves slowly forward. The results are due tomorrow. Mingzhi decides to pay a visit to the government office to confirm the announcement.

There are the rumbling sounds of vehicles and hooves, approaching. Dust rising, horses neighing, people shouting. Their way is blocked and the carriage is squeezed to one side. The first cart passes by. The second follows. The third. One after another horses and carriages jostle past. The street is now at a standstill, packed with people and carriages, with more than a thousand scholars inside them.

From far in front a commotion is heard, passing swiftly among the scholars. Some speak of a fight, in which swords are raised, and there are rumours of threats to kill the demonstrators. The scholars become anxious, worried about their leaders and angry with the guards. They shout and hit the sides of the carriages. The horses rear in their traces, struggling to free themselves from the confined space. They kick and neigh and the carriages crash into one another.

Mingzhi turns pale. The carriage he sits in is jostled, jerked to one side, and he stumbles off his seat. The horse goes hysterical: shrieking, twisting, leaping. The carriage overturns and Mingzhi falls to the ground. He is now among the many unsettled hooves, the wheels of carriages, the panic-stricken footsteps of the crowd. Sees only hooves and wheels and pairs of legs from beneath the hems of long gowns that rustle in the mess of yellow dust.

‘Eldest Grand Young Master!’

He hears Little Mouse, strives to surface from the sea of people flooding over him and get to his feet.

‘Eldest Grand Young Master!’

The call now seems to come from a distance away. Mingzhi hurriedly pushes against the shoulders and chests and backs that are pushing against him, stands on tiptoe and sees only milling heads, anxious horses and upset carriages. Hears again Little Mouse’s shouts, gradually fading.

*No, come back, don't leave me!*

He pushes and squeezes, freeing himself from the trap of the crowd and dodging into an alley. He climbs up a mound and searches the faces beneath him. Still, there's no sign of Little Mouse. People begin to crowd in on him. Mingzhi turns and runs.

The hem of his long gown beats against his lean body. There are footsteps behind him, running too as if in pursuit. He speeds up, his heart beating fast, his ears burning. One alley ends, another begins, and there are wider streets. Vertical, horizontal, straight or crooked. Mingzhi has lost his bearings; not knowing where he is and without destination, he lets his trembling legs take him.

He tilts his head up, gasping for air. The spring sun falls full on his face, into his eyes. White, dazzling, blinding. He feels a throbbing behind his eyes. Everything goes dark.

Blank.

\*

'Eldest Grand Young Master!'

Little Mouse's voice seems to come from far away, sounding vague, unreal. Mingzhi's shoulders are grasped, shaken, and he opens his heavy lids. A face swims before him, familiar, coming into focus: Little Mouse's worried gaze.

Mingzhi feels a soft mattress under him and knows he is safe. He closes his eyes again, this time for a good, deep sleep.

\*

Mingzhi's letter to Uncle Liwei describes a failed demonstration by intellectual reformers. The two hundred thousand painful words of appeal are rejected once again.

Scholars from all eighteen districts of the country begin to disperse. Some strike their names from the scroll, and the final list secures less than a thousand signatures.

*Including mine.*

Mingzhi tosses in bed. The events of the day flash in snatches through his mind: the horses and people, shouting and shoving; the crash, his flight, the disorientation. His mind then moves to the petition - with his name on it. *What will they do with it? What if it really reaches the officials' hands?*

He shudders, thinking about the announcement of results tomorrow, and knowing it's too late to retract his endorsement. He pulls the blanket over his head, clutches a corner of it, squeezing it tight till his fingers hurt.

He hears his name and looks up. A man in the costume of a Mandarin stands tall before him. His face is a blur, unrecognisable. He holds up a scroll and it rolls open—

### CHAI MINGZHI

It's his name, written in gold ink, in bold, regular script, filling up the page.

*I've passed! I'm a jinshi, an Advanced Scholar!*

Mingzhi's heart races, his hand reaches out for the scroll. The man dodges him and tears the paper to pieces. Mingzhi sees his face now – Mandarin Liu! He laughs hysterically as he melts into the darkness.

Mingzhi yells: 'Wait! Give me back my result!' His blanket is kicked from the bed and he opens his eyes on a puzzled Little Mouse.

The room is light. The day is waiting.

\*

Mingzhi is about to head for the government office when the loud drumming of gongs is heard, and two messengers swagger in to the public house. In their hands is the list of successful Advanced Scholars who will sit the palace exam in ten days' time, and their official notices in red envelopes.

The scholars crowd towards them, getting impatient. One of the messengers holds up his papers. Mingzhi keeps his head down, cheeks burning, ears buzzing. A couple of names are called and there are cheers, calls of congratulation. Mingzhi's head drops lower, and—

‘Chai Mingzhi.’

Loud in his ears, drumming in his head.

He looks up. Little Mouse waves the envelope he has taken from the messenger. Smiling, whooping, approaching him.

The red colour of the envelope fills Mingzhi's eyes. The world before him swims in the red filter.

\*

Late at night. Mingzhi closes his book, thinking about the exam tomorrow. *The last one of all.* He knows that regardless of this final result, as a *jinshi*, he'll still be assigned a post. The palace exam will only determine his rank and his eligibility to become a Hanlin Academician.

*A Hanlin Academician!*

The words nearly leap to his lips, as his heart does out of his chest. With one hand over his mouth and the other on his chest, he presses them all down.

He is unsure, though. *Do I really want to be a Hanlin Academician? Or should I just be a Mandarin at a regional office that serves people directly? Maybe I won't have to marry Scholar Dai's daughter if I fail the palace exam? Maybe he would prefer a Hanlin Academician for a son-in-law?*

Questions without answers. One after another rolls over and over in Mingzhi's sea of sleep.

Or sleeplessness.

The night is short and the first streaks of dawn creep quietly up, lining the horizon. Mingzhi sits by the windowsill, gazing out through bloodshot eyes. Red and orange threads crisscross the faraway black screen, thickening, and gradually nudging away all remaining darkness. The world brightens. *It all begins from a tiny speck of light!*

Mingzhi closes his eyes and thanks the Heavenly God for the answer to the questions he has been worrying over all night. Little Mouse is calling: Mingzhi's washing water is ready.

*Such perfect timing.*

*Foreign books! So many of them!*

In a bookshop in Shanghai, locally published translated books fill a corner. Almost a hundred of them, on various subjects: astronomy, the geography and history of far off lands, western art, culture and philosophy, and more. Vastly more variety than in Father Terry's collection. Mingzhi browses the shelves: quivering fingers work along the spines, hungry eyes search for his favourites. He yearns to take them all home.

This first trip to Shanghai has proved unexpectedly fruitful. Mingzhi is glad for his decision to travel by train to Shanghai on the newly built track before heading home. He has decided to leave the Imperial City before the results of the palace exam are announced. After all, the wait is over, in a way.

*And I'll be a Mandarin!*

The blood rushes to Mingzhi's head and he hears his heartbeat, drumming in his ears. He hurriedly opens a book, buries his face in it, hiding away his daydream. There are maps, huge and detailed. The first contains a general view of oceans and continents with national boundaries, all clearly marked with strange translated names. Mingzhi notices that China is in one of the continents—Asia—and Britain and France, where Father Terry comes from, in another: Europe. There are others, too: Africa, Australia, North and South America.

*So this is the world, and China is only part of it.*

The printed page confirms Father Terry's account. The once vague images in Mingzhi's mind now become concrete. He walks his fingers on the map and explores the foreign destinations he has heard of before. *China – Yellow Sea – East China Sea – South China Sea – Straits of Malacca - Malacca*. Imagines also, the route Father Terry has taken: *England – North Atlantic Sea – Gulf of Guinea – Mozambique Channel – Arabian Sea - Indian Ocean – Bay of Bengal - Straits of Malacca – South China Sea – China*. Such a long journey!

His mind travels with his fingers, and he sees the tropics, coconut trees and monkeys, the forests and mountains. Hears birds singing, beasts howling, as they fight each other noisily—

'Let go of me! It wasn't me!'

*Little Mouse!*

On the doorstep Little Mouse's arms have been pinned behind his back by the shop owner. Little Mouse struggles to free himself, but the shop owner, a strong six-footer, tightens his grip.

'Give him back his money!'

'I didn't take it!'

'Who else could it be? You're the only person here!'

'Maybe it really wasn't him.'

An awkward accent, a white man, and Mingzhi can't tell his age from his bearded face. In his limited Mandarin he is trying to persuade the shop owner to free Little Mouse. His tongue gets tied in knots, and English words begin to creep in. The shop owner stares at him in puzzlement, then squeezes Little Mouse harder, thinking his

precious white customer is angry. Mingzhi approaches them, speaking slowly, assures them of Little Mouse's innocence, and his own willingness to compensate for the loss. The white man anxiously shakes his head and gestures.

'No, no, no, you don't have to!' His red head keeps shaking, his palms and fingers sway and flash before Mingzhi's eyes. Mingzhi smiles. *What an earnest man he is!*

The shop owner reluctantly releases Little Mouse, gives him a glare and is glared at in his turn. He moves to the counter and steps on something, so that his foot twists and he staggers backwards, banging against the counter. Little Mouse smiles a that's-the-result-of-what-you've-done-to-me smile, but goes to help him up.

On the floor near the counter lies the cause of the trouble, a small bundle the size of a fist wrapped in a white kerchief.

'There it is!' The white man picks it up and points to a corner of the kerchief. M GRAY. Embroidered in blue thread.

'My name,' his finger pokes at the M. 'Martin. Martin Gray.'

Mingzhi nods and watches Martin pay for his purchase, a scroll of Chinese landscape painting.

Once outside the shop Mingzhi says quietly, in English: 'Thank you ... for trusting me.'

He hears his own voice: tremulous, unnatural, and feels his cheeks burning.

A loud slap on his shoulder.

'You speak English!' Martin pats Mingzhi's shoulder again. 'I'm glad! I'm so glad!'

He laughs, says he is new in town, and has been trying to learn Mandarin from Chinese sailors on the journey from the west. But most of them were illiterate, former peasants driven aboard by poverty. Their spoken languages were tinged with strong local dialects from different regions, and they would only laugh quietly at his pronunciation. Now in Shanghai he feels lost, though he gets privileges in the British Territory.

*He's come from far away, like Father Terry!*

Mingzhi remembers the illustrations in Father Terry's book, and the world map he has just studied. He admires Martin: a traveller from across the sea. *How exciting!* Mingzhi's earlier excitement about travelling from Beijing to Shanghai by train now seems nothing in comparison with Martin's journey on an ocean steamer.

Little Mouse is sent to scout for information about the city. Mingzhi chooses a quiet corner in the teahouse, avoiding conspicuous stares. He shares a pot of *o-long* with his new friend and explains the characteristics and properties of a few common and prominent types of tea: *o-long* emulsifies fat, *pu'er* cleans up the digestive channel and *longjing* is simply refreshing. Interested, Martin asks occasional questions, orders a couple to taste the difference.

Determined to practise his English, Mingzhi speaks slowly, selects the right words and phrases, and forms articulate sentences. Martin struggles with his halting Mandarin, mingling it with his own language from time to time. Soon they are able to understand each other's accents, pronunciation and gestures.

Martin is quickly bored by the tediousness of preparing tea, and impatient with taking small sips from a tiny cup. He beckons the waiter for a bigger cup and gulps his

tea at will. Mingzhi laughs at Martin's bulging cheeks, but the Englishman is unmoved, savouring his mouthful of tea, the sweet aftertaste of *pu'er*.

They study the painting Martin has bought, a pond with scattered lotus floating on the surface. Mingzhi reads the title aloud: 'Pingshui Xiangfeng.'

'Literally, it means the meeting of lotus with the water it lives in,' he explains. 'A chance encounter...'

'Like you and I,' Martin laughs. He runs his fingers over the calligraphic writings, amazed by the meanings contained in only four characters. He holds an imaginary brush between his fingers and writes in the air, imitating the words on the painting. His arm swings in big movements. Every stroke is accomplished with a whizzing sound as of strength. Mingzhi's jaw begins to hurt. *Never have I laughed so much!* All strokes are completed and Martin sighs, wishing he could really write. He urges Mingzhi to be his teacher. Mingzhi can only smile, knowing that this is unlikely. He will return home soon. *And a different life will begin.* For seconds his mind turns blank, unable to imagine what lies ahead.

'Stop frowning! You do it all the time, even when you laugh.'

*Do I?* Mingzhi hurriedly feels his eyebrows with his fingers. Martin's wicked laughter rings in his ears. Mingzhi drops his hand, gives his playful friend a stare but bursts into laughter, too.

There are whispers and pointing fingers, and curious stares are darted at this supposed-to-be quiet corner of the teahouse. There a black and a red head sway in unison, dark eyes meeting amber ones, bodies shaking, their laughter, one shy and soft,

the other bold and loud, blending into an awkward concoction. Unstoppable.

Unstoppable.

Little Mouse returns to their rescue. With a sketch of the city in hand and a few destinations in mind, they set off.

\*

Days pass. They trudge through the main streets and side alleys, gardens and temples, the ports and shores of Shanghai. Talking, admiring the views, learning each other's language. Their walks are filled with Martin's careless laughter and blunt questions, and Mingzhi's gentle and in-depth explanations of food and drink, people and clothes, buildings and the craftwork on their eaves, doorposts and the signboards above the doors.

Detailed answers in response to Martin's unquenchable curiosity.

\*

Midday, and they are having lunch in a public house. Martin struggles to pick up a piece of braised chicken wing with his chopsticks.

'Why do people here—why do you wear a plait and half-shave your head?'

Mingzhi nearly coughs out his mouthful of rice. He glances around. No stares, whispers or pointing fingers. And he sighs with relief, realising that Martin has been speaking in English.

'Do you like wearing your hair this way? It must be unpleasant!'

Mingzhi puts his finger on his lips and *s/hs* Martin to keep quiet.

'I don't understand. Why do you wear it if you don't like it? Might as well cut it off!' Martin thumps down the chopsticks and picks up the chicken wing with his hand.

Watching Martin, Mingzhi thinks about his words and their implicit meaning: *You don't have to do anything against your will.*

*Don't I?*

*Don't we?*

Around him, his fellow countrymen, with their plaits hanging down their backs or round their necks, are eating and chatting and laughing. Too busy even to think about the question. Mingzhi's own bundle of hair suddenly feels heavy behind him, dragging at the back of his head like a boulder. Pulling him down. All the way.

Down.

\*

Mingzhi begins to learn about Martin by snatches. That his friend has just arrived. That he works for a British trading company, sourcing merchandise for trade. That his parents – both teachers – want him to be a teacher, too, if not a professor, and resent him for his choice of career. For travelling so far.

'Yet you came?'

'It's my choice. Whatever I do, they respect my decision.'

Mingzhi stares at his friend, not understanding. He imagines his grandfather's response if he were to say no to his arrangements.

'Travel is my aim. Work is only an excuse.' Martin's laughter echoes in the narrow alley. 'I like to feel free, to be able to travel to different places. Places I've never been before. This job is good though, allowing me to go from one place to another.'

*How straightforward he is.* Mingzhi is puzzled. Never has he met anyone who would say so unreservedly what they feel. *Not Mother, not Uncle Liwei, and certainly not Grandpa.*

‘What about you? What’re you going to do?’

Mingzhi hesitates, says he wishes to be a mandarin.

‘A mandarin? With the feather-tailed hat and heavy gown? Are you sure?’

*Am I sure?* The question is too sudden and surprising. Mingzhi’s mind wanders, as do his legs, treading blindly on the uneven ground.

‘Ouch!’ He steps in a puddle and loses his footing.

Clink! Clink!

‘Look out!’

Martin pulls Mingzhi up to one side, escaping a bicycle that has just blundered past. The rider turns and glares at him, cursing and swearing over his shoulder. His back pinned to the wall, Mingzhi sees Martin’s body before him, fencing him from the glare and the curses. And the near accident, of course. Tall and strong and familiar. Like Uncle Liwei’s stout leg in Mingzhi’s childhood incident with the snake.

\*

‘There’s a French Territory, too,’ Little Mouse grumbles. ‘There’re places I’m not allowed in. You, too. Us, Chinese.’

Mingzhi notices a mixture of confusion and anger in Little Mouse’s eyes.

‘It’s our country, our land, isn’t it?’

For the first time Mingzhi feels tongue-tied in front of his servant.

\*

A week passes. The new friends say their goodbyes: Martin stays in Shanghai, as he must report to work the next day, while Mingzhi must go back to Plum Blossom Village.

Martin's waving figure, tall and lean, shrinks in the yellow dust as Mingzhi's carriage pulls away. Mingzhi knows it is impossible for them to meet again. He stares at the distant speck of movement, recalls their first meeting, the laughter they shared, the places they visited together, the painting they both admired. Thinks about the lotus and the water, the sentence cut short by Martin: a chance encounter... which usually doesn't last long. Eventually, the lotus has to leave the pond, the water it lives in.

*Yes, like you and me.*

In the yellow dust, he sees also the eyes of his long lost friend, Little Sparrow: empty, helpless, staring at him.

*My friends.*

His stomach feels sour, and he knows this journey home will be unbearably long.

\*

Home. A feast is ready. Strings of firecrackers are hung by the doorpost. More candles and joss sticks are lit in the ancestral hall. And in the central hall, there is a scroll with an imperial stamp laid on a piece of yellow silk on a silver tray. Along with the costume that comes with it: silky green, embroidered with a quail in the middle, front and back. The symbol of an eighth-ranking official.

All awaiting the new mandarin.

## Chapter Twelve

Weeds have grown wild around Old Scholar Yan's grave. Creepers crawl high, declaring their territory over the top of the tombstone. *My teacher.* Mingzhi feels a twinge of guilt. *A man of his qualities shouldn't be left unattended.* He makes a mental note: to arrange for a quarterly clean-up once he is in office.

With bare hands he and Little Mouse struggle to pull off the grass and vines. Hard soil loosens. Earthworms spring up from their broken homes. Ants run wild, disoriented. Mingzhi feels sorry for them, tries to avoid their paths.

*Go somewhere else. Find a better place for your new home.*

Little Mouse sets up white candles and burns silver paper. Hungry flames gobble up the comfort-money like the money-crazed Cowhead and Horseface guards in the netherworld. Flakes of soot and ash drift languidly in the solemn air. *Hope this will buy you a better afterlife.*

Mingzhi lights joss sticks, pours out a cup full of Old Scholar Yan's favourite *huadiao*.

*To my teacher.*

He pours the wine over the grave, then kowtows on all fours. On the ground before him, an ant stops at the dark patch of wet soil, as if sipping at it, slowly,

gracefully. As though the wine was meant for it and it is enjoying the treat. Mingzhi watches until the little ant has had enough and walks away. He wonders if it is belching, as Old Scholar Yan always did after drinking wine.

\*

Master Chai has more important things to do than visit Old Scholar Yan's grave. He orders Butler Fong to make arrangements: Mingzhi's government office in Lixing Town is to be more comfortable than the district office at Pindong Town, if not bigger, and the signboard more prominent.

*Still a rank lower than Mandarin Liu.* The old man's chest tightens. He thinks his grandson should have done better, should have tipped the provincial post if not become a Hanlin Academician. Should have been a higher-ranking official than Mandarin Liu. He doesn't understand how Mingzhi could have failed his palace exam. *Did I not pray hard enough?* He scratches his head, picks his ears, yet no answer emerges either way.

*Anyway, a Mandarin is still a Mandarin. And the first from Plum Blossom Village!* Chin up, back straightened, Master Chai grins, smoothing his goatee. Feeling proud. He thinks about the official authority bestowed on his grandson as he gazes at the flying dragons on the pillars, their bloody, wide-open mouths. So wide, as if they're waiting for something – or someone – to wolf down.

The old brain moves fast, so preoccupied that it loses its usual capacity for detecting even the slightest of changes in the Mansion. First a pair of exquisitely crafted ivory chopsticks is gone unnoticed. Then another. And another. Later a jade wine cup.

As though they have grown tired of hiding in the cabinet and decided to sneak out. For a walk. A breath of fresh air. And then decided not to return.

\*

Evening. Da Niang has been busy for hours, deciding on the design, cutting out materials, sewing the pieces together to make a cotton-filled cushion. She has her eyes on the needlework in her hands; yet her mind is in the east court. The farewell dinner for Mingzhi, with all the Chai men. *My son. He'll be gone tomorrow.* There is *something* wandering inside her. She gulps a mouthful of *longjing*, trying to press the strange feeling down but is surprised to find the tea bitter. She shakes the cup lightly and takes a closer look. Light, sodden leaves drift in the pale yellow-green water, like the *something* inside her. Not coming up, not settling down, just hanging there, right in the pit of her stomach.

*I should be happy.* She shakes her head, dabs at the wet corners of her eyes with her sleeves. Remembers how she has been praying for this day, for her son to escape the dark shadow brooding over the Mansion. The shadow that she knows she will never be able to shake off. *But he will, my son.* She stares at the dark blue sky outside the open window, and her mind follows the clump of heavy clouds that is shifting eastwards.

Over to the east court.

The central hall.

The opening toast by the Master of the House breaks the awkward silence. In high spirits, Master Chai downs his wine and asks for more. A Mandarin without a wife doesn't seem proper, he says, assuring Mingzhi he will make all the necessary arrangements. Mingzhi keeps his head low and fiddles with the big chicken drumstick in

his bowl, deposited there by Likang. Eager to get back to his comforting puffs-for-dessert, Likang wolfs his food in quick, large bites, and chokes, coughing incessantly. Liwei massages his brother's chest, while Master Chai frowns, annoyed at Likang for spoiling the dinner. The old man's face turns rigid, and the familiar awkward silence slips back through the creases between his eyebrows, sitting triumphantly on the Chai men of three generations.

Mingzhi goes to pour a cup of tea for his father, holding it for Likang as he takes small sips. Uncle Liwei pats Mingzhi's shoulder, a silent approval. Mingzhi darts a look of thank-you in return. He wishes they were playing a game of chess this evening instead. An endless game. He and his uncle.

Mingyuan, who has been quiet, seizes his opportunity, proposing a toast to Mingzhi, congratulating him. Surprised, Mingzhi raises his cup, thinking that his half-brother has finally decided to make it up. Mingyuan has been behaving unusually well lately: coming home more often, helping his grandfather and Uncle Liwei with their paperwork. Because Liwei indeed needs a hand, and because Mingyuan is meticulous with numbers, the earlier prohibition is forgotten. They let him. Beginning with simple entries of debt repayments, rental and harvest revenues, Mingyuan works to gain Liwei's appreciation. A relief to his uncle's busy routine.

And now, Mingyuan has helped to lighten up this evening. There is a rare smile on Mingzhi's face and his grandfather notices. He smiles, too, admiring the harmonious picture before him. His grandsons: one calm and steady, the other quick-witted. He smooths his goatee, sitting back, feeling pleased. *A night like this should be celebrated with good wine.* He waves the maid for an urn of hundred-year-old wine from the larder.

*We'll drink together, grandfather, sons and grandsons.*

Under the heavy cloud that shadows the Mansion.

In Pindong Town, however, the moon hangs high in the clear sky. Mandarin Liu relaxes in his bed and is surprised at its unusual softness and warmth.

*Only an eighth-ranking official, he snorts, in a town and district smaller than Pindong!* His worries ebb away, and he stacks up his pillow, willing a good night's sleep which he has missed since the spring exam began. *Not any more.* He smiles in his dreams, in which piles of silver come rumbling on to his doorstep. White, flashing. Blinding him to the dark specks of shadow looming beyond.

\*

From the moving carriage Mingzhi turns to the waving crowd in front of the Mansion. He cranes his neck and finds his mother among the many heads, knows she is tiptoeing on her bound feet to catch a glimpse of him. Mingzhi notices her pale face, contracted brows, tear-filled eyes. Still, she is smiling. *Mother, my only worry.* He grasps the sides of his seat and his fingers sink into the soft cushion Da Niang has sewn overnight for his long trip to Lixing Town. He remembers his mother's sunken eyes as she pressed the cushion into his hands this morning.

'This will make your journey more comfortable.' Da Niang whisked off stray threads from the patchwork cover, whispered for her son to take care.

'You've packed your chess set to take with you, I suppose.' She hesitated. Mingzhi nodded, watching her tremulous lips. Waiting.

'Remember the proverb?'

‘*Yinshui Siyuan?* I know, mum. I’ll never forget my roots.’

‘You ... keep it in mind, son. Keep it in your mind, no matter where you are, no matter what happens.’

Thinking back, Mingzhi feels Da Niang might have had more to tell him. He now regrets not spending more time with her. *Next time, mum, we’ll make it up.* Mingzhi waves at the now blurred figures and strains his eyes, but Da Niang is no longer in sight.

The Mansion keeps shrinking as the horses trot ahead. Mingzhi watches as the crowd withdraws and the main door closes.

Thump.

Like the end of a chapter.

Mingzhi rights his posture, eyes staring straight ahead, his back turned on the confining walls of his early years. Soon the carriage will ride past the fields of poppies he hates, the river that transports the blight to other lands, and then he will be out of the valley.

Out of Plum Blossom Village.

Matchmaker Mama Zhang is sent again to Imperial Scholar Dai, this time to propose a date for the Big Day.

Days pass. Weeks. A month. Mama Zhang returns, head bowed, shamefaced, quiet. An unsuccessful mission, a regrettable blot on her professional life as a go-between: she didn't even get to see the Imperial Scholar. The Imperial City is boiling with news about the Japanese, she says. The greedy dwarves. Stretching their tentacles out to the Heavenly Son's head, forcing a treaty for Liaodong peninsula in Southern Manchuria and Taiwan. And now, the Taiwanese have declared their independence and sworn to fight the invaders. The Forbidden City is locked in days and nights of emergency meetings. The Emperor and his ministers and all the Hanlin Academicians, including Scholar Dai.

Finding her scapegoat, Mama Zhang regains her voice, blames the chaos for her failed task. Blames Emperor Meiji from the Land of the Rising Sun, of course, and even the Russians, Germany and France, who have intervened, trying to stop the Japanese from robbing this land. This further complicates an already complicated situation.

*What bad timing.*

Master Chai sits back, thinking. He is blinded to Mama Zhang's showering spittle and flapping fan; deaf to her raised voice and high-pitched tones.

'Now, can I have my allowance, please?'

Master Chai raises his eyes to the flabby face with its fleshy smile. Thump! The brass stick trembles in the old man's hand, and Mama Zhang knows the answer to her question. She pouts, closes her fan and sneaks away.

\*

Had Mama Zhang been smart enough, she would have come to the right person for her rewards.

Mingzhi.

*What perfect timing!*

The news comes on his first day in office, and it lights him up while Little Mouse watches in confusion. *I can now devote my time fully to my job without distractions!* In his room Mingzhi smooths his gown as he glares at his reflection in the mirror. His fingers linger on the pure silk material, the folds and joints, the collar, sleeves and hems, the embroidery in the middle. *The quail.* His fingertips follow the thread lines, the rounded head and body, the feathers, legs and claws. The tip of the beak, where his fingers stop. No cross threads. No messing up of colours. A fine piece of workmanship. Impeccable. Impeccable.

*And I shall never defile it in any way,* Mingzhi promises himself.

Little Mouse brings Mingzhi his hat and helps him put it on. 'They're waiting, Master.'

Mingzhi's heart pounds.

*I'm the Master, the Mandarin!*

He smooths his gown again, takes a deep breath and walks into *his* office.

### *Chapter Thirteen*

At first Mingzhi runs his office like any other government official: takes action in response to complaints filed by the people, serving as a local and district magistrate. Punishes the criminals for their misdeeds and compensates the victims. He is scrupulous: listening attentively, collecting statements from both sides, gathering evidence, demanding material proof whenever appropriate. Taking time to digest all the information, thinking it through long and hard before the verdict.

There has been gossip:

‘How old do you think he is? Looks no more than twenty to me.’

‘A young chick, really, not a bristle on his chin.’

‘Is he up to the job?’

‘I doubt it. I give him three months. Bet he’ll run scared to his darling mummy!’

‘That’s too long! I’d say a month.’

Mingzhi remains unmoved. *I’ll prove you wrong.* He does his job, working long hours, making careful decisions.

In between the scrolls of complaints, counter-complaints and appeals, there are occasional red goodwill-envelopes. Mingzhi pushes them away, ignores them, and will

only receive papers without unlawful attachments. He spells this rule out to his assistants and guards. Offenders will be severely punished.

*No more extra income!*

Dispirited, his staff grumbles, complaining behind his back. The new mandarin hears about their grievances, telling himself to be patient. *Sooner or later they'll know it's to the benefit of all.* He treats his subordinates well, caring not only for them but also their families, especially the weak and aged. Buys them nourishing herbs and tonics, which gradually win their hearts and sweeten their tongues.

There'll be no whipping in his court, Mingzhi decides. Only jail sentences and laborious community work: repairing and building embankments and roads, clearing drainage, helping out in the fields.

The people are surprised, unaccustomed to change. But they welcome the new moves, though some express their doubts, wondering if these things can be sustained.

*Time will tell.* Mingzhi is confident.

\*

Preferring a lively garden to a barren courtyard, Mingzhi gets workers to turn the vacant land outside his room into a luxuriant green space. Little Mouse is given his task: to supervise the builders and gardeners. The instructions he has are simple: a pond is a must, and there must be beds of jasmine and bamboo. *And carp in the water, with lotus and lily for shelter.* Little Mouse knows instantly what's needed.

Soon, an ornamental garden takes shape. Trim and self-contained. With a small yet elegant pavilion in one corner, and in another, a shallow pool of water where a dense clump of bamboo rustles on windy days. And willows sway, scattering the water and the

lawn with slivers of catkin. On one side of the pavilion, stalks of jasmine stand quietly, white blossoms smiling at the blue sky against the green background.

After retreating from the office in the evening, Mingzhi always sits in the pavilion, listening to the tiny movements of the red carp: stirring the water as they turn and flee, chasing and escaping one another. Blowing bubbles. *Pop-pop-pop. Pop-pop-pop.* The familiar sounds he enjoyed on his first stay away from home. His first taste of freedom. His Taohua Yuan. *It's back again, my Little Hut of Leaping Fishes.*

The refreshing smell of jasmine soothes him, though Mingzhi sometimes feels a tiny twinge in his chest as he thinks about the person who carries the flower's name. Then he takes a deep breath. A long inhalation. Hold it. Hold it. Before gradually letting it out.

Sometimes Mingzhi prefers the stump by the bamboo clump, sitting on it for long hours. Watching the fishes mostly, peeping at the shy ones under the umbrella-leaves of lotus though he never disturbs them. But sometimes, Little Mouse finds his master fiddling with a leaf of bamboo, fashioning it into a flute and then blowing on it. Strange notes follow: trembling, sad, unfamiliar. And he wonders where his quiet master has learned about the magic and the music.

\*

There aren't any major cases to attend to in a small town like Lixing. *What more can I do?* Mingzhi thinks hard, drafts his plans but finds them impractical and scrunches them up. He tries again, and more sheets of paper are tossed away. And he realises it is impossible to create something out of nothing.

He begins to plan his trips.

\*

‘The Mandarin is coming!’

Peasants in remote villages exchange the news with disbelief. *Never has a Mandarin come this far!* Some dismiss the rumour instantly, thinking it absurd. A pinch of spice to their dawn-to-the-fields-and-dusk-to-bed everyday life.

But the Mandarin does indeed come, in his official sedan and with a humble retinue of two, as well as Little Mouse, of course. Meeting the villagers, asking their needs, discussing problems. The image of a friendly Mandarin is established: soft-spoken, understanding, polite.

*Never before, never before.*

The elders smile a toothless smile, their faces all crumpled and their eyes stretched into slits, hidden under loose, flabby lids. They respect the young Mandarin who respects them, like him and trust him. They take their grandchildren in their arms, whispering hopes for the future. *Better late than never.* They smooth the children’s mousey heads with their scrawny fingers, and the young ones giggle and pull themselves away.

They wait.

It isn’t a long wait. They cheer when the order comes. Mingzhi has worked it out: a school for every village. The budget is tight and resources scarce. Mingzhi tries his best, drafting careful, practical plans. Local villagers are organised to work together, to repair and refurbish abandoned outhouses and shacks. The facilities are basic: four walls and a roof for shelter to begin with, and some even without wooden benches. *For a start, something is better than nothing.*

Literate men from the villages, if there are any, as long as they can read and write, are deployed. A couple of hours break from working in the field is good enough for the children to learn at least how to write their names. Mingzhi also makes contact with his former classmates at the school in Pindong Town, inviting them to join his teaching force. In his letters Mingzhi explains his long-term plan of improving the life of ordinary people, a silent reformation. And because he has the support of Head Teacher Scholar Ning, the response is overwhelming. Positions are filled immediately. New teachers in crude shacks with bare-footed children reciting Confucius and Laozi. Heads swaying, voices raised, spirits high. Outside, the elders squat in the shade and listen, nodding and grinning and swaying their heads. And praise their Mandarin.

For towns and villages already with schools, Mingzhi has other plans. The model of the reformist intellectuals' Society for the Study of National Rejuvenation is adopted. Study groups are formed, though on a smaller scale – provided with small collections of texts on various subjects. Through Father Terry's contacts, Mingzhi manages to get a supply of books of new knowledge from the west. There are regular guided discussions led by experienced scholars. Mingzhi tries to tone down these activities though, to prevent them becoming too conspicuous. As long as there is steady progress, he doesn't mind if it is slow.

\*

Hundreds of miles away in Pindong Town, Mandarin Liu is content with his weekly circuit of the main streets in his comfortable official sedan, guarded by a retinue of eight, who hit the gongs and hoo-ha along, shouting for pedestrians and carts and horses to give way.

Though he is on a routine trip to observe life at a grassroots level, Mandarin Liu's mind wanders as the sedan sways forward. His brows are knitted tight. Recent pressure from the Governor – who is himself pressurised by Central Government - has put him in a predicament. Money. That's their demand. There is a gigantic hole in the treasury of the Forbidden City, dug up by foreign hands. The hands that brought in opium in hundreds of thousands of chests. That drafted and signed the infamous treaties, asking not only for land but also for indemnities. The hole has to be filled. Since the only means of income is taxation, targets are set, from the provinces to the districts under their charge.

*How am I going to meet my target?*

Certainly not from his own pocket, which is bulging with money from other people's pockets. Mandarin Liu lays his hands on his protruding stomach, rubbing it in circular motions, as if trying to squeeze something out of it. Fat. Or silver. Or a perfect solution.

The team hoo-ha ahead.

At the corner of a street a man is pushed to the ground. A loud cry. Two burly men rush after him. Slap and punch and kick. More cries follow, and their defenceless target rolls in the road, his scholar's gown now smudged and dusty.

'Clear your debts or you know what you're getting!' One of the men shouts as he spits on his prey.

Gong! Gong! Gong!

The men look up and stop instantly. Too late. The parade has turned the corner and the bearers collide with them. The sedan jolts to a sudden halt and inside, Mandarin Liu is flung from his seat; his head strikes the side post.

*What's going on?* Mandarin Liu clutches his head and pushes away his pale-faced guards who crowd forward to check their master's condition.

One feeble, badly beaten scholar and two surly-looking men, typical bullies.

*And they gave me this lump on my head!*

'Take those thugs away!' Mandarin Liu roars, angry fingers pointing at the big men.

Still groaning, as he gets to his feet, the victim raises his head and nods gratefully at his saviour.

Mingyuan.

And Mandarin Liu recognises him.

*What has he done?* He glances at Mingyuan, then at his captives, knowing he has some questioning to do when he gets back to his office. He sits back and rubs his stomach again. Wonders if he has indeed rubbed something out of it.

Autumn in the eastern island across the strait is filled with the stink of gunpowder, the trotting of heavy boots, loud, brutal shouts. And louder cries of anger, fear and pain that come in response. Red hot blood spatters on withering leaves, turning cold, darkening as it coagulates in the September wind. And the season ends with the end of a newly independent nation, over which a white flag with a huge dot of fresh blood now flies, high enough for all eyes to see. The evil eyes of the red-haired or golden-haired or flowery-flagged devils - the British, Russians and Americans.

The walls of the Forbidden City tremble beneath their covetous stares.

Across the strait in the inner mainland, Master Chai is celebrating another bumper harvest. Quietly. And he orders the entire mansion to keep quiet too. No news is to go beyond the walls, he warns, as he knows how risky it will be if word of his prosperity shall reach Mandarin Liu. More than once Mandarin Liu has tried to push Master Chai into contributing to his tax target. And more than once the old man has managed to push aside his demands with the excuse of a poor harvest.

Shh, shh. Shh, shh.

Master Chai sips his tea. *I should make good use of the extra money.* He takes another look at the profits, trying to decide if he should hoard them up for Mingzhi's wedding or purchase more lands, plant more poppies.

'Yes, definitely more lands!' He blurts out.

Oops. He covers his mouth with one hand and looks around, glad that he is all by himself.

Shh, shh. Shh, shh.

Yet the orders arrive: one official, with a district government seal on it; the other private, words from the messenger. The former demands ten per cent of the opium revenue for tax, with an unspoken understanding that this is on top of the previously agreed portion for Mandarin Liu; and the latter is more of a warning: the Mandarin wants no more tricks from Master Chai.

Liwei sneaks away after reading the letter to his father, who snatches it, crumples it up and tosses it away. *A cunning fox he is, and a cold-blooded one.* Master Chai makes a quick mental calculation and works out a rough figure. There is a twinge in his chest and a tic on his face. The servant girl drifts to a hidden corner, promising herself she will re-emerge only in response to a direct order. Which doesn't come, as her master is too engrossed in his thoughts. Too busy even to have a sip of tea.

*As if he is here, as if he knows exactly what's in my hoard, exactly when to deal me a blow.*

Master Chai bangs the armrest, furious that Mandarin Liu has launched his attack before he does.

*Your time will come, I swear it.*

Master Chai grits his teeth so hard that angry veins squirm under the layer of loose skin on his neck.

\*

Mingzhi wakes in the middle of the night. His eyes open on the fine gauze surrounding his bed, streaked with soft moonlight. Blurred, unreal. *Where am I?* The faintly-lit chiffon envelops him like a thin layer of smoke. He stares through it at a familiar scene: a smoke-shrouded figure.

*Mother.*

Mingzhi gets up and paces the room. It has been five months since he took up his appointment. Five months away from the Mansion. The longest time he has spent by himself. This is his world now, he knows, and he likes his job. But something is missing. Something.

Restless ants crawl through his sleepless mind, and he longs for a game of chess.

In the south court of Chai Mansion, a chess set is laid out on the table. The pieces have taken their positions, ready for battle. For Liwei to sound the horn and give his commands. Liwei is commander of both sides: the challenger and its defender. Playing his lonely game of chess, planning his attacks and defences, deciding who shall win. But everything is quiet tonight. There is no sign of Liwei. Not in the hall, his room, or the courtyard. Nor is he in his bed.

It is a breezy night and the Mansion sleeps soundly. There are occasional hoots from the western hills. Lonely cries break through the monotonous chirping and buzzing of insects, disrupting the seeming tranquillity. Like reminders, that activity never ceases under the amorphous smokescreen of darkness. It brews, surreptitiously, taking full advantage of the night.

Under the smokescreen of darkness, the two-thousand-year-old Confucianism that rules everyday life—pronouncing on what is right and wrong, what may be done and what may not—is forgotten. Eyes are blinded, as are minds, and so the heart takes charge.

Quietly. Quietly.

\*

Likang has been bed bound for months, by illness this time. His chronic coughing has grown worse. The intervals between bouts of coughing grow shorter, and he is breathless, wheezing all day. His room is now a popular visiting place for the doctors – from Plum Blossom Village to Pindong Town – who have issued numerous prescriptions. It is an unspoken fact amongst the servants in the Mansion that Likang drinks herbal medicine as if he were drinking tea. And that he only drinks half of the dark, bitter, strong-smelling remedy, as he prefers opium, which assuages his pain.

A couple of puffs, then he relaxes, lies down, until the next fit begins. Then a sip of herbal remedy. On good days he manages to keep it down, with the help of Da Niang who rubs his chest or back. On bad days, the dark liquid surges in the pit of his stomach, then spurts, and he coughs ferociously. In the midst of his fit he always asks for his pipe, struggles to take a couple of puffs, then relaxes again.

The pattern repeats itself.

\*

Mingzhi pays occasional visits to remote villages, bringing with him rice and flour and sugar. He never has enough: they are finished long before he reaches the most distant

quarters. He can ration the food, he knows, but it is painful for him to see the outstretched hands and desperate eyes. And the disappointment that follows rejection.

Too many mouths to feed, too little food to feed them. And the number of mouths keeps increasing, at a rate that far outstrips the paddy harvest. In the fields men with protruding rib bones plod on. At home women make watery porridge out of carefully rationed rice. Children with jaundiced faces munch twigs to quench their hunger, murmuring listlessly after their teacher in their shack-for-classroom. Older children are yanked out of class to help in the fields. An extra pair of hands is more useful than an open mouth.

Mingzhi thinks about his grandfather's lands. Thinks about the old days of planting at least one season of paddy. *If I could only have half of those crops for my people.* He can buy rice brought in by the British from their colonies in the southeast. He has learned about it from his short stay in the Imperial City. *But where can I find the money?*

Mingzhi sits in his pavilion. For the first time he doesn't hear the fishes, their bubble-blowing.

The sound of his little dream world.

That fades away without him noticing.

### *Chapter Fourteen*

The Provincial Capital is busy as ever. Mingzhi walks out of the Governor's office and enters his carriage, wordless. Little Mouse gestures for the driver to leave. The carriage makes slow progress in the bustling street, much to Little Mouse's delight. *So much to see!* There is a shop displaying square wooden boxes on stands, each with a round glass in front and a piece of black cloth at the back. *What are those for?* He glances up. The characters on the signboard stare blankly back at him like strangers, and at the door, the unbelievably clear black and white portraits of some foreign devils in strange suits seem to be laughing at him. Little Mouse turns to his literate and knowledgeable master for help but finds him sitting still, frowning.

Mingzhi came to ask the Governor for funds. He was kept waiting in an empty room. When the Governor finally sent for him, the reply came short and sharp, without mention of the requested relief.

Mingzhi tried to explain about the food shortages. The Governor brushed him off. 'Don't you know how to make money for yourself? All mandarins do!'

His voice struck sharply against Mingzhi's back as the dispirited young mandarin slouched away.

And now in his carriage, Mingzhi pictures the *look* that accompanied those words: *Asking me for money? How stupid you are!* Of course he knows how other mandarins—like Mandarin Liu—make their money. *No, I will never do that.* He squeezes the cushion under him until the cotton turns into small, sweat-sodden lumps.

The traffic grinds to a halt. There is a commotion in the street, from where angry shouts are heard. The driver prepares to shout for the crowd to ‘Give way to the Mandarin!’ but Mingzhi stops him. The noises get louder, seething in Mingzhi’s troubled mind. Mingzhi stirs in his seat, recalling the proverb: ‘Disaster never strikes just once.’ *So I’m in a run of bad luck just now and everything is against me.*

There is a familiar voice, strange intonations, cutting across the noise currents.

*Martin? Impossible.*

Mingzhi shakes his head, until Little Mouse turns to him: ‘It’s him, the red-haired devil!’

Martin touches Mingzhi’s gown, feels the material and the embroidered quail, and is amazed.

‘Wow! I have a mandarin for a friend!’ He playfully pours a cup of tea and bows, holding it up for Mingzhi in pretended reverence: ‘Your Excellency.’

His mandarin friend takes the tea. He has been restraining his smile with such an effort that his face turns red and contorts. One touch and it will explode. He glances at Martin’s equally awkward expression -- the *touch* that ignites the long-awaited burst of laughter from the two friends. One loud and careless, the other soft and chuckling.

Mingzhi instantly covers his mouth with his hand and looks around. It's a quiet day and the teahouse inside the garden is quiet, too. They are sitting in a pavilion that extends from the main teahouse to the lake. A booth reserved exclusively for the guests of dignitaries.

Martin hisses out the remaining laughter bugs and holds up his tea, this time to thank Mingzhi for rescuing him from the angry crowd. He shakes his head and smiles a waggish smile, recalling the episode. Says he has come to source a local speciality, something "exclusive and exquisite", as his boss specified. At the market place he was attracted to some porcelain on display: pots, dishes, bowls, vases. Fine craftsmanship, plain or painted with flowers or plants, scenery or people and activities, or simply calligraphy or designs.

'Good God! You really should see it!'

Martin's eyes sparkle, his voice rises and he speaks faster. How he had grabbed a vase and approached the vendor. How he had spoken to him across the display table full of the precious porcelains, pointing at the vase, asking about the factories, the suppliers. How the man had shaken his head and kept retreating. And how he, anxious to make himself clear, had kept leaning forward, getting closer to the nonplussed salesman.

Ping-pang! The pots and dishes and bowls and vases clink-clanged to the ground, save the one in his eager clutch.

Then came the shouts and cries.

Came the unfortunate vendor pushing and punching and asking for compensation, supported by other stall owners.

Then Mingzhi the Mandarin, who bought the disastrous red-haired devil out of the disaster.

Mingzhi imagines his friend speaking to the vendor in his strange, halting Mandarin, red-faced, sweat-sodden in the Southern heat, excited veins green-purple against his translucent skin, hands and fingers flying all over the place. ‘The foreign devil is threatening me, he’s lunging at me!’ must have been the thought in the poor vendor’s mind. Mingzhi chuckles.

‘Hey, you’re laughing at me!’

Martin gives the mandarin a gentle blow.

‘Ouch!’ Mingzhi holds his shoulder. *Good. Mandarin or not, things are just as they were before.* He nudges his friend’s arm in protest. Martin dodges, his smile as bright as the glittering lake behind him. *My friend.* Mingzhi takes slow sips of tea, lets the bittersweet aftertaste linger on his tongue.

Soft whispers and girlish chuckles waft through the languid air. A light boat ruffles the water. Two figures. Moving, approaching. Gradually becoming clearer.

Jasmine. And the servant girl. Apparently taking a leisure trip in the Provincial Capital.

Mingzhi’s heart races. A hand on her forehead shielding the midday glare, she glances around, admiring the scenery while the other girl rows the boat. She lets her eyes run from the distant hills and mountains to the temple on a rise in the garden. Then the pavilion on the lake.

She sees him.

And he sees puzzlement in her eyes. She doesn't flinch, though, staring straight at him. *The shy young man, now a mandarin.* She drops her hand and smiles, squinting in the sunlight. *Well done.* Mingzhi feels his face burning.

'What is it?' Martin, who has been watching Mingzhi, turns to the lake and sees the girls. The now bashful Jasmine. Head down, she hurriedly helps her servant to right the boat and row it away. Mingzhi's gaze follows. He hardly hears Martin.

'Hey, you like her, don't you?'

Mingzhi looks away, busying himself with pouring tea. He spills it and wets his gown, like an inexperienced thief who has been caught on his first outing.

Martin smiles: 'I'm not surprised. She looks like a nice girl. So why wait?'

Mingzhi, face still red, shakes his head and snaps: 'Never mention this again, please!'

'I don't understand. It's perfectly natural--'

'You never will understand.' Mingzhi flops in his chair. He stares at the vase which Martin has salvaged and placed on the table. Court women in the colourful, splendid costumes of the Tang Dynasty dance to a house full of guests. Detailed drawing, fine colouring. He imagines how Jasmine would look in those dresses. A celestial goddess drifting in the clouds, on the water, throwing her long flowing sleeves, turning, twisting her tiny waist gracefully...

'My boss will go crazy when he sees this!'

Gone is the goddess, back to the real world.

Mingzhi watches Martin running his fingertips over the outlines: the dresses, the facial expressions of the various characters, the beams, furniture and floor of the court.

‘These things would sell like hot cakes back home.’

*Porcelain?*

A quick movement and the vase is in Mingzhi’s hand before his friend can make out what is going on. He checks the bottom: Made in Lixing. He looks up and smiles his brightest smile of the day.

\*

The old craftsman, already well known for his skill, runs his pottery from home. He is the potter and painter, his wife the kiln keeper, and his son sells whatever they produce. The excellent quality of the products means they fetch a good price in the Provincial Capital, but the family hardly makes ends meet. Production is low and there is never much left after paying the hooligans for *protection*.

You can do better, the Mandarin tells them. He gets workers to build a bigger kiln, gathers a team of painters and potters, and appoints the craftsman and his wife as trainers and supervisors. They are to ensure high standards of quality are met. Martin is asked to guide the vendor to set up accounts. Old enemies sit side by side, talking with the aid of sketches and gestures.

The first batch is removed from the kiln, loaded into carts, put on a ship.

And there are a second, a third, and many more shipments to come.

While the old craftsman is still wondering who—thousands of miles away—can be using his dishes and bowls, pots and vases, and how they are being used, the supply of rice and flour and sugar begins to reach the distant villages.

\*

Mingzhi tries but is unable to get the right pronunciation of MARTIN out of Little Mouse. As if his tongue simply refuses to cooperate, getting twisted in the R of MAR, then tangled with the T that follows. His master gives up, does not understand why Little Mouse has no problem at all saying *er*, goose, and *ting*, pavilion. He thinks Little Mouse's inability to utter Martin's name has shied him into a corner, keeping a distance from the Englishman when he visits.

He tolerates Little Mouse's referring to Martin as the red-haired devil.

\*

The news arrives in the shrieking December wind: the Society for the Study of National Rejuvenation has been banned. The Forbidden City has forbidden reformist activities by intellectuals under the banner of Study Groups.

Mingzhi tells his groups to be more careful. He doesn't close them down, though, thinking that it is safe here in a small town. A good distance away, not only from the Imperial City, but also the Provincial Capital.

Stay quiet, very quiet, he says.

His gentle voice is swept away by the forceful wind of the year's end, howling wildly, disseminating along its path whatever it brings with it. Such as stories about a successful business, about young men learning from foreign books. About Athens and the ancient Greek Parliament. About democracy and civil rights.

The wind roars on.

Butler Fong is finally sent. Mingzhi is to go home for the New Year. Letters rare, words scarce, and worst of all, not returning for Mid-Autumn, Mingzhi has infuriated his grandfather. Butler Fong tells Mingzhi not to worry, though, reassuring him that the old man will forget it all when Mingzhi comes home. New Year means happiness, he says, and Master Chai will be delighted to see his Mandarin Grandson at the reunion dinner.

It is a reunion indeed, but for the wrong reason. Likang lapses into unconsciousness on his bloodstained bed after a fit on the morning of New Year's Eve. He has been coughing up blood lately, despite taking bowl after bowl of herbal remedies.

None of the doctors would come on this day of the year to risk their luck for the coming year. Mingzhi persuades, Master Chai rages at first but falls silent when Likang shows no sign of recovery. Father Terry is sent for, arriving late from Pindong Town. It doesn't take him long to make his diagnosis: tuberculosis, final stage. The name sounds strange to the Chai, but not the words that follow, and the head-shaking.

Likang dies the next morning.

Mingzhi sits by Likang's bedside, his eyes red from staying awake all night. *This is the longest time I've spent with him. Alone.* He shudders, taking a closer look at his father, as if seeing him for the first time. Drawn cheeks, sharp face, long jaws. Collarbones, ribs and joints protruding. Chest and abdomen sunken. Like a skeleton.

*Is this really my father?*

The smell of opium-smoke he has been tolerating teams up with the sticky, fishy smell of coagulated vomit to assault him. Like the most insidious of enemies, they quietly sneak into his every pore, his nostrils without him noticing. He sneezes with such force that it wets the corners of his eyes.

‘It’s all right.’

A soft voice, and an equally soft hand on his shoulder.

*Mother.*

‘It’s a release for him, in a way.’ His mother sounds bitter.

Mingzhi pats the back of her hand, finding it relaxed. Too relaxed. *Is this a release for you, too?*

Then comes a grip on his arm, strong and firm.

Uncle Liwei.

*A death on the first day of the New Year.* Master Chai shakes his head. He has been in the ancestral hall since dawn. Praying. As though he had known it before the news came. As though he had been waiting for it. And he stays there until Butler Fong has instructed the servants to dismantle the firecrackers and couplets at the doorpost. The red new-year couplets, which say:

**Spring returns to the land,**

**Blessing the people with happiness.**

No, not this year. No firecrackers, no couplets. Nothing red should be seen, not even good-luck envelopes for the children. Only white. The solemn, grievous white of a funeral.

Master Chai watches as the servants roll up the last couplet. HAPPINESS and GOOD LUCK disappear into the folds of the fabric. Blindfolded. Trapped. Put away in a dark corner.

\*

In the world of the servants, though, a little taste of happiness seeps into their secret New Year get-together. Crude rice wine, tea, roasted groundnuts, pumpkin seeds, and a long night of chatter. Tiredness forgotten, worries put aside. *It's a New Year!*

Now the most widely travelled servant of the lot, Little Mouse gets all the attention he could wish for. Three cups of wine add to his eloquence, and he talks, red-faced, spittle showering, fingers pointing. About Lixing Town, the government house, the garden. About his master the new mandarin, what he has done and what he is doing. And his audience listens, eyes wide, mouths gaping, can't wait to pass the stories around.

In between the long hours of dull work, the servants whisper among themselves, bits that are worth whispering about: the remote villages, the schools, the pottery, the red-haired devil. And hiss under their breath things that are meant to be secrets. Shh, shh, it's a secret, they say, their mouths hidden behind their sleeves. But they forget the old saying that 'the wind has ears.' So the northerly spring wind, which closes in surreptitiously, takes their hissing with it, whisking it into the pricking ears of an insidious spy.

Who has eyes that glow in the dark, a mind that conjures up a powerful weapon from the intelligence collected.

For his own revenge.

Or for somebody else's.

### *Chapter Fifteen*

The funeral and the rituals that follow keep Mingzhi in the mansion for a month. He returns to Lixing Town to find that the study groups have been closed down. His precious collection of books is now a heap of dark ashes.

The order came from the Provincial Capital. Apparently, someone somewhere had reported this secret activity to the Governor, who had ordered an unusually swift response. A serious offence against the orders of the Forbidden City, the Governor observes, which could easily be classed as subversive. He is not unkind, though. Having heard about Mingzhi's possible marital connection with Imperial Scholar Dai, he quietly leaves Mingzhi out of his blacklist. 'New and inexperienced,' he comments in his report, an excuse good enough to save the Governor from trouble, either from the unsatisfied informant or any sympathetic party.

The scroll lies open before Mingzhi on his desk. The red seal looks enormous against the carefully constructed official writing. Mingzhi sees it lift itself off the page, swelling in the air, three times, ten, a hundred times bigger. Then it swoops down like an eagle, coming after him. Thump! Stamping on him, on the hopeful young men, their ideals, the possibility of reinventing the nation.

Thump! Red, striking, like the flame that swallows the books of science, geography, history, arts and humanity. The weapons of self-strengthening.

It keeps burning, the bundle of forbidden knowledge, ablaze in the dark. Fierce fire against black emptiness. Until it collapses into a heap of cinders, blocking the passage to freedom and democracy, smearing the dignity of a nation.

The amber dies out. Black. Cold.

\*

It is warm and light in the gambling den in Pindong Town, though. Too hot, in fact. Mingyuan keeps wiping his sweaty forehead with a hand kerchief, which he stuffs into his waist belt. His jade-tasselled waist belt. Which has found its way back to its master.

And it is not alone.

In Mingyuan's silk pouch tied to his waist, his mother's family of jewels – earrings, necklace, pendant, bracelet, rings, hairpins – are clinking and clanking, celebrating a happy reunion. Complaining among themselves about Uncle Eagle's sweaty palms, the smelly, tattered boxes that had kept them apart from one another, and the even darker and smellier safe which kept the boxes that kept them.

Outside their pouch-home, their master gets a treat from Uncle Eagle. A cigarette, carefully lit. An apology. To offend someone with a connection with the most important man in town is far too risky. The man with an eagle's nose and eyes certainly has a mind as shrewd as an eagle's, too. After all, Mingyuan has settled his debts and redeemed the jewels at twice their actual value. *A fat chip he is, again.*

The fat chip moves with his fat pouch to the gambling table. The jewellery siblings clink-clank along.

\*

In the mansion, the ivory chopsticks, jade cups and porcelain dishes have stopped sneaking out – for the time being. Perhaps they are being cautious. Perhaps it is the rain that has stopped them. An unexpected downpour in late spring, which washes over Plum Blossom Village. The fields. The poppies.

Roots and stalks rot. Mature pods droop, falling wearily down.

The giant vats in the outbuilding-turned-factory are dry, empty; the air fresh, cleansed of the least favourable smell of the opium favoured by Master Chai. The peasants squat on the thresholds of their homes, watching rainwater cascade from the eaves, smoking the occasional bit of tobacco. Yet they don't seem to be happy, as if they, too, are addicted to them, the opium. As if it has seeped into their veins, their blood, becoming part of them, and now they are unable to shake it off.

'Heavenly God has chosen the wrong time to pee.'

The peasants squint through the rain curtain, seeing only the grey sky sitting heavily above the fields, where the money for rent and rice lies rotting.

Landlord Master Chai slumps in the couch in the central hall, taking long, deep breaths. *At the very least, there's another season to cover the loss.* His body feels heavy, a total exhaustion he has never experienced before. As though it is going to pull him down into a bottomless slough, from which he will never manage to rise. *No, not yet. I have tons of matters to settle.* He thinks about the lost harvest, Mandarin Liu, Mingzhi's marriage, Mingyuan's exam. The mansion. So much to take care of.

He stares at the pipe on the desk. Likang's. Cleaned and polished, its smoke-blackened mouth shines in the well-lit room. Inside, the thick darkness gleams like a seductive eye, winking at him. *Go on, try me and you'll feel better.* Another wink. Long, curly lashes flap down, then roll up like dozens of soft, boneless hands. Beckoning. *One puff, just one.*

He wonders what it tastes like, the black, muddy cake. Why his son was so fond of it. He gestures, and the maid lights it, boiling it up.

Master Chai takes his first puff.

He doesn't choke.

\*

Another order comes from the Governor. A new tax target for Mingzhi, a rise, of course.

This time Mingzhi whisks the scroll away, not wishing to lay his eyes on it. Not on the figure, nor on the seal with its square face. Like a cage, and inside it it's him, Mingzhi the captive.

*Nothing escapes him.*

As though he is equipped with the Thousand-Mile Eyes and Downwind Ears of the Monkey God, the Governor sees and hears everything: the pottery, the connection with a foreign trader. The profits. The connection worries him, but money prevails. He closes one eye, opens the other only to the silver he will receive. White, shiny silver which, after he painfully cuts out a small portion to satisfy the Forbidden City, will contribute to top up his private hoard.

The silver glitters in the bright light of day, blinding eyes and hearts.

\*

Martin pays his farewell visit. He has been assigned to company business in the Imperial City. He brings with him a camera and the cameraman.

*The strange box in the strange shop in the Provincial Capital!*

Little Mouse's eyes widen. He watches closely from a distance while the equipment is being set up in the court-office. Mingzhi tries to help.

'No, leave it to us.' Martin hurries Mingzhi off to put on his mandarin costume.

'Is this necessary?'

Though he grumbles, Mingzhi does not argue. He prepares himself. His official gown and hat are fresh, starched, shiny. His eyes are bright, his beard-for-mature-look clean and tidy.

Snap! A flash, like an explosion.

Mingzhi has his hands on the armrest, his legs spread under the heavy gown. His face is tense, and he stares straight ahead.

With a frown between his brows.

Snap!

In a corner Little Mouse winces, thinking the evil box from the evil land has captured his master's soul. He stares at Mingzhi, smiling and chatting with the red-haired devil, and wonders if Mingzhi's spirit is going to be taken away to foreign parts.

\*

Master Chai is happy with the picture. *A real person on paper, not just a painted imitation.* He lies on the couch and squints up at the portrait on the wall, which he has hijacked from Da Niang. Taking occasional puffs of opium, studying the picture: the exquisite costume that shines in black and white, the quail in the middle of it, Mingzhi's

bright eyes. *My grandson, a mandarin.* He grins and takes another puff, refreshed. *And I will have another mandarin grandson soon.*

The old man suddenly realises Mingyuan should have been home after his exam. Mingyuan has sat the provincial level exam for a second time. He will attain his *juren* this time. Master Chai is confident. Mingyuan drafted a study plan after Likang's funeral. It was a strict, intensive schedule. Convinced by it, Master Chai approved Mingyuan's leaving for Pindong Town to concentrate on his studies.

Now that the exam is over, where is he?

Indeed he has a plan. Mingyuan has spent the past few months moving between the gambling den and the brothel once frequented by his father, studying the subjects that most interest him: the sciences of probability, and of human biology. His servant is warned: never reveal Mingyuan's doings to the mansion, or he will be sent home. He seals the boy's lips with strings of cash, which he now has plenty of in his pouch, courtesy of Mandarin Liu.

News of Mingyuan's special connection with the Mandarin circulates fast in the underworld. And so, courtesy of Mandarin Liu, Mingyuan gets first class treatment in this first class brothel: getting his choice of girls, the best wine and the most luxurious room.

He has learned something: Money is the only thing that is everything. *To hell with the exam, to hell with the mandarin post. To hell with Mingzhi.* Thinking that his half brother might have been blacklisted and punished, and may lose his post soon, he takes a big gulp of *wu jiapi*. Warm, all the way down to his stomach. And beyond. It's

burning inside him, somewhere. He pulls his favourite singsong girl—the most sought-after in the brothel—closer to him, gives her a loud kiss on the cheek, pressing for more while his hands grope. She giggles, twisting in his clutch.

‘Not here, you little rascal!’

Of course he knows where to go. His luxurious room with a comfortable bed is waiting. So comfortable that he nearly forgets about his father’s hundred-day memorial ceremony.

\*

It is smoky and stuffy inside the ancestral hall, with the burning of candles, joss sticks and silver papers, and Mingzhi has been sneezing and trying to control the sneezes.

Kneeling in front of his father’s memorial plate, he feels his grandfather’s stare on his curved back. His skin itches. He can’t wait for the ceremony to be over. Huchh! *Stupid nose!* He rubs it with his sleeves and lowers his head against another resentful glare from Master Chai. A kerchief is fluttered before his face. *Uncle Liwei.* Mingzhi takes it, nodding thank-you. He covers his nose with the piece of silk, and a refreshing smell of sandalwood soothes him. He breathes, slow and calm.

Beside him, Mingyuan has been quiet, with his eyes closed most of the time. As though he is remembering his father with sorrow. *A good son he is, paying full respect to his father.* Master Chai nods, not knowing that Mingyuan, who came rushing home at dawn, has worn himself out with his favourite girl in Pindong Town. A good son all the same, respectfully follows in his father’s footsteps.

Mingzhi is still sneezing when he walks out of the hall. He heaves a long sigh, relieved.

*It's over.*

The day is bright and breezy, and Mingzhi straightens his torso, taking another deep breath. *A nice cup of tea is just what I need now, and a game of chess, perhaps.* He quickens his pace and makes his way to the west court. There are flakes of burnt silver paper on his gown. He whisks them off, and is assailed by an unexpected rush of fetid fumes from his smoke-impregnated sleeves. The smell that he seems unable to get rid of.

Huchh!

'Are you all right, son?' Da Niang calls over from the moon gate. Mingzhi knows she has been waiting for him. Da Niang looks pale in her white mourning dress, paler than the little white lily pinned to her hair near her cheek. As though she were the lily, standing in a garden of gaudy peonies, magnolia and roses. Alone, out of place.

Without himself and Mingyuan, without Likang's coughing and groaning, the west court is now quiet and calm. *She must be lonely.* Mingzhi hurries over to meet his mother.

Meilian does not come home for the ceremony, nor did she attend her father's funeral. There was a letter of condolence from her father-in-law - the most Mandarin Liu would do. Mingzhi has lost track of when Meilian last came home. Three years ago, five, or longer? He gazes at his mother. *She must feel it to be even longer. She must be missing her, my eldest sister.*

As Mingzhi approaches, Da Niang takes out a kerchief and wipes sweat off her son's forehead. There is a smell, faint, familiar. *Where have I smelled that before?*

Threads of vague memories intertwine in Mingzhi's mind. Too many of them, too messy. He can't make head nor tail of them.

'Let's have some tea.' Da Niang beckons, heading for her room. Mingzhi follows.

The many threads slip away from Mingzhi's mind, retreating into a deep corner.

\*

Mingzhi persuades his grandfather: Da Niang has not been to Pindong Town, the biggest town in this district. She hasn't stepped out of the mansion for more than ten years, only to serve you and my father, he says. And now she deserves a trip; a short one will do. Master Chai relents only when Mingzhi promises to walk past Mandarin Liu's office in his formal gown, to remind the old enemy that he, Master Chai's grandson, is a mandarin too.

*So he can tell lies!* Little Mouse laughs quietly at his master's promise. He has packed Mingzhi's luggage and the mandarin costume isn't in it. Once in Pindong Town, Mingzhi broaches his real plan. Little Mouse is to make arrangements for Da Niang to meet Meilian.

*Another good story to tell!*

Little Mouse is excited; elated at the usefulness of his mousy brain, and an opportunity to further impress his fellow workers. He is delighted also, that his master is getting *nasty*.

The servant from Mingzhi's old rented residence has made arrangements. After dark, Da Niang and Mingzhi wait at the back door of the government office. The moon is waning

but the sky above the mansion is bright, reflecting the lights behind the high walls. *Something is going on.* Mingzhi can sense the bustle inside: rushing footsteps, the rustling of dresses, the occasional barking of orders.

Meilian sidles through the half-open door, then swiftly closes it on the noises behind her.

Da Niang takes Meilian in her arms and holds her tight. They are both breathless and speechless, while tears smear their dresses. Mingzhi sees his sister almost shrink in Da Niang's embrace. A lean body holding another leaner figure, trembling.

*The two women I love. Their lives resemble each other.*

Mingzhi feels himself useless, watching their sufferings from a distance. Not even able to join in their embrace, to show his love. He grinds his feet into the ground until the gravel crunches under him and the sharp edges of the stones stab his sole. He presses harder. The pain is strangely soothing.

There is a shout from behind the door. Meilian's worried face turns pale in the soft flood of yellow from behind the wall.

'I must go.' She pulls herself away from her mother: 'They're preparing for a wedding in there. I have to help.'

Da Niang holds Meilian's hand, reluctant to let go. Meilian wipes her face, twisting her wrist slowly away from her mother. *When will I see her again?* Da Niang bites her fist but feels only the pain in her heart.

'Take care, Eldest Sister,' Mingzhi's voice is dry.

Meilian nods, mouths 'you take care, too.' Her lips are tremulous and she bites hard to stop them trembling. She ducks inside, and the door closes behind her. Light,

soundless, like the life she lives. A fragile leaf blown off its mother tree, drifting in the air. Unable to decide its destination.

Mingzhi takes his mother for a trip in the carriage. Relax and enjoy the day, he says. Da Niang nods, her eyes red and swollen from weeping through the night. She tries to smile, manages only an awkward tilt at each corner of her mouth. Mingzhi turns away, sees the textile stall piled high with bales of cloth. And the crowd surrounding it, mostly women, young and old, noblewomen and their maids, peasant women, housewives or singsong girls. Everyone is gathered there, except for one.

The naughty ants march into Mingzhi's heart, tiny feet tickling his soft, tender flesh. Mingzhi holds his chest, trying to press them down.

There are sounds of trumpets and flutes and gongs. A wedding procession is coming their way. The driver steers the carriage to one side.

The orchestra passes. Then the bridegroom on his horse, a mousy-faced man with small, mousy eyes. His mouth is not drawn to the same scale, though. It tilts all the way up, opens as wide as it can, happily boasting its master's happiness.

The crowd recognises him.

'The son of the richest man in town.'

'The richest and the most powerful. What a convenient connection!'

'Look how happy he is.'

'Of course he is! I would be too if I got to marry the most beautiful girl in town.'

The red-curtained sedan is passing by. The bride is a vague figure behind the thin shield. Still, people crane to catch a glimpse of any movement, any sight of the pair of tiny feet wrapped in embroidered shoes under the flapping curtain.

*A new woman.*

Mingzhi wonders what she looks like, the girl behind the curtain, heading for an unknown beginning. *Whoever you are, I hope you have a better life than my mother's or my sister's.*

A sudden gust of wind sweeps the curtain open. The bride, who has been peering out through the thin screen, is caught with her red veil raised above her eyebrows, staring straight at the crowd who are staring at her.

Her curious eyes turn shocked on her pale face.

Jasmine.

Mingzhi's heart sinks.

The scarf drops.

The curtain is slapped down.

Red. Bright, striking in the morning sun, filling up Mingzhi's vision. He sees nothing but the burning colour. The fierce flame that licks away the last taste of his romantic fantasies.

He closes his eyes.

The sedan passes. The trumpets, flutes and gongs play on. Loud, shrilling. Drilling into his heart.

\*

Mingyuan's exam result finally reaches his grandfather: another fail.

*What a shame.*

Master Chai imagines Mandarin Liu sitting in his court-office, laughing and pointing at the list of failures. CHAI. Big and prominent, stooped and shamefaced before the mandarin's elated laughter. Anger stirs inside Master Chai, rumbling and crowding in his chest. His breath comes short.

He takes a puff. A deep breath.

*What's wrong with him? He seems to be a bright kid.*

Master Chai reasons, and then decides. Mingyuan is called to the ancestral hall. The old man makes his grandson light a bunch of joss sticks and kneel before the Chai ancestors. He announces: the dignity of the Chai is to be upheld. He makes Mingyuan repeat after him. He is to re-sit the exam. This time he will stay at home when there is no school, and come home every weekend. Study is the only thing he is to concentrate on, which means no more helping with the accounts.

Mingyuan darts a grudging glance at his grandfather. *He wants me to be another Mingzhi.* He watches as Master Chai busies himself with candles and joss sticks and *bagua*. His stooped back, his quivering fingers. Like a stranger. *I am Chai Mingyuan, not someone else.* Mingyuan clenches his fists and punches the gravelly ground.

Clank!

The set of *bagua* falls, face down. Master Chai picks the pieces up at once, pretending that nothing has happened. He will keep trying until both the pieces fall face up, smiling.

With that his wishes will be granted.

And the Chai clan may stand tall before its enemy, on whom calamity will fall.

\*

Uncle Liwei pays Mingzhi a visit in early autumn, a surprise. Mingzhi has work to finish. He takes his uncle to his court-office, shows him the place where he attends to daily business. Uncle Liwei watches the young man in his mandarin gown, sitting tall and calm, giving orders to his charges. Reading documents with his eyebrows knitted tight, writing neatly on them when decisions are made, finishing them with a firm seal.

A careful, responsible young man, Uncle Liwei notes, gazing at him long and deep. The boy who sat on the stool reciting *San Zijing* with him seems to have suddenly swelled, hands and legs elongating, turning him into an adult. A mandarin.

*He has his place in the world now.*

He smiles, feels moisture at the corners of his eyes and wipes it away.

Little Mouse sets their dinner in the pavilion, and the evening passes with chess and tea. Slow moves, small sips, intermittent chatter under the kerosene lamp.

Uncle Liwei's plait hangs grey and thin on his back. His words come out haltingly between breaths. His eyes are red-veined from the long, dusty journey. Tiredness crawls heavily over the lids. He rubs his face occasionally to chase it away and keeps drinking tea to refresh himself.

Mingzhi notices. This is a secret three-day trip before his uncle's rent collecting, and Mingzhi knows he does not wish to waste it in bed. He sends Little Mouse for a pot of strong *pu're*. Black, very black, he orders. And a plate of groundnuts. The night is prolonged.

In the pond, the red carp express their joy in the visitor's company. Swimming in circles, turning somersaults, splashing water.

The soft light of a kerosene lamp fills the pavilion, a little yellow world within the garden. In it Mingzhi sits with his uncle. He remembers his childhood paradise behind the curtain, and feels that something is missing. *Mother*. He wishes Da Niang were here, in his world. *Their* world. Having tea together, listening to the sound of leaping fishes.

*Pop-pop-pop, pop-pop-pop.*

Uncle Liwei has left for Mingzhi a packet of bird's nests, carefully cleaned and wrapped by Da Niang in waxed paper. Mingzhi runs his fingers over the neatly tied package, the folds and knots. Thinks about his mother's world in her small, incense-burning room. He winds the string tightly around his finger, until the sides of it turn pale, bloodless against the swollen red-purple at the tip. Numbed.

Da Niang gave a special duty to Little Mouse on the day Mingzhi left for Lixing: to prepare a daily nourishment supplement for his master. The loyal servant takes his responsibility seriously. There is always a bowl of bird's nest soup on the table at night before bed. The sweet taste of the soup reminds Mingzhi not only of his mother, but of the place hundreds of miles away. The mansion. The former he wishes to hold on tightly to; the latter, to pluck out of his mind like hauling off stubborn tendrils of poison ivy. But then, the two are intertwined. Da Niang is a little lily trapped under a poisonous shed of wild ivy. And he stands outside of it, watching, enjoying his little freedom.

The soup turns sour. His stomach aches.

An insidious vine quietly extends itself, creeping hundreds of miles into Mingzhi's private garden.

In the island across the strait, bloodstained leaves are now dust buried deep under ground, nourishing the soil that produces food, not for the nourishment of the people who produce it, but those who have trampled the land.

The pain and tears are not forgotten, though, and ferment into powerful words that fill the pages of the first reformist newspaper. Which are quickly circulated by means of the many new-laid railway tracks - cobwebbing like the equally new electric cables between and through the cities on the mainland. And some arrive on doorsteps by the hands of uniformed postmen.

\*

The newspaper doesn't reach distant towns like Lixing.

Life has become a routine for Mingzhi. Listening to appeals, solving cases, worrying about tax quotas. He is not unhappy though, knowing that he is serving the people. He goes on making occasional trips to remote villages, bringing with him whatever he can. Though the journeys exhaust him, he likes to see the children reciting after their teachers. Green, childish voices ring under the roofs, bouncing against the crude walls; fresh, smiling faces with curious eyes, asking to be fed with knowledge.

Mingzhi hoards up these images in his mind. His treasures. Which he would use, bit by bit, to fill his evenings sitting in the garden. He now prefers the stump by the bamboo clump to the pavilion, keeping his distance from the jasmines. The whiffs of the

flowers sent over by the occasional breeze pain him. He contemplates pulling them up, getting them out of his sight. But the idea of trampling on jasmine blossom is too cruel to be thought of. He leaves them there, quietly, in a corner. Keeps his eyes on the ever-active fishes, his ears on the sound of their joy. *Pop-pop-pop, pop-pop-pop*. And his mind focused on devising better plans to help the people in his care.

Occasionally, he reads about Martin's new adventures in his letters: how he has enjoyed eating rice dumplings in the Mid-Autumn, downing so many that his stomach swelled throughout the following day; and how he now wields chopsticks like a Chinese, able to pick up fishballs with them. *My funny friend*. Mingzhi would laugh quietly, as pictures of a white man with a swollen stomach struggling to pick up fishballs with chopsticks come vividly to his mind. Other times, Mingzhi indulges himself by recalling the praises of himself he has overheard from the floor of his court-office, the streets, the villages. Reassuring voices, driving him forward.

He feels as though he will be here forever, in this little corner of the world, and he likes the thought of it. He doesn't need a big space, only a spot where he can stand on his own feet. *Like here, like now*. But with his mother.

In the pond, the red carp are swimming round the edge in a long fleet, one following closely after another, as if there is a leader up front, taking them on a tour. A happy family trip.

As he looks on, Mingzhi promises himself: *One day, mother will come and live with me*. The fishes nod as they dart past: *Pop-pop-pop, I agree; pop-pop-pop, I agree*.

### *Chapter Sixteen*

When school reopens in Pindong Town, something puts Mingzhi's plans on permanent hold.

\*

Mingyuan can't wait to return to his world. The gambling den. The brothel. His favourite singsong girl.

Who is also favoured by someone else. Someone as stubborn as he is, who challenges him and thinks money—which they both have in handfals—is the one thing that is everything.

As though Likang has cast his shadow over his son, an immaculate suit of history clings tight to Mingyuan. A row erupts between the girl's admirers. Only this time, a knife is raised. A death is involved. Not the challenger, not Mingyuan, but his teenage servant, behind whose back Mingyuan dodges to evade the thrust.

The news swims into every household, tearooms, public houses, opium and gambling dens, the streets. Into the steaming rice, the cups of tea and wine, the pipes and dice. Fresh and flavoured with details of the singsong girl in question, the fight, the *loyal* servant, the murderer. More flavours are being stirred into the talks, as though they were

all there, the chatters, as though they witnessed the very act. And they are waiting, wishing to see more, to witness the murderer being punished.

‘It never came into my head that he’d do this!’

‘Aye, still a new groom!’

‘What’s the point of fighting over a singsong girl when you have a beautiful wife at home?’

‘That’s the problem with rich people. They’ll never have enough – money or women.’

‘A death for a death. Do you think he’ll be hanged or beheaded?’

‘Who knows? Let’s wait and see.’

They wait. And wait.

And nothing happens.

As though nothing has happened.

Mandarin Liu sits in silence in his court-office. On the desk before him, documents pile high. He notices none of them but the one that lies wide open. The report on the brothel murder.

‘Stupid idiots!’

Bang!

His angry hand thumps the desk. The papers fall, scattering across the floor.

*Those two idiots.* One, with his niece as a new wife at home, went to look for pleasure at the brothel; the other, with the money he gave, fought against his mousy-headed nephew-in-law.

It is not difficult to deal with Mingyuan. He has sealed his mouth with silver, knowing well that Mingyuan will not want his secret activities disclosed. Not to Master Chai certainly. Still, the case has to be sorted out. Already, he can hear whispers from the streets. The town is watching. People are gathering round the gallows, waiting for the big day when his nephew-in-law will be hanged.

*My stupid nephew-in-law!*

Another bang on the desk.

He squeezes his temples. A wrong move will cost him his position, and he knows it well. There were dozens of witnesses in the brothel that night. The girls and their clients. *A bunch of low-class freaks.* Mandarin Liu snorts, knowing trouble is the last thing they will want. He resolves: he will send his butler, with plenty of silver.

The mandarin sits back, still rigid, anxious fingers knuckling the armrests.

A widely told story is now being revised: the teenager was the attacker, and the other man acted in self-defence. This new version of the insiders' story races to the ears of the public with the ultimate *truth*: the victim was in fact the villain, the murderer the victim. The so-called eyewitnesses hiss into the ears of the waiters in teahouses and public houses, the most efficient transmitters, who later hiss into the ears of the hawkers and their customers, merchants and traders, gamblers and opium addicts during their tea or meal breaks. Who later hiss into the ears of their women at home. Who later hiss among themselves in the alleys, markets, and while washing by the river.

The first time they hear about it, they shake their heads. Disbelief.

The second time, question marks appear in their eyes. Uncertainty.

The third, more details are asked for, mental images reconstructed.

The fourth.

Heads nod, lips twitch in contempt. Fresh details leap from mouth to mouth, nudging away the older versions. All fingers point at the *delinquent* teenager.

In his court-office, Mandarin Liu stamps his seal on the scroll, endorsing his conclusion: 'Self-defence'. His fingers shake.

The case is closed.

\*

Before Mingyuan has figured out the best way to report his servant's death to his grandfather, the news reaches the mansion. The second version of it.

The servants shake their heads as they whisper among themselves in shock, disbelief and sympathy:

'I bet they're still in the dark, his poor parents in that far-off village.'

'Old and poor, without their only son to look after them.'

'That's fate. What else can you say? A life like ours is worth nothing.'

'Aye. He was a good kid. I'll believe he launched the attack when the sun starts rising in the west.'

'You know how it is. Justice isn't intended for people like us.'

They are wrong this time.

However many versions of the story there may be, it doesn't seem to bother Master Chai too much. Instead, only three phrases occupy his mind:

1. MY SERVANT.
2. MANDARIN LIU'S NEPHEW-IN-LAW.
3. KILLED.

Like the blocks of a jigsaw puzzle, they are instantly rearranged into:

MANDARIN LIU'S nephew-in-law. KILLED. MY servant.

Click! The right combination. The only thing he needs to know.

*My servant. Died at the hands of that cunning old fox's nephew in-law!*

The notion spreads as quickly as the old man's anger, crowding his head, nudging away the many questions he might ask: Where and when and how did it happen? Where was Mingyuan? And where is he now?

The resolved puzzle is thrust aside, replaced by a set of nouns with a missing verb:

1. MANDARIN LIU.
2. HIS NEPHEW-IN-LAW.

It doesn't take Master Chai long to work out the connecting word. PROTECTS.

There is a distant light in his old brain, vague, but bright enough for him to find some clues.

There is a long moment of thoughtful silence.

Thud!

The sharp tail of his brass stick strikes the concrete, the most beautiful note he has heard for a long time. Since the last performance of the Northern Opera Troupe.

'Get Butler Fong!'

Mingyuan is to be sent for. He is to draft a letter of appeal: eloquently and adequately phrased. Although he would prefer Mingzhi to do it, as no one would be better suited to this task than a *jinshi* – after all, it's for Mingzhi's sake - he is too far off to be reached. It would be too risky to delay this business. Master Chai works it out: the letter will be read by the Provincial Governor, and a crate of silver will enhance its readability. Another copy of it will be delivered to Imperial Scholar Dai, by hand, without the silver.

He takes a puff of opium, lies back on his couch, and laughs.

*Your time has come, my old friend!*

'Go get Butler Fong!'

The shout sounds elated rather than impatient, drowned out by echoes of his laughter. The servant girls exchange looks, surprised. Smiles have been absent from their master's face for some time, and laughter is even more rare. Their eyes widen when their master orders Butler Fong to arrange a funeral for the unfortunate servant, and compensation for his parents.

*What a timely death!*

Master Chai takes another puff, feels his head getting lighter, then his body. He is drifting out of the mansion, floating all the way to the government office in Pindong Town. He sees Mandarin Liu trapped between four walls, pacing the room in agitation like an ant on the lip of a hot cauldron: always running, round and round, yet escaping to nowhere. He sees, too, Mingzhi sitting tall in Mandarin Liu's court-office, in his new seventh ranking mandarin gown.

The old man laughs again and shouts into the blue sky: 'I'll see to it. I'll see justice done for my man!'

For himself.

Mingyuan is rushed home that night. Since he is fully engrossed by his plan, Master Chai asks no questions and sees nothing of his grandson's pale face or his tremulous hands. Only urges him to write on: a miscarriage of justice, a case that needs investigation.

Done. Mingyuan reads back the letters in a trembling voice. His grandfather nods, smoothing his goatee. Butler Fong is sent for again. The letters are to be dispatched first thing in the morning, one of them to the Governor, the other to Imperial Scholar Dai.

In the middle of the night, Master Chai re-dreams his daydream. The contents of the letters read by Mingyuan ring like music in his ears, more alluring, more absorbing than a Peking opera. In fact, the opera is in full swing. The villain, who has been caught and chained, turns his head round ...

Mandarin Liu!

Master Chai hisses out a sigh of satisfaction, tosses, then settles into the embrace of his soft blanket. The dream continues in the deep darkness where it belongs, along with many other night activities. Such as, the creak of a back door, the ducking out of a shadow.

Mingyuan.

Swift and soundless.

Like a mouse.

The peasants whose day starts at dawn see them: two apparitions, white and lean, drifting through the misty darkness. The eyewitnesses shudder, pale-faced. *Calamity will soon befall.* They shut their mouths tight, pretending that it is an illusion, that they have seen nothing. This way they work the fields through out the morning: quiet, deep in thought, with heavy clouds in their stomachs. Occasional glances of confusion are exchanged, each waits for the other to broach the subject—lips move, throats are cleared—yet no words are uttered. The clouds accumulate, crowding their guts, and come midday, they burst. Perched on the dike, the peasants whisper among themselves. Their voices tremble, their eyes flicker with fear, their lunches lie forgotten.

‘The Goddesses of Calamity, I’m sure that’s who they were.’

‘Why here, then?’

‘Look at this crop you’re working on. Isn’t this a good reason for calamities to befall us?’

‘No, not us, I’d say. It’s the Chai they should go after.’

‘Aye, I’d say so. In fact I saw them heading towards the Mansion.’

‘Are you sure? That would serve Landlord Chai right!’

‘Don’t be so naïve. If anything happens to him, do you think our lives will be any better?’

The peasants sigh, shake their heads and fall silent.

\*

In the mansion, a different picture is conjured up. The servant who opened the door to Meilian and her daughter, and later hung about in the west court for more news, is delighted with his long-awaited chance to give a show. The busy morning kitchen is his stage, packed with an eager audience, and his news is hotter than the cauldrons: Mandarin Liu has fled with his family and his nephew-in-law, the murderer!

Eyes widen, mouths gape, exclamations and questions are voiced. Eager faces surround the storyteller, urging him to tell more. Excited, the servant, as if he had been there in Pindong the night before, paints a picture of how the panic-stricken Mandarin Liu, on receiving certain intelligence, hastily packed and fled in the middle of the night like a stoned dog with its head and tail down.

The messy scene of scattered antique vases and pots, paintings and calligraphic displays, exquisite dresses and gowns comes alive. The servants exchange glances of regret: if they could only get hold of just a piece of those valuables!

The storyteller is elated, though, thinking that he has got his piece from the mess: the attention he longs for, with questions and answers over free tobacco and wine for several days to come. *Too good to be true!* He scratches his head and takes his first free puff, not knowing it will soon be proved that it really is too good to be true.

Da Niang holds Meilian and her fourteen-year-old daughter, Jiayi, tight in her embrace. *She's mine again.* Her tears wet the sleeve of the teenage girl.

'Grandma, don't cry. We're here with you now.'

Da Niang glances up at the innocent face. She remembers Meilian as a teenager, how she was married off as young as Jiayi. She turns to her daughter and sees Meilian's sad eyes, haggard from the long journey. *They've walked all the way from Pindong overnight!* Da Niang's throat constricts, her words are jammed in a sour lump. Her maid brings in ginger tea on her mistress's orders. Da Niang watches Meilian and Jiayi drink it, and is glad to see the colour gradually creep back into their cheeks.

Da Niang smooths Jiayi's dress, then Meilian's. Their clothes are as white as the lilies pinned to their hair. They are still in mourning after the death of Meilian's husband less than a year ago. Da Niang stares down at her own pale gown. *Her fate resembles mine.* She knows her daughter has been abiding by the rules of the Three Obedience and the Four Virtues. For the former, Meilian was obedient to her husband, and will be obedient to her son, too; for the latter, she is doubtlessly a woman who leads a life of perfect morality, speaks properly, has modest manners and works with diligence. Yet she has been abandoned by her in-laws, who left her and Jiayi behind when they fled, taking with them their only grandson. Meilian's son.

*Where is he now? Where is my Junwei?* An invisible knife cuts deep across Meilian's heart. She shudders, bending over, holding her chest. Da Niang hugs her tighter.

*The cunning fox has run away!*

Master Chai gnashes his teeth. His balled-up fist strikes the armrest. Soundless. The plumwood feels especially hard for the first time. He kneads his fingers, but doesn't

feel the pain. The Governor is yet to announce his action. Master Chai the Informer has been waiting to see his old enemy stumble to his doom.

*And now he is gone, with that murderer his nephew in-law!*

The old man's heavy breathing fills the central hall, pressing against the pillars, the walls, ceiling and floor, forcing the young maid into holding hers. The candle and opium bowl in her hands shake as she prepares the pipe. She peeps occasionally at her master, and steals a breath on finding him contemplating the prancing dragons on the pillars.

Master Chai's eyes follow the beasts' upstretched tentacles, almost touching the ceiling. *Yes, my Mingzhi will move up the ranks, I'll make sure of that.* He decides instantly, knowing that the Governor will not resist a second chest of silver, the perfect gift for the New Year. He draws his first long breath of the morning and sits back. Tiredness besieges him all of a sudden. He shouts with his remaining strength: 'Where's my pipe?'

Clank!

The clay bowl smashes to pieces on the floor. The death-faced maid fumbles to pick up the debris.

Master Chai glances down at her trembling back and frowns. *Girls, useless.* Instantly the image of two *girls* in white dresses entering the Mansion at dawn sneaks into his mind. An abandoned widow and her daughter, still in the period of mourning. *How inauspicious!* The rain has brought him enough bad luck, which finally began to change with the discovery of Mandarin Liu's wrong-doing. The situation must not be

jeopardised. *No, there is no place here for that ominous pair.* He calls for Butler Fong: the servant who let them in—and thinks himself lucky—must be punished.

Giving the orders exhausts the old man. The maid brings him his long-awaited pipe. Master Chai takes a puff, then closes his eyes and feels the warmth travelling deep inside him. He squints up from under his lids at Mingzhi's portrait on the wall. His handsome grandson is floating on iridescent clouds, as bright and colourful as his young eyes, and he is parading the hall. *Such a beautiful world.* Master Chai takes another puff and closes his eyes again, this time for a good nap.

An open chest of silver springs into his dream. Glittering white, reflecting on the greedy eyes of the Governor, who holds out a scroll to him. CHAI MINGZHI. With an official stamp.

Master Chai turns over and heaves a sigh of satisfaction.

\*

In the real world, however, the tradition of gift-giving in the Lunar New Year is broken by foreign forces, who, in turn, introduce a new custom: gift-demanding. The gift: the fertile land along Meinam River round Rangoon. A treaty is signed, as generous as demanded, in time for the red-haired devils to raise their star-flag over the paddy fields in the New Year. A perfect gift for the festive season, indeed.

Traditions keep changing, as the forceful westerly wind sweeps in with it fragments of life from the faraway lands. They scatter themselves around, seeping into the earth, melting into the waters. Into wells and tanks. Veins and flesh. And so the changes become rightful, indisputable, and are enshrined in the textbooks of the first foreign school in the north.

In a small southern village yet to be reached by the westerly wind, Master Chai prepares his gift chests of silver, happily, willingly.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

### **Pindong Town, 1897**

The carriage makes slow progress along the main street. In it Mingzhi sits upright, his neck strained, his ears deafened by the gongs and trumpets at the front of the procession. Before him faces shuffle, many, anonymous. Curious and staring. Crowding in for a glimpse of their new mandarin. He retains his posture, staring ahead, telling himself to relax. *They are my charges now, my people.* His expression is fixed between a smile and a frown - a kind, approachable mandarin, or an iron face with an iron heart. The choice has yet to be made as a string of sudden clattering sounds bursts in on his wandering mind. In the whirling red flakes of the firecrackers, an acrid smell of gunpowder rushes to his nostrils. He sneezes.

The carriage stops.

Mingzhi looks up. The golden strokes of the newly painted horizontal board glow in the morning sun:

PINDONG TOWN GOVERNMENT OFFICE

Underneath, the door is wide open, waiting for its new master. Mingzhi closes his eyes. *Too sudden, too soon!*

For someone with expectations like Master Chai's, it has been a long wait. Anyhow, two chests of silver in total given to the Governor have not been wasted. One letter of recommendation has been conjured up, travelling all the way from the Provincial City to the Forbidden City, another from Mingzhi's future father-in-law, the Imperial Scholar. One would have been good enough; two are irresistible.

Master Chai's laughter hovers beneath the high ceiling of the central hall. He puts down his pipe, lays his head sideways on the jade pillow on his couch and stares upwards. The uplifted tentacles of the dragons dance in the echoes of his laughter. He heaves a long sigh of relief, turns and sprawls on the couch, relaxed. He has not been feeling so well lately. Money and connections, the mightiest of weapons, he has them both. A touch of the magic button and the power is released at once. The result:

*A sixth-ranking mandarin post for my grandson!*

A rank higher than Mandarin Liu. Too good to be true; an auspicious omen for the New Year. Master Chai holds out his hand. The maid passes him the prepared pipe, in which the black gum has turned to bubbling froth. Master Chai brings the pipe closer. Through the blur before him, the dragons' eyes soften, their faces look tame, their smiles colourful! Master Chai inhales, long and deep. His mind follows Mingzhi as he enters Mandarin Liu's old—oops—*his grandson's new* office.

Mingzhi steps out of the carriage. The brightness of the clear blue sky falls on his head, shoulders and body, embracing him. He takes a deep breath and strides forward.

Behind him, slicing through the crowd, a pair of eyes follows him, pinned to his back, a gaze of hatred and jealousy. Of anger. Mingyuan stares down from the second

floor of the public house. His half-brother's new gown seems too splendid, too shiny. He averts his eyes and shuts them tightly. His face crumples. He gropes for the cup of wine on the table and drains it. Feels the liquid burn down his throat till it reaches his heart. He has to put it out, the fire. He empties another cup. And another.

Downstairs, across the road, the new mandarin is hoo-ha-ed into the government office. Vague sounds of gongs and trumpets leap over the walls. The crowd disperses. Slivers of red paper race in the northerly wind, capering high like liberated spirits. But not high enough to reach the banister of the second floor of the public house, and the young man who sits drinking there, so despondent that he loses his usual alertness, his acute sensitivity for sound and movement. Below him, a carriage quietly slips past, entering the alley at the side of the government house, approaching the back door where Little Mouse is waiting. For Meilian and Jiayi.

Inside his new office Mingzhi paces round, pretending to admire the horizontal boards and silk banners hanging on the walls, the congratulations and well wishes in golden inscriptions and embroideries. **All the way up the Mandarin Ladder.** *Have they arrived yet? Moving steadily up the colourful cloud.* *Did anyone see them?* He cracks his knuckles, keeps walking, sees nothing but sweet words about fortune, status and fame. *It's them, my unfortunate sister and niece, who have brought me these.* Meilian and Jiayi, who came to him after Master Chai slammed the door of the mansion in their faces.

*Yet they are my lucky stars!*

Mingzhi remembers the look of them on their arrival in Lixing, after days of journeying in an open cart: dust-covered, travel-worn, sick. Like wilting leaves,

wrinkled, discoloured, urgently needing water and nourishment. Mingzhi's heart clenched. *I will not let them suffer again*, he promised himself, setting aside the vacant south court for them, assigning Little Mouse to supervise its decoration to the pair's specification. The loyal servant, too, worked hard to ensure that no news about the new occupants should leak to the Mansion. He also boiled extra bowls of bird's nest soup for Meilian and Jiayi. This he did without Mingzhi's instruction.

*A clever young man he is.* Mingzhi smiles, staring up as he strolls on.

### **Fair and Just**

*Only this.* Mingzhi stops in front of the board, the highest of all. Four square, honest faces in thick and forceful golden brushstrokes look down on him. *Only this makes sense.* How he wishes all matters could be settled fairly and justly, all humans treated equally, regardless of gender. *Women.* He sighs, thinking about his mother, sisters and niece. How the corrupt fragments of Confucianism and Ritual have thrust themselves into their flesh, invading their veins. Sharp edges pressing against delicate flesh and sinew. Pain. After pain. After pain.

Which he has noticed in them.

The fragments have melted and run into their bloodstream, and they don't feel it any longer, the pain. It has become part of them, the beliefs, the customs, the rituals. They have channelled into their extremities, their bodies, their brains, guarding their everyday life. A majestic voice rings out from inside their bodies, firm and harsh, deciding their place on earth, telling them what to do and what not to. Like how Meilian and Jiayi kept themselves to their quarters, conscious of their own inauspiciousness, not wishing to cause Mingzhi trouble.

He had given them time, waited.

For the first time they had a place of their own, Meilian and Jiayi. Their own world. For the first time, too, Meilian made decisions: about their meals, about lessons for Jiayi. For the former, she ordered simple, inexpensive dishes. *A good woman should not be a burden on a man*, the voice in her bloodstream sang aloud. For the latter, *sewing and the culinary arts*, the voice said, *will make her a good woman, get her a good husband*. That, she couldn't disagree with. Timetable was set. Cotton spinning, thread twisting in the morning; the afternoon for fine needlework and embroidery; and cookery, baking, and the preparing of wine and sauces in the evening. Discipline but not exhausting. Along with the cabbage, fresh or salted, the sweet potatoes and fried eggs with salted radishes she asked for, came streaky pork, herbal chicken soup, braised duck or steamed fish specially ordered by her mandarin brother. These she accepted, and they ate, munching slowly, savouring mouthful after mouthful of their relative's love with gratitude. Let it in, let it in. Let it warm their stomachs, their hearts.

Until their sunken cheeks and limbs filled out, colour re-emerged, smiles reappeared. Until laughter rang out in the courtyard. Then one evening, the mother and daughter were sent for.

They waited at the pavilion. Meilian kept kneading her fingers, twisting about uneasily on her stool. Mingzhi now recalls Meilian's agitation, imagining the questions in her mind: *Has grandpa found out about us? Do we have to leave?*

He shakes his head, *oh, my sister*, and keeps pacing. On the floor near his desk, a servant is unpacking his books, bundle after bundle. Reaching for one pile, another is knocked over. The tower of books topples, and one of them slides under Mingzhi's foot.

He picks it up. It's a collection of poems and verses, the same book he showed Meilian that evening at the pavilion.

*Has Little Mouse received them all right?* He leafs through it, pauses at the sight of Li Qingzhao's poem, 'To the Tune of Drunk in a Yellow Shadow' – one of Meilian's favourites:

Thin mist and thick clouds dim the everlasting day;  
 Camphor incense fades away from the golden animal.  
 Once again it is the Double Ninth Festival.  
 Through the jade pillow and the gauze bed curtain  
 The cold begins to penetrate at midnight.

When I hold up the wine cup by the eastern hedge,  
 In the twilight a hidden fragrance fills my sleeves.  
 Do not say that one's soul cannot be rapt!  
 When the bamboo screen rolls up in the west wind,  
 I look thinner than the yellow flower.

He sees a lean figure by the window, alone and pale, shivering in the morning chill. *No, no, my sister will not suffer Li's fate.* He turns the page, seeking out the poem he read for Meilian and Jiayi, 'To the Tune of a Variation of Rinsing Silk Stream':

Thousands of light flakes of crushed gold for its blossoms,  
 And of trimmed jade for its layer of leaves;  
 This flower has the air of scholar Yen Fu.  
 How brilliant!

Plum flowers are too common;  
Lilacs, too coarse, when compared with this.  
Yet, its penetrating fragrance  
drives away my fond dreams  
of faraway places.

How merciful!

*Yes, she should drive away the unhappy past and start afresh.* He wants Meilian to appreciate every little thing in life as the poet had tried to. He remembers his sister's tearful gaze as she listened to the poem, and knows she understood. He thumps the book closed. A loud echo in the spacious hall frightens the servant into knocking down another pile of books. He glances up at Mingzhi as he hurriedly rearranges them, expecting a roar like he used to get from his old master. Strangely, the mandarin stays silent. *This official is different.* The servant gives a sigh of relief, and throws a look of admiration at his new master.

Who notices nothing of all this.

*Have they settled down in their new home?*

'Of course they have!'

Little Mouse lands a heavy *trust me* pat on his chest, his tone excited, his spirits high. *Another secret I share with my master!*

Mingzhi imagines Meilian and Jiayi in his Little Hut—now theirs—admiring the pond of fishes, their leaping and the splashing of water. Experiencing the first taste of freedom he once experienced in that very same room, that same courtyard.

\*

Butler Fong arrives with gifts from home: Master Chai's ivory abacus, elegant, exquisitely crafted; Da Niang's hand-sewn pillowcases, embroidered with plum blossoms; Uncle Liwei's sandalwood chessboard, carefully engraved with lines and characters, his calligraphic *lishu*. At night Mingzhi lies on his pillows, feels the little plum blossoms caressing his face, soft against his skin. Through the gauze, he sees the chessboard on the table in the middle of the room, the pieces standing in their positions, ready for battle. He dreams. A kind smile, a game of chess. Silent, without a starting point, without an ending. From behind a curtain of pink flowers there comes a soft whisper: *Do not forget your origins*. He wakes with a smile on his face, the voice ringing in his head, and the day is waiting.

Mingzhi keeps the abacus in the display cabinet in his study. Later he lays it away in the drawer of his desk.

\*

A bigger town means more work, more cases to handle, problems to solve. Longer hours spent in reading complaints, appeals, suggestions. He doesn't grumble, though, immersing himself in the piles of documents on his desk till late at night: focused, prudent, scrupulous. There are no more petty complaints about stolen eggs or goats or unreasonable neighbours; instead cases of bullies, treacheries, fights and assaults top the list. Inside the documents, notes promising silver in exchange for favours come more

often, the amounts larger, and Mingzhi discards them all as he did in Lixing. *This custom must change, and I must set an example.*

There are grievances, too, noises of discontent and contempt towards his age, his inexperience, his new practices. A repeat of his early days in Lixing, though the noises come louder this time. More watchful eyes, too, all waiting to witness his failure. He is aware, though not afraid. Promises himself he will be a good mandarin, as he already is. He plans investigations, detailed and meticulous; drafts solutions, fair and just. Firmly holds on to the saying, 'as there are rules governing a family, there are rules too, to govern a state,' a principle that has long been imprinted in his mind by Old Scholar Yan. And he is to ensure those rules are followed.

*I will, I will,* he says quietly, promising his teacher.

\*

At night, lying in bed, Mingzhi's mind's eye travels to his first spring in Pindong: the colours, the sounds, the smells, the air. The people. *A vibrant town it seemed to be.* Yet crime and violence surface from the underworld, looming in the streets and alleys. Prostitution, gambling, opium addiction, and their causes and effects. Mingzhi sighs, staring through the thin gauze at the wall, on which shadows of the willow outside the window are cast. Dark shapes of evil claws spreading, reaching, threatening. *I will not give in.* Mingzhi bites his lip, promises consistency and transparency in his administration. Promises a town of real vibrancy, with a new blueprint of life for its people.

He shuts his eyes against the shadows, pricks his ears for the tiny movement of his fishes, the clear, reassuring sound of water. *It will be the same all over again,* he

convinces himself. *My little world*. A garden, a pond, some carp. Willows and a pavilion.

No jasmine.

\*

It's not the same after all, he should know, not with the changes in his situation and status. A letter finally comes from Master Chai.

'As the eldest, and as you are now capable, it's time to carry out your familial duties,' the old man demands.

*My duties...*

Sitting at his desk, Mingzhi makes a 'to-do' list. At the top of it is a name:

MINGYUAN

Almost instantly he draws a line across it. And then writes again. And crosses it out. The bowl of ink empties and Little Mouse, who has been waiting at his side, comes forward to replenish it. And he sees, on the paper:

MINGYUAN

MINGYUAN

MINGYUAN

MINGYUAN

MINGYUAN

MINGYUAN

He recognises not the characters but the quivering of the strokes and lines. A troubled heart. Little Mouse quietly pours a cup of tea before retreating to one side. Mingzhi doesn't seem to have noticed him. There is something crowding his chest, an

intense pressure. He leans back and inhales, his eyes browsing the room. On the moon table in the corner, a stick of incense burns low. The string of dark ash tilts, then falls crumbling into the ceramic bowl, mixing with the base-sand to form a mesh of grey. *We are the same, of the same surname, will be buried in the same clan's land eventually.* He exhales, sits up, soaks his brush in plenty of ink and writes:

MINGYUAN.

With a full stop.

\*

Mingyuan scrunches the letter and hurls it away. *What a hypocrite!* The offer from his half-brother has been generous: accommodation, a courtyard to himself, where he can concentrate on his studies. It's an eldest brother's duty to take care of his younger sibling, the young mandarin says. *Nothing but an excuse to keep an eye on me.* The thought sparks up the cinders in his stomach. Flames flicker, hot, spreading. He has to put them out.

'Get me my wine!'

A full jar, a few gulps, an immediate soothing.

Three days later, another letter arrives, this time from Master Chai, not a request but an order. Now that Mingzhi has settled down in his new post, the old man has finally got time for Mingyuan. He has begun to rethink the incident involving the unfortunate servant, Mingyuan's failure in his exam and his concealment of his whereabouts from the master. Your brother will help you to be disciplined, his grandfather says. His stern face appears between the strokes of black ink, his gaze fixed on his grandson.

Mingyuan clenches his fists. The word 'NO' springs to his lips, halts, and is swallowed back. Wrapped in the thick, hard shell of indignation, it sticks in his throat, squeezing and thrusting. He feels it accumulate, the pressure, then it spurts all the way out, bursting into a roar: 'Wine, more wine!'

\*

A meeting with his half-brother is inevitable, and Mingzhi makes it brief and clear: a courtyard to yourself, your servants, your way. Mingyuan grasps his meaning at once. As in the saying, 'Water from the river shall not run into the well,' both of them are not to interfere with the other's business.

Mingyuan nods, his face impassive, then turns and leaves, his tea untouched. Mingzhi stares at his half-brother's receding back, his gown loose and creased at the elbows, back and hem. There is a sudden grab at his heart. He blurts out: 'If—when you need anything, anything at all, you know I'm always here!'

Mingyuan pauses—a second or two—then walks on.

*Let's see, let's see.*

\*

Mingzhi resumes his Sunday outings. Plain-clothed, with Little Mouse for company, of course. Sneaking out the back door, taking slow walks along the river to Father Terry's little church. Where Meilian and Jiayi are waiting.

Encouraged by Mingzhi, the pair have been attending Sunday mass, and helping Father Terry prepare lunch and relief for the congregation. Glad to be useful, the mother and daughter work together with passion. Smiles exchanged over a steamy cauldron, soft whispers between chopping and frying and stirring. Quiet and efficient.

Father Terry likes his helpers, and is happy to have two extra pairs of hands. In the afternoon when work is done and the congregation have left with full stomachs, bags of rice and sugar, and smiles of contentment, Meilian and Jiayi sit in Father Terry's study, learning English and knowledge as Mingzhi once did. And their mandarin brother always arrives just in time to join them. He darts occasional glances of encouragement at the women as he revises his lessons, listening to Father Terry's gentle words of guidance, and the soft, diffident voices of Meilian and Jiayi.

A cosy room, a pot of constantly replenished hot tea, a loyal servant waiting to one side. The afternoon passes.

\*

Mingyuan counts the cash in his kerchief, hearing nothing of the clinking and clattering of dice and blocks, the cheers of joy, the sighs and curses of disappointment, the shouts of anger and fights. He keeps fingering the few pieces of silver and the strings of cash, his reward from Mandarin Liu.

*Last of all.*

Suddenly, the surrounding noises rise like surging waves, come rumbling towards him from all directions, swooping into his head, pounding behind his temples. He holds his head, trying to press it down, the pain.

*Should have found out where he has fled to.*

He curses, regretting the opportunity to ask for more. *I saved his life.* He remembers blundering through the darkness, trudging all the way to Pindong, informing the mandarin of his grandfather's letter of appeal. The cuts and bruises, sore toes and aching legs. *And this is all I got.* He stares at the money again. No matter what, he

knows if an investigation were to be made into the murder, his name would certainly be brought up. *At least, at least I have these.* He looks up. There is a faint flicker of light from a corner. Uncle Eagle. He is hawk-eyeing Mingyuan. The young man turns, hurriedly ties the kerchief up and keeps the bundle carefully under the inner layer of his gown near his chest. Without Mandarin Liu at his back, without his guardian angel, he senses the piercing gaze at his back. *A wait-and-see stare, that says, how long can you survive?* His spine prickles. He swears he will double his money, maybe triple it. He will.

In front of him at the gambling table, there are two familiar figures, strong and burly. Mandarin Liu's former followers, who have been idle since their master left them. They were the hatchet men who made sure the rents and taxes were paid on time. Men with muscles but no brains, who would win everything in a fighting ring but nothing at the gambling table. Like now.

*They need a new master; one that can show them how to make money.*

His mind moves fast, and in seconds a plan is worked out. Mingyuan steps forward and taps them on the shoulders.

'Let's have a chat.'

\*

Mingzhi visits his old school, proposing a foundation for needy students, handing out a generous sum to begin with. Head Teacher Scholar Ning thanks his favourite student, praises his achievements. Teacher and student sit talking, taking slow sips of tea between news and plans. The Germans have set foot in Qingdao, a treaty is only a matter of time. There are more railways, more factories, constructed by technical experts from the west,

for their own benefit, of course. More opium is imported; higher trade deficits are recorded. A picture of a country in ruins becomes clearer, more visible.

They fall silent, a long interval of tea and thought.

‘You will help to stop this. I have faith in you.’

Scholar Ning grips Mingzhi’s shoulder, his voice firm and persistent. ‘You changed him, your brother,’ he says, assuring Mingzhi of Mingyuan’s recent improved behaviour, and that he has been attending school and making progress. ‘And you can do more, I know.’

Mingzhi feels the pressure on his shoulder, the weight of the Forbidden City. Heavy, pressing. I’ll do my best, he murmurs.

He does.

In his court-office Mingzhi works his way through piles of documents, burying his head in them, and so he doesn’t hear the growing turbulence outside. Over the high walls, from the streets. From the hawkers and shop owners, who, in quivering voices, describe a new gang of thugs who are competing with the local rascals for protection money. While the latter settle for one-off cash for wine and dice, this new gang is different: the way they keep the details of their victims, their whereabouts, their daily activities, threatening not only them but also their families. A dark shadow that clings onto their life, that they are unable to shrug off. And they are warned to keep their heads down. Shh-shh, shh-shh, no voice is to be heard.

\*

Mingzhi returns late from the Provincial City, his first visit to the Governor since taking up his new office. Exhausted, he closes his eyes as the carriage rustles along, yet the

Governor's face sways before him. A false smile on a fleshy face, expanding, filling up his mind. *Huh!* He opens his eyes, remembering the room in which he once sat waiting expectantly but fruitlessly for a word with the top mandarin of the province. *And now he's asking to see me.* He shakes his head, takes up the invitation and examines his name and title on the envelope.

The title.

Granted by the Emperor, granting a seat level with the Governor, the chance for closed door discussions. Yet still, tax targets are to be achieved. Still, 'all mandarins know where to get their money from.' Same words, same tone, same expressions.

*Nothing changes.*

Mingzhi closes his eyes again. Approaching the government office, he hears a commotion. A loud cry, the angry shouts of guards, and louder cries in response. The carriage grinds to a halt. Mingzhi sticks his neck out.

'Help us, Your Excellency!'

'Go away!'

In front of the carriage, the guards are grappling with two peasants, an elderly couple, stopping them from coming near the carriage. Seeing the mandarin, they push forward and are pushed back, unable to break through the strong arms of the younger men. Desperate, the woman flops down on the ground and cries: 'Please, Your Excellency!'

Her voice is hoarse, her eyes bloodshot, her looks bitter. The man kneels down beside her.

Mingzhi signals to the guards: *let them in*. He prepares his ears and his heart. *I will listen, this is what I'm here for.*

He listens, and takes action. Immediately, without hesitation.

‘This mandarin is different!’

The following day in the streets, the hawkers cheer. There will be a special team of guards patrolling the market area. Local rascals asking for protection money will be seized, severely punished. Cases of extortion and threats are to be reported. A zero tolerance policy. The shop and stall owners learn the new phrase, relating this hottest story through the town.

‘We should thank them, for having the courage to approach the mandarin!’

‘What have they got to lose? Their only son has been beaten up so badly.’

‘Those hooligans! How much can these poor peasants earn selling sweet potatoes? Where on earth can they find the money for them?’

‘If they would show some sign of humanity, we wouldn’t call them bastards!’

‘Protection, huh! How dare they ask money for that? You see, now we have a real guardian.’

‘I heard he paid a herbalist to treat the poor fellow.’

‘Unbelievable!’

They grin. *Never before, never before.*

The new mandarin stands tall in their mind’s eye. His face gets confused with that of Bao Gong, the legendary Black-faced Official, the most upright and honest official

of all time. An effective, efficient investigator who righted all wrongs, loathed corruption and embezzlement. A saviour to the poor and the victims of injustice and discrimination.

‘I’m sure he is!’ They remark as they pass the word around, nodding, smiling.

The reincarnation of Bao Gong is established.

Da Niang's trips to Pindong Town now need no excuse. *To serve my son.* The reason stands tall above the Three Rules of Obedience, strong and indisputable for a widow with an only son to serve. A son of importance, with a Position. *Yes, serve him, and serve him well.* Master Chai merely nods and waves her off. The old man lies on his couch, taking occasional puffs as he admires his mandarin grandson's photo on the wall, and imagines a new photo: Mingzhi in his new gown that carries the emblem of the eaglet, the symbol of a sixth-ranking official. In his mind's eye the snowy bird lifts its wings and kicks its legs as it dances, white against the iridescent rays of the old man's mental paradise.

Da Niang's mental paradise, however, is built upon the characters 'nu' and 'zi', a *daughter* and a *son*, constructing the word 'hao', *good*. She is a good woman with a son and daughter, and she feels good. Now. In the Little Hut from Mingzhi's schooldays that he has rented, with Little Mouse's help, for Meilian and Jiayi. A secret they are to keep from Master Chai.

*My children.* Da Niang admires her son, daughter and granddaughter at the dinner table. Jiayi pours tea for Meilian. Da Niang stares at the shadows of the pair on the wall behind them, one huge, the other tiny. Sees herself dissolving into the bigger mould, and Meilian the smaller. The moulds of history. Of the past. *How time has flown.* She sighs, but smiles at once as her eyes meet Mingzhi's.

Plain-clothed, Mingzhi has sneaked out of his residence at the government office. After Jiayi has filled their cups, he raises his: a toast to the family. He moves his gaze from his mother to his sister and his niece as he takes small sips, rolling the tealeaves on his tongue, tasting the bittersweetness of *pu're*. Smiling. Smiling.

He hears the fishes smiling in the garden, too, and remembers the evening he spent with Uncle Liwei in Lixing. Remembers also the chess set and the new chessboard hibernating in his room. He swallows his tea, the same he drank with his uncle in the pavilion. A tiny leaf escapes from his tongue and sticks in his throat. He chokes, a hand holding his chest, the other reaching for the table. Chopsticks drop, cups overturn, the kerosene lamplight flickers. The room full of smiles turns to laughter. *My mandarin son, he is a child after all*. Laughingly, Da Niang hands him her kerchief. He wipes his mouth and face with it, letting the familiar faint smell of sandalwood fill his nostrils. The moment freezes.

\*

In the mansion, Liwei, alone in the south court, works his way through the year-end accounts. Fingers fiddling, wooden pieces of abacus click-clacking, loud against the quietness, rumpling the calmness between his brows.

\*

‘Impossible!’

Master Chai hurls the book to the floor. Two harvests a year and the combined figure is less than the first harvest of the very first year. Likang’s untimely death has proved inauspicious; but then, things should change from now on, with Mingzhi’s new appointment.

Mingzhi.

*My lucky star.*

Immediately the old man has his next move in mind, something that should have been done long ago. He will see to it this time.

‘Call Butler Fong!’

The dowry, the fixing of the date, the gowns and guest list and food. So much to do, yet he can’t wait for it. Can’t wait to have a glimpse of red, the colour of good fortune, which has now filled up his mind’s eye.

Red. Candles, bed-net, sheets and covers. Cut-outs of *Xi*, Double Happiness, on the wall, the windows. The bright, dazzling colour of a wedding.

Mingzhi stands gazing at the figure by his bedside. Red veil, red gown, red shoes, almost melting into the background. He looks hard, but is unable to tell if she is fat or thin, pretty or ugly.

*A stranger. My wife.*

The thought scares him. He goes to the table and fills the cups with wine, the drink for their first night. The go-between Mama Zhang's lengthy briefing doesn't escape him. He knows he has to call her to him, his bride, remove her headpiece and veil, and they will have their wine. Instead, he sits. The pair of dragon and phoenix candles is burning fiercely, hot tears of wax cascading down, coagulating into two pools of red by the candle stands. He sits, watching.

The candles burn low; the pools of red tears accumulate.

There is a sound, faint, muffled. Mingzhi traces the source of it, sees the slight movement under the headpiece, the trembling of the shoulders, the breathing that is getting short. Yet she tries to sit still, struggling to stop herself sobbing. Mingzhi stares at the patches of dark wet on the veil where the eyes are. *She doesn't have a choice either.* He thinks about Meilian, her wedding, and the tears he couldn't understand as a child. Her unhappiness in a supposed-to-be happy occasion.

And her, Jasmine. The footpath, the temple, the back garden, the lakeside. The eyes, the face, the giggles.

His heart aches.

*Was she happy at her wedding?* He remembers the face under the raised curtain, her curiosity. An active, lively soul.

And a murderer husband. Mingzhi's heart sinks. The association troubles him. The question he has been suppressing rises in a rush: *Where is she now? Where is she?* He hears the sound of low sobbing, as if Jasmine is responding to him, and it gets louder. He turns around.

His bride. She has buried her face in her hands, weeping, and her shoulders shake. Mingzhi's heart melts. He moves forward, sits by the bedside and removes her headpiece and veil. A clean, innocent face, a glimpse of fear. There are tears at the corners of her eyes. She blinks, and the tears roll down like drops of pearl. Mingzhi gingerly dabs them away with his sleeves. She glances up, her eyes search, then cast down hastily. Unsure. He holds her hand, gently stroking her soft, delicate skin. A reassurance: *I will treat you well, I promise.* He places his palm on hers, feels the warmth being channelled between them, running through him. A feeling he has never had before. *A woman, mine.* He sees her blush, knows he does, too.

It's time for the wine. He doesn't hesitate this time.

### *Chapter Eighteen*

Someone has spilt colours on the palette of his life. Everything brightens up. The new groom smiles, reading documents, writing comments, making decisions. Sitting in the carriage, touring the streets. He would look away with his dreamy eyes, a sweet smile gleaming on his young face. Shake his head in a fluster, pulling himself together. The pattern repeats itself. The servants exchange looks when their mandarin slips into his happiness, smile too, without cynicism. Happy to see him happy.

The new couple like taking evening strolls in the garden, talking: his day in the office, the cases, the bottlenecks and his worries, his solutions and ambitions; the patterns and colours of her embroideries, the clothes and shoes she has sewn, the pastries she has learned to bake. The heaviness of the day melts under her attentive gaze, soft whispers and shy smile. Sometimes they walk in silence, listening to the fishes, watching them. Quiet and content.

This evening, however, husband and wife decide to stay indoors. Sitting at his desk Mingzhi glances up occasionally at his wife who stands to one side, grinding ink as he writes. A character, two, and more. Verses formed. A poem is taking shape: about her brows, her eyes, her lips. About the tiny mole above her upper lip, like a black pearl

that dances when she smiles. And he reads it to her, watching as she blushes, feeling the sudden fullness in his chest. Surprised as the evening slips away so quickly.

\*

News from the outside world doesn't seem to be pleasing. In the Imperial City, the intellectual reformers stage yet another failed demonstration. Scraps of the appeal signed by two thousand *jurens* from eight districts swirl in the early breeze of 1898, falling to the ground, rotting fast in the spring rain, seeping deep into the soil. Taking away with them the dignity of a nation. It is confirmed now. The Germans have a firm grip on Qingdao.

His wife watches as Mingzhi reads the now widely circulated newspaper of the reformers, as he knits his brows tight, then eases: the former for the treaty; the latter the mushrooming of provincial intellectual political groups across the country, motivated by none other than Kang Yuwei. A determination to fight against corrupt traditions and bureaucracy, to rescue the nation from its invaders.

*There's still hope.*

Mingzhi drinks the tea his wife brings him. Warm. Like her smile. He wishes that all the chaos in the north would stop where it is. *Never to reign here; spare my family.* He is immediately ashamed of these thoughts, the cowardice fondly used by the enemies to describe his countrymen.

Hurriedly taking a drink of tea-for-hiding-shameful-thoughts, he chokes on the mouthful and coughs ferociously. His wife smiles as she gently rubs his back, and dabs his mouth and face with her silk kerchief, laughing at his clumsiness. Mingzhi feels her soft touch and keeps his eyes on her. Excuses himself for his cowardice.

\*

Chaos reigns in the north, and ripples stir in the southern town. More disturbances are reported. The new gang of thugs is getting bolder, robbing in daylight sometimes. Their targets are carefully chosen: travelling traders, visiting strangers, men and women in exquisite dresses and gowns. New to the town, less alert, more vulnerable. In quiet paths, side alleys, secluded corners.

Early morning, Mingzhi listens to reports from his chief guard. The townsfolk have been helpful, providing intelligence, he is told, but the group is cunning. As though these thugs can fathom the office's every move, and they leap a step ahead. A siege of an abandoned temple last week found only empty crates scattered around the dying embers: the men had fled, the goods taken, the ground still warm. Two days later, another siege, another narrow escape. This time silk pouches for jewellery were found. Empty, of course. The trader from the north swore: never to return to Pindong.

Mingzhi sits back in his chair. The picture of a gloomy, desolate town looms on the horizon. He shudders, remembering the vibrant town of his first visit. The colours, the sounds, the people. Their smiling faces.

*No!*

He sits up straight and drafts his plan. There will be plain-clothes in addition to the existing patrols. Not just double but triple the number of guards. A close relationship must be established with the *dibao*, the local security forces who know everybody and every corner in town, getting them to get information. There will be rewards for useful intelligence.

A town map is unrolled in front of Mingzhi. Streets and alleys are marked, and beyond these, the paths leading to the town on which traders and visitors travel. He discusses his plan with the chief guard.

There are noises at the door. Mingzhi frowns but continues with his briefing.

‘Second Young Master!’ shouts Little Mouse, who is waiting to one side.

Mingzhi glances up.

Uncle Liwei. Ragged, pale faced, shaking.

‘They came from nowhere.’ Uncle Liwei takes a sip of tea-for-calming. Fear and anger flicker like unsettled flames in his eyes. ‘Everything happened so quickly.’

It was meant to be a surprise trip: to check on Mingzhi and Mingyuan. Master Chai ordered it and Uncle Liwei was delighted with the errand. A bundle was packed: more birds’ nests and a new pair of shoes for Mingzhi, from Da Niang, of course. She had also sewn a gown for Mingyuan, with his name embroidered on the inside of the hem. A silent assurance of her care for him, the unfortunate orphan, the son of her husband. A member of the family.

Bundle on his back, Uncle Liwei started early and arrived early. From the path leading to town, the centre of activities was in sight: people, stalls, the roofs of buildings. *Mingzhi’s residence and court-office.* He hurried up.

Gravel crunched under the feet. Approaching shadows shuffled. Quick movements. A punch, and he was knocked to the ground. His bundle was snatched, his shoulder pulled.

Two men, surly and burly, were fleeing.

‘Give me back my things!’ Uncle Liwei got to his feet and chased after them.

With the courage he had acquired from years of rent-collecting in remote regions, added with the limited martial arts he had learned from Butler Fong. He pushed one of the men on his back, was pushed back by both of them. His martial arts turned to water. A kick, another punch, and he was on the ground again.

Mingzhi dabs *baihua* oil onto the cuts and bruises on Uncle Liwei’s face, shoulders and legs. Tells him to relax. Tells him there is no lack of birds’ nests, shoes and clothes, and that he shouldn’t have chased after them.

‘They are from your mother.’ Uncle Liwei’s reason is firm and clear; his eyes fixed on Mingzhi.

*He did it for me.*

Mingzhi averts his misty eyes and turns to rubbing the patches of blue-black off his uncle’s shoulders. The shoulders he once rode on, strong and square.

And now.

Mingzhi feels the sagging flesh under the dull, freckled skin. His uncle’s body grows heavy, a dead weight leaning against him and the bedpost. He has dozed off.

Age has laid siege to him.

Something clenches inside Mingzhi. He doesn’t stop massaging, though, enjoying the closeness with his uncle they once enjoyed. Happy for the chance to serve him. Glad to see the healthy colour of red gradually return, clogged blood smoothed.

\*

Before dusk, before Uncle Liwei has come to terms with the loss of his bundle, it is returned.

By Mingyuan.

He says he found it in a quiet alley. He says no one was there. He says he picked it up and saw that it belonged to the family.

He says, he says, he says.

*The gang!*

Immediately there is a tumult and they are too busy to ask questions: Uncle Liwei checks the bundle for his birds' nests, clothes and shoes; Mingzhi summons his chief guard and sends his men, hoping that the gang has left a trail of signs.

There is no trace of the thugs, yet again.

Uncle Liwei insists and a dinner is arranged. Mingyuan is summoned to Mingzhi's residence: uncle and nephews sitting together at the dinner table for the first time. After a round of tea Uncle Liwei happily distributes the birds' nests, clothes and shoes. Happier to learn that Mingyuan has earned his first four-tael scholarship. A big leap forward, he nods approving. The best report he will bring home.

As for Mingzhi—

Law and order in the town has to be restored. Uncle Liwei's face turns stern. The criminals are to be caught and prosecuted. Didn't you promise to serve your people? He looks Mingzhi in the eyes, an expectation rather than a reprimand, as a father would to his son. But Mingzhi becomes agitated, ashamed. From across the table his half-brother Mingyuan darts a cynical look of *useless*. Mingzhi feels his face burning: *I did do*

*something!* Quickly he broaches his plans: the plain-clothes, the deployment of *dibao*, the scheduling of patrols and the targeted routes. His voice loud in the quiet room to an audience of two: one, exhausted and still in shock, half-listening; the other, young and clear-minded, fully attentive.

Mingyuan.

Sitting still, learning by heart every word Mingzhi says, every move he plans. His eyes flicker, his expression unruffled.

The insidious vine of darkness grows again, stretching its amorphous arms around the high pillars and beams of the government office, under the cement floor of the mandarin's residence.

Quietly, quietly.

\*

Two weeks on and the gang has been quiet. As in a game of cat-and-mouse, the cat stays in bright light, the mouse in the dark, observing its predator's every move: sidling away as it glimpses a furry shadow, hiding when the enemy presses close. Waiting. For the right moment to strike again.

Morning, and Mingzhi takes a tour of the town, threading between the stalls, the people, the noise of haggling and street buskers. The colours.

The smiling faces.

As though nothing has happened before, and nothing will ever happen again.

Stay vigilant, the mandarin orders.

\*

Shadows, whispers, surreptitious movements. In a dark alley, three figures huddle in a corner: two big, one lean. Soft voices turn out to be suppressed argument, gradually becoming louder.

‘Don’t do anything just yet.’

‘We’re bored to death, and the money’s running out!’

‘The guards are everywhere. Let’s wait a little longer.’

Mingyuan.

And the former hatchet men of Mandarin Liu, who are eager to launch their strikes again, to indulge themselves with drink and women that only money can buy. Money from vulnerable hawkers and shop owners, tradesmen and travellers, which has also funded Mingyuan’s games of cards and dice.

‘Wait? For how long?’

‘As long as I tell you to.’ Mingyuan turns to leave. The two men move in front of him, blocking his way. He steps back, and the men move forward, two giant shadows looming over him. Mingyuan holds his breath, takes out his money and gives it to them: ‘Take this. I’ll come up with something soon.’

Mingyuan watches as his hatchet men leave. There is an uneasy feeling lurking in the bottom of his stomach, as if something, some caterpillars, are wriggling inside him. Hundreds of tiny legs march on, and bristly hair brushes against the soft lining of his stomach, itchy, eerie.

*They are getting out of control.*

He shakes his head. The caterpillars coil themselves up, stay motionless. For the time being.

Father Terry is leaving on a month-long errand to the Imperial City. Plain-clothed, Mingzhi goes to the river port to see him off.

Father Terry has been quiet: brows knitted tight, deep in thought. Mingzhi walks with him in silence. When the priest finally speaks, there is a long sigh. There have been attacks on his missionaries, mostly in the cities: congregations disrupted, churches broken into, property stolen, icons destroyed. Verbal and physical abuse. Negotiation after negotiation has taken place with local governments, and finally he is summoned: meetings at the headquarters, helping with negotiations, drafting new strategies.

His voice turns low and deep: ‘We are here to help them!’

Mingzhi pats Father Terry’s shoulder, a silent comfort to his friend: *they will understand, eventually.*

They stop before reaching the dock, where ships and people and goods are gathered, avoiding the hustle and bustle as they talk, bidding farewell.

It is a hot afternoon, the sun scorching. The port is busy. People shuffling, seeing someone off or being seen off; goods piling up, waiting to be shipped or stored or transported straight to the marketplace. Dockers make countless trips in lines up and down the wooden gangplank between the piles of goods, the warehouses and the ships, loading or unloading. A token is given for every trip they make, which will be exchanged for wages at the end of day.

Stooped under their heavy burdens, they grit their teeth, struggling forward. Beads of sweat roll down their naked upper bodies; their muscles strain, their faces contort. The stronger amongst the men take firm steps, making quicker trips, collecting as many tokens as they can. Most others, though, struggle to balance the load on their slender backs and their movements on the shaking gangplank. Underneath them, the water surges, slapping against the pillars, the shore and the sides of the ships. Their legs tremble and they take slow steps, each more careful than the one before, knowing well that one false step will cost them their lives.

Mingzhi notes the signs of hardship: weather-worn faces, shrivelled lips, protruding ribs and collar bones on sunburnt, swarthy bodies.

*These are my people.*

He feels his scalp itch in the blazing sun.

Flop! An object plunges heavily into the water.

‘Help! Someone’s fallen!’ A loud cry, followed by screams.

Mingzhi turns to the source of the commotion. On the gangplank, the dockers drop the goods they carry and peer into the river, shouting and pointing. Apparently a docker has lost his footing.

‘There, there he is! Quick!’

Flop! Flop! Two figures jump into the pointed direction. At the edge of the dock and on the ships, onlookers congregate, shoving each other aside to get the best view.

The shouting becomes clearer as Mingzhi and Father Terry approach the crowd, now rushing to the dock. The hue and cry intensifies. A loud hurra, and a man is pulled from the river onto the dock, soaking wet, like his rescuers. Lying frail on the ground,

the man coughs out water and vomits, wheezing breathlessly, gasping for air. Through the gaps between shuffling legs, Mingzhi glimpses the unfortunate docker: a youthful face, familiar. His heart thumps, and he stares hard. More people pile in and the gaps are sealed off. *No!* Mingzhi squeezes through the many sweaty bodies to the front.

And he sees him.

Little Sparrow.

\*

Mingzhi stares at his long lost friend, lying in bed, muttering, his face contorted as if in pain. A nightmare, perhaps a dreadful past experience is haunting him. *What has happened to him in all these years?* He is eager to have a long talk with him, to fill in the blanks between them, the Lost Time. To listen to his friend's stories, and tell him his, as he once did. So much to tell, so many questions to ask.

Little Sparrow stays in bed for two days, drifting in and out of consciousness, only waking for sips of porridge and herbal soup prepared by Little Mouse on Mingzhi's orders. Exhaustion, the doctor diagnoses. The remedies are food and rest.

Mingzhi sits by his friend's bedside, reading the traces of his life since they parted: his rough, sallow face, drawn cheeks and dark-ringed eyes, callused knuckles and protruding joints. Hard work, poverty, malnutrition.

There is a sudden tightening in his chest: the opera singer he once knew has long gone.

When Little Sparrow is finally awake, he says: 'Call me Tiansheng.' 'Little Sparrow' is a painful reminder of his glorious past, the name he made with his tears and sweat. Mingzhi understands: *Tiansheng*, from the sky. From nowhere. *But you'll know*

*where you're heading to, I'll see to that.* Mingzhi promises his friend a better life after the hardship he has been through.

The pair of old friends face each other, one sitting, the other lying in bed. Tiansheng looks round the room: the exquisite rosewood moon table, and on top of it the porcelain vase with a detailed painting of court women of the Tang Dynasty; then at the mandarin by his bedside: the immaculate gown, jade-tasselled waistband, delicately embroidered shoes; and finally, at himself—nothing. Nothing that he has with him now belongs to him. DIFFERENCE swells between them like a green-eyed monster, wielding its powerful weapons of Class and Status.

What does his friend expect of him? Tiansheng wonders. Descriptions of a life on the streets would be too much for the mandarin. The struggle for each gulp of rice, each sip of water. Fights, quick snatches of food at street corners, thieving in mansions filled with valuables like the one he is in right now. Drifting in and out of odd jobs at the dock, if he is lucky, though he is barely fit for them.

He stares blankly as Mingzhi excitedly lays out his plans: a private tutor for Tiansheng until he is confident enough to go to school; and he will, of course, live under his roof. The Lost Time has to be recaptured, bought back, and Tiansheng will become a member of the gentry. Wasn't that your childhood dream? Excited, Mingzhi raises his voice, and he sees his friend sitting beside him in his court-office. Mandarin and assistant working side by side, complementing one another.

Tiansheng shakes his head and closes his eyes.

Mingzhi lets him. *He is tired.* His friend is with him now and there will be plenty of chances to catch up. To recapture Lost Time.

Tiansheng has turned to face the wall and seems to have fallen asleep. *Sleep well.* Mingzhi smiles, closing the door behind him. *A bowl of porridge with scallops in the morning will help him recuperate.* He makes a mental note to remind Little Mouse about the breakfast preparation.

\*

Porridge with scallops, a treat too good for a street rat, perhaps. In the morning, Little Mouse comes to his master's room with the bowl of untouched delicacy.

‘What a waste of my efforts!’ The young servant grumbles, staring at the strips of yellowish scallop floating in the steaming white porridge. Can't wait to have a taste of it, the smooth, tender texture and the sweetness.

Tiansheng has left in the middle of the night, without saying goodbye. Taking with him the porcelain vase.

Mingzhi rushes into the empty room. He sits at the edge of the bed and feels the slight curve in the middle of the bed with his hand, the only evidence that his friend has been there. It's cold. He fumbles for the pouch tied to his waist, takes out a sheet of yellow, dried bamboo leaf. Remembers it as the makeshift flute and the music it could give; remembers too the talks, the long nights by the river. All so vivid in his mind's eye.

He folds the leaf and tries to blow it. It is mute. Quietly, his wife comes to him, wraps her hand over his and helps him put the leaf back in the pouch. Knows he will always treasure it as he has done all these years. Mingzhi takes her hands in his, grinding them into his cheeks, feeling the softness against his flesh, a reassuring comfort. He buries his face in them.

Slowly, his wife moves his head down and rests it on her belly. And he hears them, the faint beats of life. He looks up. She nods, smiling, smiling.

A job that serves the people, a wife who listens and cares, occasional secret family gatherings. And a new life, the combined essence of himself and his wife, growing inside her. Life seems to be complete, full. He knows he is already blessed, to expect more would be shameful. Mingzhi quietly thanks his grandfather for the favour he did him: the marriage, that brought him his beloved wife and the soon-to-be child.

Though it doesn't seem so favourable for the old man.

\*

The wedding has ceased to serve the function Master Chai hoped for. In Plum Blossom Village, the rain has finally stopped. And as though he regrets the earlier downpour, the Heavenly God decides that it's time to turn the pipe off. Click. Not another drop is to be wasted.

In the late spring, Master Chai stands on the hill rise and stares blankly at the fields, the shrunken pods at the tips of the stalks, as wrinkled as his aged and anxious face. Gone is the milk inside them, the juice of his wealth.

*What more can I do?* He thumps the sharp tail of his dragon stick heavily down as though it is his anger, and he is pounding it away. The stick bounces against the hard, stony ground, jarring his hand, and he loses hold of it.

He watches as it rolls down the slope, as Butler Fong chases clumsily after it.

In the distance, the Plum River glistens in the morning sun, winding round the western hill, slithering across the fields like a band of silver ribbon carelessly dropped on the green land. There are little polka dots on it: smaller spots for rafts, bigger marks for boats.

Salt boats.

Which will leave without the opium.

Master Chai stares at the white patches of the boats' sails, raised high, bulging with air, and thinks about the snowy salt stored underneath. The merchants who trade it. The licenses they need for trading.

He smiles.

Master Chai waves at Butler Fong who has just climbed back up the slope, huffing and puffing. Urging him to hurry up. Snatching his stick from him. The old man has a plan to work on, and time is too precious to be wasted.

\*

When Father Terry returns to Pindong Town, it is his turn to face a vandalised church. Although the icons are unharmed, a couple of benches-for-pews are broken, and the gold-plated candle holders and the donation box containing the last collection have gone missing.

Much to Father Terry's relief, though, the new, vacant building next to the church remains unscathed.

Mingzhi stands alongside Father Terry in front of the white-washed building, listening to his priest friend's plans for an orphanage. His determination to serve the community is undeterred by the assault on the church. There have been infants - mostly

girls - left abandoned in fields and back alleys, and on a couple of occasions, on his doorstep. They are lucky though, for the real unfortunates sink quietly into the Plum River, or rot in shallow graves at the back of the western hill. The money to raise them has been saved for a few sacks of rice, or a cow to plough the field – if there is any cash at all.

Father Terry has employed some wet nurses, and Meilian and Jiayi have agreed to help run the place.

Mingzhi notes the passion in Father Terry's eyes. He imagines a room full of children, chubby and happy, slowly growing to adulthood, with an abundance of energy and intelligence to offer the country.

A picture of a strong, healthy nation is in view, and Mingzhi can only support Father Terry's mission. He will encourage his wife to join Meilian and Jiayi.

\*

It's a fine morning for the opening of the orphanage. Mingzhi attends the ceremony as guest of honour in his mandarin gown: a statement of his support for Father Terry, a request for the support of his people.

A crowd has already gathered outside the orphanage as Mingzhi arrives in his carriage. He is glad at first. *They do appreciate his good deed.* But not for long. From among the crowd, come pointing fingers and looks of suspicion directed at the new building, and complaints, which subside when Mingzhi steps out of his carriage. Then again, pointing fingers resume pointing, looks of suspicious look on. Noises of discontentment rise again in the air like a swarm of humming bees.

'Tuh, do you call this an opening?'

‘White? How inauspicious!’

Mingzhi looks ahead.

At the door of the orphanage, two thin bands of white and red silk are tied across, the substitutes for ribbon in the opening ceremony. *They are not ready for this.* Mingzhi smiles, shaking his head. Father Terry, standing to one side, looks confused. Mingzhi pulls Father Terry aside and whispers in his ear.

Midday now, and the white ribbon is untied. With Little Mouse’s help, two strings of firecrackers are hung from the doorposts. Plates of buns and mandarin oranges are laid out on a long table.

Joss stick in hand, the mandarin ignites the firecrackers. *Bang-bang! Bang-bang!* Thunderous cheers and applause break out in response to the clattering of the firecrackers.

Father Terry nods at the crowd now gathered at the long table, enjoying the food. He pats Mingzhi’s shoulder, thanking him. In the front courtyard of the orphanage, children shower each other with handfuls of red flakes from the burnt firecrackers. Their cheeks bulge with buns and oranges, their faces a healthy glow. Knowing that Meilian and Jiayi are inside the building, Mingzhi, eager to meet them, turns to enter.

There is a shout, struggling to make itself heard above the cheering mass. A man pushes hastily through the crowd.

Butler Fong.

He rushes to Mingzhi.

‘Eldest Great Grand Master!’ He calls breathlessly. ‘The master is waiting at the government office.’

Mingzhi freezes. The laughter and noises fade away.

### *Chapter Nineteen*

It rains. At first there are only a few drops here and there, then the roof shudders, thunder roars, the sky blackens all over. As if the heavens have cracked open, and the Heavenly God and his Heavenly Palace fall rumbling down, together with his squadron of heavenly guards and servants.

The first rain in Plum Blossom Village in a month.

It is midday and Master Chai isn't there to welcome it, the juice of life he has been yearning for. He left for Pindong Town this morning and is now waiting for Mingzhi in his reception hall.

Da Niang is alone. The smell of heavy air, the damp heat overwhelms the incense that fills her room. Needlework still in hand, she stares out of the window at the rain cascading from the eaves and wonders if her father-in-law would have stayed had the rain come earlier. Wonders if he would have left Mingzhi alone.

*Mingzhi.* She sighs.

On the windowsill, a trail of ants hurries across on its way to find a safer home. The rain has caught them unprepared. *Like the old man's visit to Mingzhi.* She wishes she could do something, but she wasn't even in time to send a warning. It was as though the old man decided at the moment he opened his eyes in the morning: calling for Butler

Fong, packed and left; leaving Liwei in charge of the household, and both he and Da Niang were instructed not to travel to Pindong. Simple, short and clear, obviously after long and careful planning.

*He doesn't trust anyone.* Da Niang lays down the needlework in her hand. On the wall, black ants with fat bottoms scurry away from the windowsill, slithering all the way up to the beam, the S-shape of a moving black line against the whitewash. She lifts her head and follows the dark thread along the beam, remembering the column of ants on Mingzhi's birth. Wishes, again, that his father were there. To help him. Wishes they were all together. A family.

The thought scares her. She hurriedly picks up the garment she has been sewing, a gown of fine cotton she has spun for days and nights. That will last for a long trip of two-months and still look good. She thinks about how *he* would look in his new attire. How *he* would respond on receiving it. With a smile and a long, deep gaze, as *he* always does, perhaps. Her fingers quiver; the needle pokes the pad of her finger. She gasps *Ouch!* lightly, unaware that a drop of blood has dripped onto the sleeve of the half-sewn gown.

Da Niang looks out of the window as she sucks her finger to stop the bleeding. The rain has stopped as quickly as it came, as though the Heavenly God has just made a mistake (*not here, you fool*) and is quick to realise and correct it. Blackness lines the horizon. The heavy lump of dark cloud that has covered the mansion is now moving north-eastwards, slowly, steadily.

To Pindong Town.

Da Niang drops her needlework, rushes to the altar, burns some incense and starts chanting.

*Naminumemo. Naminumemo.*

\*

In his sedan Mingzhi sees the cloud, dark and heavy, driven by the wind, following him all the way back to the government office. Still accumulating, still pressing down. He feels it crowding his stomach, and wishes he could turn away from it, the gigantic black devil, leaving it behind the way he left the mansion and Plum Blossom Village.

He closes his eyes and leans heavily against the side of the sedan.

The rain pours down, hitting against the thin canopy of the sedan, drumming on Mingzhi's heart.

\*

The patter of rain on the roof of the government office excites Grandfather Master Chai. He listens to the *dot-dot-dot* that turns to *plop-plop-plop* on the solid green tiles, imagines water filling up the cracked land, seeping through the dried earth. Imagines the peasants, their hoes and rakes on their backs, on their way to plough the fields. Imagines them sowing the seeds. He sees blooming red poppies, gradually turning into milky sap. And there comes the next harvest.

The old man smooths his goatee and takes a puff from his pipe. He is certain he has made the right move, and that the Heavenly God has granted him approval for it. The rain is the sign. *He is still my lucky star.* He regrets that he didn't come earlier.

Taking another puff, he relaxes in his grandson's redwood chair. The chair that the mandarin sits in to receive his guests. That the old man will continue to sit in to receive his guests for days to come.

The cushion is soft, the hall airy and the monotonous rhythm of the rain soothing. *It's comfortable here, like home.* He dozes off.

\*

Mingyuan would have wished he were in a position as comfortable as his grandfather. The young man is running in the rain. Beads of water hit against his head and body. Every inch of him is bursting with pain, his new gown smudged with dirt, his shoes caked with mud.

Wet cotton sticks to his body like another layer of skin. His long gown slaps against his legs, pressing them down as he strives to lift each in turn, to hurry forward. Each step becomes heavier than the one before it.

Still, he keeps running.

A while ago, Mingyuan went to the shack in the east end of town, the gang's hiding place, to meet his men. They were not there, and Mingyuan knew where they had gone. As if they had suddenly regained their missing brains, the two thugs had come up with a brilliant idea: to launch their first strike in a month during the opening of the orphanage, when the townsfolk are gathered at the ceremony. When the guards are pulled away from the town centre to accompany the mandarin to the event.

They have selected their target: a new face in the marketplace, a young poultry hawker. Skinny, effeminate, seemingly defenceless.

Their elated laughter shook the shabby shack last night as they broached their plan. Mingyuan tried to hush them down: 'Not yet, let's wait a little longer!' and was hushed back. He was asked to pay them their allowance instead if he were to stop them.

'Before midday; that's as long as we can wait.' Standing tall and big, they slammed the door in Mingyuan's face. The hairy caterpillars that had been hibernating stuck up their heads, burrowing their way into the warm, comfortable home they had missed for so long. Tender bristles brushing against soft stomach.

Mingyuan's abdomen crumpled.

Strings of cash clanking on his belt, Mingyuan holds his belly with one hand as he leaps over puddles. Mud seeps through his finely embroidered shoes, sharp gravel stabs at the thin soles.

He was listening out for news early this morning, and it was confirmed: the policing of the town was to keep to its usual schedule. That the mandarin didn't require extra protection. That he insisted on putting the security of his people before his own.

He had to stop those two brainless men before it was too late.

In his room Mingyuan emptied his chests and cupboards, searching his pouch and kerchiefs, fumbling under his bed and bedding. The four-tael scholarship, which he won with essays bought with eight taels from a bright but needy student over a month, had long gone. The allowance from Mingzhi is never enough for drink and dice, and the hatchet men, who are supposed to generate an income for him. Now he has to stuff their mouths with cash.

On the floor the sunlight that slanted through the east-facing window was retreating by the inch, so his heart kept shrinking. When the golden light began to slip out of the window and the thick rain cloud takes its place, he grabbed his jade tassel and darted out.

He didn't argue when Uncle Eagle paid him half the price the jade was worth.

Still, he missed the deadline.

Mingyuan looks ahead. Not far away a team of six guards in cloaks and bamboo hats walks out of an alley onto the main street. Mingyuan's heart halts. He stops and watches the guards proceed in the opposite direction. He sighs with relief. Tells himself he will get to the two men before the guards do.

As he stands still he begins to feel the mud inside his shoes, the sticky itchiness between his toes, like the hairy caterpillars that wriggle inside him. Something is going to happen, he knows it for certain. *But what?* For the first time, a feeling of extreme uneasiness crawls up from his tailbone, rising along his spinal cord to the top of his head. Then comes the cold sweat, and goose bumps spread all over him. *They will hand me over to Mingzhi; I'm sure they will.* He knows, too late, that the men are unreliable. That they will put the blame on him, the gang-master, if they are caught.

He sees himself kneeling before his half-brother in the court-office; the mandarin standing tall and straight, while he is small and helpless. *Damn!* He spits and resumes running.

He has nearly reached the marketplace when he spots the two figures ahead of him. Vague, distant, fast moving through the rain. He quickens his pace, gasping for air, but only rainwater flows into his mouth. He chokes and coughs ferociously.

The gang has now disappeared into a side street. Mingyuan follows.

The marketplace, a square. Canopies, makeshift thatched-roofs. Dark and gloomy in the rain. There is no sign of customers, only a few hawkers squat at the stalls, looking out for customers, for the chance of a few strings of cash for the day. Mingyuan threads his way between the stalls, stepping over rotten leaves and fruit, decomposing fish guts, heads and feet of chicken and duck, retches at the smells.

There is a shout, coming from the far end of the square. Mingyuan speeds up.

At a poultry stall a young man is pinned face down on the wooden display platform by the two hatchet men, one on each side of their victim. His butcher's knives are shoved to one side. His chickens go hysterical, stepping on each other and knocking themselves against the sides of the wicker baskets in which they are caged. Feathers fly loose, falling lifelessly down to the ground.

'Stop it!'

'Good timing, Boss! He said he has no money. Do you believe him?'

Immediately there are raised fists, heavy blows, screams and groans.

'You fools!' Mingyuan lunges at them, a quick shove, and they all stumble. The hawker gets loose. The hatchet men grab him. He grabs the knife by his side. Mingyuan rushes to stop his men.

A flash of metal.

A splash of red.

A scream.

Mingyuan falls to the ground; blood spouts from between the fingers that clutches at his chest.

The hawker drops his knife, standing stock still. He rubs his face with his blood-stained hand.

Tiansheng, or Little Sparrow from the Lost Time.

There are approaching footsteps and noises. He watches as rain-diluted blood is washed into the ditch. More footsteps and noises. Once more he is pinned against the wooden platform. He doesn't move this time, doesn't feel the pain in his wrists and arms, the kicks on his calves. Doesn't hear the rain, the shouts, the smashing of his stall.

He thinks about the shed of chicks in his shelter, waiting to be fed. To grow bigger and fatter, to be sold. To be turned into cash. Then he will reclaim the porcelain vase from the pawn shop and return it to where it came from. He will thank him, his friend, for a chance of the new life. Or maybe he will wait until he is able to write a note for himself, and quietly leave it with the vase on the moon table where it was before.

*How, if they have got a new vase?* He decides that he will put the vase and the note on the floor next to the table, if this should be the case.

The chicks must be hungry. They can never get enough. A couple of them like to peck the toes that stick out from his tattered shoes, seemingly their favourite appetiser. He giggles but lets them, the tingling sensation as pleasant as their chirps.

*Maybe I should get some ducks, too.* He thinks about those little furry yellow balls rolling about in his palms. The touch of softness.

*Quack-quack-quack, quack-quack-quack.*

\*

Master Chai's body shakes, his face grey; green veins dance like snakes on his forehead and the backs of his hands. He curses and spits at Tiansheng, kicks him and hits him with his stick, again and again, until the angry old man is taken away to the reception hall on Mingzhi's orders.

Eyes closed, Mingzhi sits holding his head in his court-office. His grandfather's voice, hoarse and sometimes breaking, drills into his ears. And the rage. All so familiar. The poisonous vines deep-rooted in the old mansion are now snaking triumphantly up the pillars and beams of the court-office, cobwebbing, spewing out the memories he has been striving to push away. The nightmares. He remembers the night when Er Niang was caught. The chaos, the spitting and cursing, and the order to kill: to drown her and her lover.

The evening of Meifong's death. The refusal to call a doctor. The order for the rapid disposal of her body.

The moment when his foreign books were found. The shock and humiliation, and the order that he be housebound.

The scene of Master Chai's sixtieth birthday. The broken cup, the opera, Charcoal, the Green Snake. The order for Little Sparrow to be dismissed from the opera troupe.

And now. *What will his order be this time?*

Mingzhi glances at the friend in front of him, face down, tied up and kneeling on the floor, quiet and still. He wonders what is in his mind.

There are patches of blood on Tiansheng's shirt, Mingzhi notices, strikingly red against the worn-out cotton. *Not his, but someone else's. Someone.* He tries not to think about it and looks away, and so he sees that *someone*. Mingyuan. Lying quietly in a corner of the hall, eyes wide open, face contorted as if still in pain. Or perhaps he is simply refusing to acknowledge his death (*too soon, so unexpected*), to be denied the chance to launch his long-awaited revenge against his half-brother. *When was the last time we spoke to each other?* Mingzhi's heart clenches. The boy who joined him in reciting poems on their long walk to school wanders into his mind's eye. He hears his childish voice, his clear laughter, the echoes in the wilderness.

Mingzhi turns to Tiansheng, then to Mingyuan again. Then again. Tiansheng, Mingyuan. Mingyuan, Tiansheng.

His brother.

His friend.

The gang of two, kneeling next to Tiansheng, take the silence as an opportunity to plead their innocence: blaming Mingyuan for all their evil deeds, insisting that Tiansheng attacked Mingyuan all of a sudden.

Two tongues against one. One that utters not a word.

Mingzhi watches the men gibber and babble, two bumblebees buzzing busily. His head is bursting. He has to do something, anything. He fumbles on his desk, reaches for the inkwell and hurls it to the floor.

Thump!

Silence returns. An unprecedented deep, dead silence in response to an unprecedented act from the mandarin.

It doesn't last long, though.

'Chop off the bastard's head, right now! I order you!' Master Chai shouts from the reception hall. *The order!* Mingzhi's body turns rigid. The invisible vines creep into his head, crowding in. He sees himself kneeling in the ancestral hall, shrouded in a thick smoke of incense.

'Your order, Sir!' The chief guard's voice rings in his ears. The smoke, the ancestral hall vanish. He is back in his court-office.

'Take them down.' Mingzhi's hand drops wearily onto the desk as he watches the captives being dragged away to the detention cells in the dungeon. He needs time to work out a plan.

\*

Little Mouse is delighted to have another chance to prove his usefulness. His important task of preparing birds' nests soup has long been taken over by the mandarin's wife. It is a woman's duty to serve her man, and he can't argue with that, can only be happy for his master. He now has only the garden to tend, the fishes to care for. This has given him time to make friends. With the servants. The guards.

That, unexpectedly, gets him his most important job so far.

Little Mouse descends the stairs to the dungeon, a wicker basket in hand. Wine and groundnuts, a set of dice. Perfect companions for the night watchmen, a treat too good to resist in view of the long hours ahead.

Drinks, snacks, games. Their laughter bounces off the stone walls of the dungeon. Little Mouse keeps losing at both the dice and the finger-guessing games he is good at, and so he keeps pouring wine for the winners, who, overjoyed, drink more than their fair

share. By midnight, heads of the four guards are drooping, their loud cheers and sighs of victory or defeat are reduced to drunken mutterings. Then, one by one, they flop down on the table.

Next comes the fumbling for keys.

The click of the cell door.

Another two clicks from the hand and leg cuffs.

One last click from the main entrance.

In the darkness, two shadows duck out of the government office, moving swiftly to the waiting carriage, which takes off at once, heading north.

Little Mouse crouches in his seat, his body swaying to the wobbling of the carriage. Sitting next to him, Tiansheng has been quiet. The young servant turns to look back, staring hard in the direction of the government office, a gloomy silhouette, fast disappearing. Suddenly all the excitement of the rescue mission leaves him. He now realises that this is not a game; that he is leaving his master. *Who will wait by his side at the court office? To grind ink for him, get him what he needs? Who's going to take care of the garden and the fishes?* A sudden emptiness seizes him. His mind goes blank. He wants to shout, to stop the carriage, but his throat feels dry and tight, as though something is stuck in it. He hides his face in his hands and finds it wet with tears.

\*

Mingzhi hides his face in his hands and finds it wet with tears. It is pitch black in the garden and he doesn't carry a candle or a kerosene lamp, doesn't wish to wake his wife, already troubled by his worries. A while ago he heard the carriage, clear clatters loud in

the empty street, gradually fading away. He wishes he could leave with it, too, but he can only sit and wait.

For tomorrow.

For another outbreak of rage, another roar. More cursing and spitting.

Which never come.

Master Chai lies in bed, too weak to curse and spit, to rage and roar. His head is heavy but he refuses to follow the doctor's advice: to close his eyes and rest. Above him, the vermilion satin lining of the bed-net sways lightly in the occasional gusts of morning breeze from the open window, like the curtain of an opera stage. *Opera?* A far-off memory slowly takes shape. A young face gradually emerges, becoming clearer, blending with the features of the escaped murderer.

His second grandson's murderer. A friend of his eldest grandson.

He feels the urgent need for a boost, a few puffs of opium, enough to keep him up for a while. To give orders.

Order One: Mingzhi will administer and supervise his half-brother's funeral, while his grandfather, unfit for travel, stays in Pindong.

Order Two: to ensure that the proceedings of the funeral are being observed according to tradition, Mingzhi is to stay for the full *qiqi*, the seven-times-seven-day ritual, and return to Pindong after forty-nine days.

'Don't forget, he is your brother!' Master Chai spends the last of his borrowed energy on the final word, closes his eyes and lies feebly back in his bed, panting. The word 'brother' drums in Mingzhi's ears, and he knows. That his grandfather knows.

\*

Because the elders are forbidden to mourn for the young, because he died unmarried and childless, Mingyuan, in his coffin, lies small and lonely in the central hall. Even smaller and lonelier at night, under the yellowish light of the two giant lanterns that hang high above the altar.

Mingzhi lays the little book of *Sanzi Jing* on top of the bier. On the altar, Mingyuan smiles a bright, innocent smile in his portrait, the work of the finest painter in town, commissioned by Mingzhi. His teeth look dazzlingly white against the carefully coloured lips, as they did when he was a child.

‘Men are kind-natured when they are born,’ Mingzhi mutters, pacing the room. ‘Their natures are similar; their habits become different...’

Tears trickle down his cheeks.

Around him, strips of white paper are draped loosely on the wall, where his own shadows loom like trolls as he moves about. The long, dark shapes extend themselves from his feet, standing tall in front of him as if they were devils lurking inside him, his guilt, now lunging at him.

*I know, I know, I promised to look after him!*

He presses his body hard against the wall as if he is bonding himself with it, crushing the shadows beneath him. Then he begins to knock his head against the wall.

There is a grip from behind. Uncle Liwei takes his nephew in his arms. Mingzhi weeps, his sobbing muffled by his uncle’s shoulder.

\*

Mingzhi returns to Pindong Town to a happy, bustling Master Chai. The old man has been enjoying the title of Grandfather of the Mandarin and the privileges that come with it. Since the news that *The mandarin's grandfather is in town!* has broken, visitors - tradesmen, merchants, gentry - have been streaming in with handfuls of gifts and red goodwill-packets. Master Chai receives them all, and their gifts and red envelopes, of course, with a wide smile on his face that squeezes his eyes into two tiny slits. Soon, friends and families of the defendants in court cases and convicted criminals join the queue: the mandarin's grandfather will take what the mandarin won't.

And they hope he will, in return, also give them what the mandarin won't.

That, they will find out soon.

Worst of all, the old man has pocketed cash from hopeful merchants desperate for the much sought after salt permits, the assurance of wealth. Four thousand taels each, no more, no less, now lies safely in Master Chai's hoard.

Ten certificates, waiting to be stamped and issued.

Mingzhi pushes away the list his grandfather Chai lays on his desk, and it is pushed back.

Master Chai looks at his grandson with knowing eyes. 'At least,' he says, 'at the very least I haven't asked you to track down the murderer.' He takes a puff from his pipe. 'But the governor will, if he finds out.'

Mingzhi's hands shake.

Thump! He sees the seal fall on the open page of the Confucian readings, his guide to good moral conduct, already stained by his part in Tiansheng's escape.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

Thick, stubborn red ink overwrites the black and white rules of right and wrong, what to do and what not to do.

\*

Mingzhi finds himself in the main hall of the provincial government office, head down, on all fours. The room is spacious and the white, shiny marble on the floor feels cold under his knees and palms. He shivers.

‘Chai Mingzhi!’

He glances up.

The governor sits high in his chair, his face stern. ‘You will pay for what you’ve done.’

He scribbles on a scroll, finishes it off with a seal, then throws it to the floor. Thump! The decree unfolds itself in front of Mingzhi.

### **Death Sentence**

Black characters on white paper, swelling and reeling, gradually dissolve into the sinister faces of the God of Death and his faithful wardens, Cowhead and Horseface. Brandishing their spears, laughing at Mingzhi, approaching him.

He shrinks.

‘Take him to the block, right now!’

The court guards step forward, one on each side, and pull Mingzhi away.

‘No, no!’

He stirs in bed; sweat shines on his forehead. Opening his eyes, in the darkness the gauzy bed-net surrounds him like a smokescreen, blurring his gaze, and he is unable to see beyond it. *Where am I?* Mingzhi sits up in a fluster.

There is a faint sound of breathing. He turns and sees that his wife is asleep next to him, her face placid.

He heaves a long sigh.

Another nightmare. The same as the one he had last night, and the night before.

Mingzhi sits leaning against the bedpost, staring blankly ahead. On the gauze before him, Peasant Xu's face looms.

It was a simple case. He had only to return the land title to Peasant Xu, the little piece of fertile field bequeathed to the peasant by his ancestors, which was snatched by Landlord Yao.

He didn't.

The landlords are friends, Yao and Master Chai, and some silver has further strengthened their friendship.

The old peasant's face in the court-office sways before Mingzhi: the look of despair, the deadness in his eyes. And the surprised stares of his attendants, sharp against his shame-filled face.

Peasant Xu hung himself that night.

In another case, a convicted murderer was set free (*you've already set one free, anyway*), and in another, a gambling house which Mingzhi had closed down was permitted to reopen.

The mandarin no longer tours the streets. The pointing fingers, whispered comments and contemptuous stares are too much to bear.

‘Time has shown him in his true colours, after all.’ A voice rings in his ears. He balls his fist and hits his thigh, again and again, and feels the pain deep inside his muscle, his thigh bone.

‘Another nightmare?’ Awake now, his wife sits up and massages his head. Mingzhi takes her in his arms instead, holding her tight, almost crushing her, as if trying to squeeze her inside him. He is careful not to press against her belly, now showing. Gently protecting them, his wife and the new life inside her.

His only hope. That keeps him going.

## *Chapter Twenty*

The same unyielding hope boils up an early summer in the Imperial City. Deep inside the Forbidden City, the embryo of reformation is now in full shape, a warm, comfortable cradle readily laid out by the young emperor. A team of devoted progressive intellectuals hover round, waiting to serve and nurture the new life.

As if regretting the days it has missed for arriving late, the child in the womb grows with astonishing speed. Extending its body and limbs, stretching and kicking. An active, vibrant life, ignorant of the threats soon to come.

Within days, decree after decree is drafted, with a seal from the emperor: new schools, of defence, science, technology, economics, agriculture; new ministerial departments, of commerce, agricultural geology; new practices, of western defence, law and legislation.

Old, corrupt customs are scrapped. Gone are the days of foot-binding, of tears and disfigurement. Of wobbling around in pain for the sexual pleasure of men, who toy with women, with the power, authority and status bequeathed to them by their ancestors. Unquestionable norms are questioned, for the wellbeing of the entire nation, the one and only long-term destination.

Gone also, the eight-legged style, the classical writing used in the Imperial civil service examinations. New literature, new knowledge and plain language prevail in this era of change.

Conservative, old system-favouring officials are demoted or dismissed; young, forward-thinking intellectuals rule.

Hot, steaming hot. The heat that blurs the eyes and seals the ears; that melts away fear and caution.

And so, eyes are blinded to the discontented faces, ears deafened to the grievances that swell as speedily as the foetus of reformation, and weave their way into the heart of the Garden of Peace and Harmony, where the real power lies. Where the Lady Dragon, her eyes and ears wide open, observes. Every saying, every move. And waits, with the patience of someone nearly a century in age, and the shrewdness of the legendary thousand-year-old fox, counting the days. One, two, three, four, five, six...

And autumn comes.

\*

Autumn comes early in Pindong Town, as does the labour. The first contractions begin at midnight. Her eyes small and puffy, the midwife drags her equally sleepy body to the mandarin's residence, and is fully awake seconds after entering the room. Immediately orders are given: hot water, scissors, towels. More towels! Her voice wavers, her tone conveys nerves: Quick, quick, double quick! No time is to be wasted.

Barred from entering the room, Mingzhi paces the garden. Dried, withered leaves crunch under his feet, dark silhouettes of tree trunks and branches scatter on the ground.

He steps on them, studying the shapes of leaves and shadows, again and again, and counts. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten...

At nine hundred and fifty, he goes to sit by the pond. There is a *pop* from the water, a sigh of surprise maybe, and then silence. He longs for their company, the fishes, but lets them sleep, telling himself not to be selfish. Next to him the willow is a heavy patch of black, like a night spirit looming in the dark. It was yellowish green earlier this evening, he remembers. He had plucked a stalk for his wife as they strolled around, their usual evening walk. Told her it would bring her luck. She had smiled, her lips curled like a half-moon agate. Full, red, glowing. The tiny mole above them danced, a drop of black pearl somersaulting in clear water. He was tempted to kiss her, but she glided away from him, brushing him lightly with the willow. Her face blushed a *not here, not now* red, and she kept her eyes on the leaves in her hand.

Mingzhi remembers now that it was at that moment the idea had come to her.

Willow, that's the name! She said. Perfect for either a boy or a girl. Her voice had a childlike sweetness, raised high at the unexpected discovery, the excitement of it.

*Her lovely voice.*

He smiles, pulls a branch of willow towards him and studies it, as if studying her, his wife, and the child-to-be. *My family.* His chest feels full, warm.

Then he hears her shriek, once, twice. More. Like the scratching of one metal against another. The willow branch slips away from his hand, swinging away.

His head throbs as he imagines her pain, her suffering. The pushing and breathing. The bleeding. The unsettled ants find their way into his guts, crawling busily inside him. Up and down, up and down. He gets up and begins to pace and count again.

One, two, three, four, five, six...

Strangely, he can never get past a hundred this time and doesn't even notice it. Ninety-nine is followed by one, and the counting starts all over again. Like a cycle, which never ends and is heading nowhere.

... Ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one, two, three, four, five...

He keeps counting, between the fits of screams, the shouting of the midwife to push and breathe, to fetch more hot water and towels. Until the first cock-a-doodle-doo breaks the dawn, birds sing, his family of carp raise their heads. *Pop-pop-pop, pop-pop-pop.*

Then everything stops, the hustle and bustle. The bleeding that wouldn't stop when it should. That flowed like water from a pipe, and eventually, washed out the long-awaited child, as lifeless as its mother.

\*

Everything stops in the autumn of 1898.

A plot to suppress the Lady Dragon is countered before it is launched, with a more drastic, better calculated coup.

The emperor is placed under house arrest, the reformers executed or fled. Previously demoted and dismissed officials resume their positions, new measures are abolished, old rules rule again.

It dies prematurely, the One Hundred Days of Reform, before it can fully stretch its arms and legs, breathe the fresh air of the new world.

Dead.

Lifeless.

Hopeless.

\*

*A real mandarin, a real man he is, no tears, nothing abnormal.* Master Chai is proud of his grandson, despite Mingzhi's pale face, red-veined eyes and gradually emptying soul. The physical signs he chooses not to notice, and the inner frailty certainly never appears in the old man's mind.

That's Chai's man, the grandfather nods. Women are like flowers, when one wilts, more will come. He smooths his goatee, thinking: the recent deaths in the family, two in a row. Of course Mingzhi will get a new wife, or wives, he quietly plans. The Chai family will have its scions. He will have great grandchildren—boys, definitely boys—to continue the family line.

In the reception hall where the bier lies, Mingzhi receives his visitors, the mandarin-flattering mourners. They come with their silver for the dead and the hope of a future favour from the mandarin, around whom they crowd like bees around honey. One after another. From morning till night.

He stands there all day, without a sip of water or a gulp of rice, watching the many wriggling lips before him but hearing nothing. Surprised at how different one person's lips can be to another's: full shrivelled wide thin wet dry red pink pale grey; and the teeth: big small even uneven loose tight clean dirty white yellow brown black. Flitting past his eyes like vegetables in the marketplace: cabbage Chinese cabbage swamp cabbage tomato carrot dwarf beans broad beans fine beans okra aubergine cucumber spinach spring onions. As though he can just point at them and pick which to have,

swamp cabbage or aubergine. Full lips or pink lips. White teeth or yellow teeth. Or choose not to have anything at all.

But he can't. He is a mandarin and he has to say something. He opens his mouth but doesn't know what comes out of it - his voice is indistinct, like that of a stranger shouting from a distance, shielded by layer upon layer of screens. Yet his ears bob, as if under siege by surging waves, again and again. And then, when night falls, they disappear completely, the noises.

The soundless dream of his teenage years resurfaces, the pantomime of a Peking opera, but now it seems real. That the world around him is mute and he is part of a dumb show, playing the role of a mandarin, who doesn't cry, doesn't laugh; always strong, always carries the right manner for the right occasion.

He feels his body emptying, a hollow wrapped in a mandarin frame, sauntering around with a smile-for-politeness at the corners of its mouth.

A puppet.

The mandarin puppet holds itself up by the invisible strings of discipline, family pride and self-respect. Of the social expectations of a culture five thousand years old. Until the day of the funeral. Until the bier is lifted onto the shoulders of the bearers and carried out of the house. Mingzhi fixes his eyes upon it as if he could see through it, the coffin with two lives in it: one big, the other small. The big one, his beloved wife, her face pink with powder, as placid as ever, as though she has just got herself ready for a long journey. The small one, shrouded in silk, is a lump of flesh and blood, with hands and legs and tiny fingers and toes, and a head with eyes and nose and mouth and ears.

His flesh and blood.

The hollowness inside him gradually fills up; the invisible strings detach themselves. Heavy and weary, the mandarin flops to the floor.

Everything turns black.

\*

Dead silence. The garden, the court-office, the reception hall. His room, where he hides, day after day, in a corner. Curtains drawn, kerosene lamps unlit, food pushed away, visitors rejected. Mingzhi crouches between the wardrobe and the chest of drawers, a screen shielding him from the worried servants and maids waiting to one side.

The first day he sees her face on the wardrobe, a vague figure against the dark rosewood in the dimness of the corner empty of sunlight. But he can read her perfectly: her eyes, her nose, her lips. The tiny mole above her upper lip, the little black pearl that dances as she smiles, that smiles by itself when she doesn't.

*You have come to me; I knew you would.* He staggers forward, reaching out—

Everything vanishes: her eyes, her nose, her lips. The little dancing black pearl.

*Come back, please. Come back!*

Mingzhi lurches at the wardrobe, bangs against it, slaps it, scrabbles at it with his fingers. Until he falls flat on it, his hands and body pressed hard against it and he slips, slowly, down to the floor. Two streaks, dark and wet, smear the rosewood.

The second day, he sits. Staring, waiting.

The third.

Master Chai's order comes: Mingzhi is to see him in the reception hall. The young man doesn't budge. He has now turned his gaze on the screen, the fine drawing on silk gauze. Mountains and waters, little huts and temples, bamboo groves and trees. And peach blossoms. Pink, cluster upon cluster, budding or blossoming, from as tiny as a copper coin to the size of a rice bowl.

A long-buried memory creeps up from the deepest corner of his heart.

Outside, there are footsteps and the thumping of a walking stick.

The screen dissolves into the magic curtain of his childhood, in the mansion in Plum Blossom Village.

'The Grand Master is here!'

His little world of Taohua Yuan.

'Get yourself out of there, you stupid fool!' A thump on the floor.

Where there is *only laughter and smiles*, and everybody lives happily ever after.

'There are plenty of women for you to choose from,' Master Chai shouts from the other side of the screen.

Mingzhi runs his fingers over the blossoming pink flowers. The buds, the petals, the stalks. His eyes turn wet, his stomach feels sour.

'I've got you one by the way. Landlord Yao's daughter. Younger and prettier.' The old man's elation fills the room, pressing against Mingzhi's little screened corner.

History overlaps. The screen, the curtain. The orders. The same bursting feeling of anger and frustration. Mingzhi holds his chest, waiting for the ensuing punctured feeling as always. But it is full, his chest, still swelling—

'No!'

The explosive force gathers in his arms.

A thrust.

A loud bang.

A series of rapid trampling sounds.

Mingzhi rises tall and straight from among the broken pieces of the screen, his hair unkempt, his eyes bloodshot, fixed on Master Chai, now shrunk into a corner. The dragon stick lies on the floor.

‘Grandpa, you’re tired.’ The mandarin speaks as if there is iron in his throat. ‘It’s time to go home and rest.’

\*

Mingzhi sits firm and sullen in the court office. *His* court office. A guarded carriage has sent away the old man together with the orders and demands he loathes, silenced by the rumbling of the wheels.

He doesn’t waste time. His previous routine resumes, mishandled cases are revised and reversed, the former standards of practice are observed again: no more red envelopes and gifts for favours, only facts and evidence.

Damage has to be made good: compensation is handed out to victims of injustice, honour restored to names that have been smeared.

The townsfolk are confused, unsure if this is just another game, another trap. They look on with watchful eyes, until the season turns, and he is still as just and fair as when he began, still refusing red envelopes and gifts. The townsfolk finally agree that the honest and upright official, the stern-faced Bao Gong, is back.

\*

The stern-faced mandarin steels his heart, his eyes hard, his back rigid. His days are spent at work, evenings at Meilian's, weekends with Father Terry. Grief is nudged away with busyness, and he puts a stop to his evening strolls in the garden. When night falls, though, the past returns, haunting him with memories and dreams. He sits at his desk and focuses his mind on documents and plans, until exhaustion overcomes him and he sleeps, face down on piles of paper.

Comfort comes from Martin's occasional letters, not so much about himself but more about Tiansheng. That the young man has settled down well, learns his trade from him, and seems to be a natural entrepreneur. *Of course he is!* Remembering Tiansheng's poultry business, Mingzhi smiles, but drops it instantly. The memories associate with it are too painful to dwell on.

There is no mention of Little Mouse in Martin's letters, though. *Little Mouse, the eyes and ears and executor of my secret activities.* Mingzhi shakes his head, telling himself not to worry: a little mouse in a big city, his witty servant will burrow through all the holes and drains and dungeons.

Yet still, he is worried.

The Heavenly God has more to worry about, though, such as floods, or a drought. And what if both?

Perhaps she is inspired by the Dragon Lady, or perhaps she is trying to please Her Majesty, in the mountainous northeast, the Yellow River - Mother of the Earth - stages a cruel attack on her own children. Drowning them in her angry waves, gobbling up houses and cattle and sorghum. A punishment for the children of the Dragon who have been disrespectful of their mother.

This is just a warning.

The real calamity comes later: the long drought, and what follows.

Without fields to plough, without crops to harvest, idle farm boys saunter through the cracked, barren land. Finding ways to pass the time, searching for food to fill their stomachs.

When stomachs are empty, minds drift, and hallucinations make the impossible seem possible. For instance, possessing extraordinary strength bestowed by unknown spirits, the gods of everything and anything, who grant them forceful martial arts, the spirit-boxing.

It is a miracle. Overnight in the summer of 1899, ordinary men, some with limited martial arts and most without any, transform themselves into the almighty Boxers,

who can disappear and reappear like the Monkey God, shielding themselves from swords and spears with their naked flesh, fighting enemies with their bare fists.

Or so they believe.

The Righteous Fists of Harmony, they call themselves, shouting out loud their vow to drive all foreign devils from the Land of the Dragon. The devils who have robbed the nation of its wealth and dignity, leaving them only with poverty and starvation. The devils who are the source of all calamities.

Their movements are rapid, the Boxers, their goals simple and their targets clear: foreigners, and those associated with them. Individual westerners, missionaries, local converts, churches.

Killed, burnt, destroyed.

\*

In the quiet southern town of Pindong, Father Terry organises a performance in his church. It is a Sunday afternoon, and Mingzhi arrives early to find them busy: Father Terry in the church hall putting up a curtain on the makeshift stage; Meilian and Jiayi in the adjacent room, getting the actors, the children from the orphanage, ready. Dressing them and making them up, giving final instructions.

The children buzz with excitement, comparing costumes, giggling at each other's rouged faces, a rosy blob on each cheek. 'You'll look stunning on stage with those,' Meilian reassures them, and more intense shy giggles come in response. Their eyes, in which once held only tears and sadness, flicker with anticipation.

Most of them are victims of the drought, these older children. Their parents failed to secure food and left to try their fortunes elsewhere, or died. While the Heavenly God

remains aloof against the many prayers, skeletal boys and girls are sent to the orphanage, to the hand of the foreign Deity.

Mingzhi looks at the rosy faces round him, far from plump yet, but skeletons no longer. Healthy, smiling, a possible bright future ahead.

Meilian is surrounded by the children, adjusting outfits here and there. Mingzhi offers a helping hand but is ushered out into the hall instead. 'There's no place here for a mandarin.' Meilian waves him off.

A young boy pulls at Meilian's sleeve, pointing at his hair, made messy by scratching. Meilian squats down, unties the band and starts combing, getting stuck where the tangles are. The boy frowns a naughty boy's frown: mouth and face twisted to one side, eyes narrowed. Blinking, blinking.

*Like Junwei.*

The combing stops. She hears a loud beat in her heart, surprised at how easily the name popped into her head. Her lost son's. As if he were always there, by her side, and she could just call him round: 'Junwei, come here and have your hair combed.' Then he would reluctantly drag himself over, the naughty boy's frown already on his face. 'Yes, mum. But promise it won't hurt.' Eyes narrowed, blinking, blinking.

*I promise you, my dear.*

If only she could.

If only.

Meilian pulls the young boy closer and strokes his head, tender fingers clawing at his hair, spoiling it, and has to tidy it again. She wishes he were Junwei, and that she could hold him tight in her bosom, never to let him go. She stays squatting long after the

boy has walked away, fixing her gaze on him, his tiny shoulders bundled with borrowed love.

Deep breath, deep breath, and she gets up, motherly tears packed away, tucked into a hidden corner.

The play will begin soon. *Without Junwei.*

Mingzhi sits in the front row as guest of honour. Behind him, the townsfolk and villagers are honoured too, and thrilled at the chance to be in the same room as The Mandarin. Their excitement is suppressed to sibilant whispers, and they cover their mouths with their hands as they crack pumpkin seeds—Shh, shh, no noise is to be made, no disrespect is to be shown to their respected mandarin.

Delighted at this unexpected effect, Father Terry pulls back the curtain. Enter the fairies, the spirits of the forest.

Seven fairies glide over the lawn in their long pink gowns, a pair of wings sticking out from their backs. Beads of glass dangle from their headpieces as they swirl in their flowing sleeves. Singing, dancing. Curious forest creatures peep from behind trees and stones, between branches and leaves. Deer, marmots, weasels, squirrels, frogs and toads, turtles, butterflies and dragonflies, cockatoos and peacocks. Admiring the beautiful fairies as they praise this beautiful world.

*Foreign fairies in Chinese costumes!* Mingzhi turns round, nods a knowing, approving smile at Father Terry, remembering the incident at the opening of the orphanage.

The song changes. The tunes get low and gloomy. The fairy sisters are unhappy. Their Fairy Mother has forbidden them to venture beyond the forest. They are the fairy weavers, and they need to carry out their duty, to spin silk for their fellow fairies.

Mingzhi now knows that his priest friend has done more than just play with the costumes. He has cleverly adapted the folk story of Niulang and Zhinu, the Herdsman and the Weaver Lady, and merged it with western fairy tales: forest spirits have slipped into the bodies of Heavenly fairies, the Fairy Mother has replaced the Heavenly Mother. *With Meilian's help*, he is certain.

'How boring!' The youngest fairy sister swirls round and round, whipping up leaves and flowers, letting her anger whirl in the air.

'Let's go out for once, just the once, please!' She pleads, describing the human world she has always peeped at from the top of the highest mountain: green fields, silvery rivers; hot, steaming, tasty human food; and the beautiful huts dotted round the hills.

Her sisters finally relent, and they set off.

The fairy sisters wander through human lands. Happy tunes return, happy dancing brightens up the air. Then a stream of clear water in a quiet, secluded bamboo grove catches their eyes, just perfect for tired legs. They wade into the water, swimming, splashing at each other, laughing and screaming.

Until they hear a sound. A human sound. Panicking, they rush to the shore and hurry away. She is too slow, the youngest of the fairies, huffing and puffing: 'Wait for me!' She trips over a tree trunk and falls.

How life has changed without their little sister. The weaver fairies sing a sad song as they observe how their sister has been made the wife to the young herdsman who

rescued her, hiding away her fairy wings so she can't return home. But she seems happy, deeply in love with her human husband, enjoying her human food; tolerating the crude shack she lives in; continuing to spin, not silk but rough cotton, just as easy.

*Like Martin, appreciating his life here in this foreign land.* Mingzhi understands now. He knows what is going to happen next. The Fairy Mother will intervene and the couple will be separated, only to meet once a year on the Seventh Day of the Seventh Month. That will spell out the difficulties faced by the foreigners in this country. Foreigners like Martin and Father Terry.

He is wrong.

Instead the Mother Fairy, after listening to her fairy daughter's plea, understands and agrees to let the couple live happily ever after. The fairy sisters sing in celebration of the happiness of their beloved sister.

A Chinese story with a twist of western optimism. The ending that Father Terry longs for. Understanding and acceptance. But do they, the people, understand?

Mingzhi looks round, sees the fast dispersing crowd and hears their comments: on the costumes (*beautiful*), the stage (*well, a little better than Chinese opera*), the singing and dancing (*Chinese opera is still the best.*), the story (*not bad, but where are the magpies? They are supposed to meet once a year, bridged by the magpies.*) Walking, talking, frowning. Not rude, no angry faces, a good start for certain.

Mingzhi goes to Father Terry, seizes his hand in a firm *trust me* firm grasp, shakes and shakes and shakes. It's only a matter of time, he says, reassuring his friend.

\*

Time does matter. It wheels past the seasons and turns the year round. It makes even the strongest lion aged, its body feeble, its limbs atrophied, emaciated by illness. A once strong and loud and agile lion like Master Chai.

Another drought descends on Plum Blossom Village in the spring of 1900. This time, Master Chai is too weak to leave the house to inspect the fields. He had a relapse of his illness after being *sent back* from Pindong Town, and has never fully recovered since.

But he sees them in his mind's eye as he lies in bed, the fields and the poppies: the cracked earth and dried stalks.

His lost harvest.

His cash.

A full, bursting feeling clogs his chest, and he needs to get it out. Heaving, he shouts: 'Get me my pipe!'

Silence.

It has been quiet in the mansion lately. Fewer footsteps, less sounds of shuffling movement, as some of the maids and servants have been dismissed. And so there are fewer mouths left to feed, less money to be spent. Liwei did the accounts, worked out the budget and solutions, and the old man could only agree. Reluctantly.

Things changed overnight when he was sent back. He sees the invisible eyes of his ancestors peering from the corners, their fingers pointing through the darkness; hears their contemptuous sniggers from the walls, and knows why. The ancestral book of hierarchy has been rewritten, his name repositioned—or scratched out altogether, perhaps. Too much shame on the Chai clan, a laughing-stock among the eighteen

generations of ancestors in the nether world. He can hear their laughter, tinged with anger and disbelief: 'The rightful giver of orders is being ordered around!'

He has tried to stage a comeback, messages have been sent to Mingzhi. But 'Home, Urgent, Grandfather' are no longer the force they once were. He does come home, his grandson, on Likang's anniversary, for the New Year family reunion. Grandfather, uncle, mother and grandson sit at the dinner table, still getting together, still a family. And Mingzhi plays his part: tea for the elders, incense for the ancestors.

A dutiful young man, as polite as always.

But there is something in his eyes. Something. The old man tries to think but his mind is blurred, confused. He needs a boost.

'Where is it? Where's my pipe?'

Master Chai waits and listens. Still, there is no sign of his maid. He freezes. *Oh no, they can't have sent her away!* He shouts again, louder, and hears his broken voice tearing the tranquillity of the room, followed by heavier breathing. Then Da Niang comes rushing in.

The old man's heart sinks.

Da Niang keeps her head down and her eyes low, preparing the pipe and handing it to her father-in-law, who snatches it.

Clank!

The pipe is hurled against the wall, the clay bowl inside it smashed to pieces. Black stains of opium smear the floor, as dark as the cloud in Master Chai's stomach. He gasps for air.

Outside, Liwei stands by the window, watching Da Niang clear away the debris, making slow jabs with a bamboo broom. Her shoulders look lean and helpless, weighed down by Master Chai's heavy breathing. Liwei grips the window frame tightly, fighting back the urge to rush in, to hold her thin shoulders, to take her in his arms. To protect her.

In the room, Da Niang squats down and scoops up the debris with a dustpan. Without looking up, without turning, she senses *his* gaze at her back, and feels protected, as she always does when he is around. Like that night, years ago, when Likang came home drunk and beat her with a candle holder. Alerted by his maid, Liwei rushed over and stopped his brother, throwing a loud slap on his face. Humiliated, Likang did not return home after that for a month.

Liwei began his habit of checking on her since then, to make sure she was well, and that Likang did not hurt her again.

Da Niang smiles quietly, remembering those days when they sat in silence, drinking tea. Then, she began to long for his visits.

Even at night, when the lights were out, when everybody was in dreamland and there were only the two of them. Their world. In which gentle whispers soothed a fragile heart; firm, strong shoulders embraced a thin, pitiable soul.

Until Likang came home, having spent his allowance. And inside her, a new life grew.

*The best thing that's ever happened to me.*

Da Niang throws the debris into a bin and turns, facing the window, a smile on her face.

It's a Saturday morning and Mingzhi decides to take a tour round town. Plain-clothed, taking slow steps, as casual as can be.

His recent routine circuits of the town have pointed to a significant finding: the place is getting quieter. There is no lack of shops and stalls, and the marketplace is operating as usual. But merchandise is scarce, people fewer. The mounds of rice and corn once piled high in abundance are now reduced to just a few sacks hidden under counters: only for those who can afford them; the prices are as high as the demand.

Mingzhi makes his way along the main street, noting that the crowd has dwindled yet again. He walks past the shops and stalls, where idle, starving flies gorge on whatever they manage to find. A tiny tear of dried anchovies. The smell of salted fish. A drop of coagulated lard. A fresh, green lump of chicken dung. Swarming black dots seal up the stains and crumbs and droppings, humming, climbing on each other's backs, fighting for their delicious meals. And at the counters, shopkeepers doze, waking only to make occasional flaps with their flyswatters. One flap, and the flies disperse, before they return again, the food too good to resist.

*At least they still have food to fight over.* Mingzhi thinks of the equally idle, starving peasants, and the dockers at the now much quieter port. His head feels heavy, already burdened with the governor's unrealistic tax targets. He shakes his head. Only if a miracle arises could he achieve his target. A miracle like—

*Martin!*

He remembers the pottery business in Lixing Town. Perhaps his friend can come up with an even better idea. He should have thought of consulting him much sooner. As if the horizon has opened up, the thought excites him and his pace lightens. Martin's letters have been rare lately. Maybe it's time to pay his friend a visit, and to check on Tiansheng as well. Maybe he should take Meilian and Jiayi with him, a reward for their hard work at the orphanage.

A smile quietly creeps over his face.

There is a busy crowd ahead, a surprise. At the centre of it a banner hangs down from a bamboo pole:

### **Job Opportunities**

Big, bright red letters, like delicious pieces of rice cake. And more people are being drawn towards it; people hungry for a mouthful of the cake, sweet and tasty and filling.

Mingzhi moves closer to the congregation and hears a strange accent, like Father Terry's: 'Good jobs, good money!' He is pushed forward by the incoming throng.

'Good food, nice place!'

At the front, a westerner like Martin and Father Terry sits at a table, and in his heavily accented Mandarin, is taking down the particulars of a peasant man, who is then asked to ink his thumb and press it on the paper. A finger print for a seal. Stamped. The promise of a job hundreds of miles away in the southeast. A dream of abundant food and better lives for his wife and children.

A life is sold, to the land of vast rubber estates, mine works, coconut trees. Never to return, never to see his homeland again.

Another peasant takes his turn. And another.

Jobs, promises, dreams.

The South China Sea laughs its slyest laugh, waiting eagerly for the countless boatloads of cheap labour, the ocean's offerings. For the chance to show his mighty power. His roar is the surging waves, his sneeze the thunderstorm, his hiccup the whirlpool. And he will have fresh food to feed his family of sea creatures. Some days his mood is good, however, and he will relent, will let them sail all the way to the Straits of Malacca, where other creatures are waiting. Creatures such as bloodsucking mine owners, secret societies with their open fights against one another, and the unbearable tropical heat in which malaria lurks.

These are not described in the contracts.

Mingzhi walks away with a frown, uncertain. The banner flutters in the morning breeze, the characters shout aloud in the air. Big, bright, red. Too seductive, impossible to resist.

## *Chapter Twenty-One*

### **Imperial City, June 1900**

They are having tea, Mingzhi and Martin, in a quiet corner of a teahouse in Tianjin. Meiliann and Jiayi have gone to explore the city, and Tiansheng has offered to be their guide. Since arriving this morning, the mother and daughter have been fascinated by the colourful city, the shops with merchandise they have never seen before: fabrics from across the country and abroad, exquisite hats and headpieces, paintings and ornamental displays, clocks and fob-watches. And there are occasional glimpses of western women in bulging frocks, delicate hats and umbrellas. All too seductive for a first-timer in the Imperial City.

Mingzhi is content to have tea with his old friend, sharing the same pot of *pu'er*. But this time, Martin prepares it: discarding the first brew, rinsing the cups, getting the second brew ready just in time for the right taste. Focused, without hesitation, in perfect measurements.

Mingzhi sips his tea and lets the sweet aftertaste of *pu'er* linger on his tongue, wondering where to begin to explain the main reason for visiting his friend. Although he still laughs (at Mingzhi's plot to help Tiansheng escape) and jokes (about finding Mingzhi a *girlfriend*), Martin is obviously much quieter than before.

There are noises from outside the teahouse.

‘Down with the foreign devils!’

‘Boycott foreign goods!’

Mingzhi peers down. In the street below, people hold placards carrying the same slogans. They shout, red-faced; angry veins dance in their necks. Then come louder cries and hurried footsteps.

‘Police! Run!’

The protesters flee. But not quick enough. A team of uniformed men rush into the crowd, batons in hand. Lunging forward, quick moves, fast strikes. Screams and curses come in response, followed by running and chasing, trampling on placards, knocking over of displays and stalls.

And they are gone. The street returns to normality, seemingly.

‘Welcome to Beijing,’ Martin smiles bitterly.

Trade has been difficult lately. Martin tells of chaotic scenes of attacks against shops and warehouses storing foreign merchandise. And on a few occasions, westerners have been assaulted. These are random cases carried out by individual groups. A greater threat comes from the more organised Boxers in the north, and rumour has it that they are advancing southwards.

Mingzhi reads fear in his friend’s tone, tries to find comforting words but his tongue turns stiff.

‘Maybe, maybe they won’t come here,’ he mutters.

Martin smiles, gestures to the waiter for more hot water. They will come, he knows. But now, he will prepare a pot of *longjing*, the fine green tea, light, refreshing.

To share it with his friend. Hot tea, old stories, new dreams. A cosy and memorable afternoon.

\*

They will come soon, the Boxers.

Too soon.

\*

Mingzhi finds out from Tiansheng that Little Mouse had left him and Martin just a few days after arriving in the Imperial City. “I’ll go anywhere, so long as I don’t have to live under the roof of a foreign devil,” he said.’ Tiansheng shrugs, doesn’t understand Little Mouse’s stubbornness.

As he owes his life to Mingzhi, Tiansheng takes every opportunity to repay his friend: making sure Mingzhi’s meals are served on time, preparing the carriage for every outing, getting everything he needs ready for him. He is making himself a replacement for Little Mouse.

Mingzhi understands, knows that rejection will be hurtful to his friend, so he quietly accepts Tiansheng’s help.

He is as agile as Little Mouse, too, a surprising discovery. The former opera singer is now a shrewd trader, Martin’s right-hand man. Accurate, meticulous, good at negotiations. Despair and deprivation are now the stories of yesterday, though still painful to recall.

The two friends work together, complementing one another, and Mingzhi is happy for them, an unexpected outcome of a tragedy.

\*

It's their last day in the Imperial City, and Martin hosts a dinner for his guests at a restaurant in the British Territory. He has invited Tiansheng, too. Martin pours tea for Mingzhi, Meilian and Jiayi while waiting for Tiansheng, unusually late for the occasion.

It is very late now, and after two rounds of tea, Martin gestures for the waiter to bring out the dishes. Mingzhi watches as Martin carefully picks bones out of the steamed fish for Meilian and Jiayi, who, unaccustomed to being served, push back Martin's spoonfuls of fish fillet in a fluster.

'We should serve you,' says Meilian in the fluent English she learned from Father Terry. She scoops dishes for Martin instead.

Martin holds her wrist, stopping her: 'Forget it. You're my guest, and men are supposed to serve the ladies.'

Meilian's hand freezes, still held by Martin. *A man, holding my hand!* She blushes. Mingzhi captures his sister's shyness, her sudden beauty, and he sees that Martin notices it, too, keeping his eyes on her. Mingzhi laughs. The hands that are locked in the air - one yellowish tan; the other pale and pink - retreat. The face that is already red gets redder.

Mingzhi looks at Martin and then Meilian. *My friend, my sister.* He smiles. A secret plan creeps into his mind.

Suddenly there is clamour, seemingly from a distance away, where the darkening evening sky burns red. The noises are getting louder, and Mingzhi can recognise them now, the shouting of a crowd, mixed with the sounds of gongs and drums.

A figure rushes in. Tiansheng comes blundering towards them, knocking against tables and chairs along the way, stepping over cups and bowls and plates that crash to the floor.

‘Quick, we have to leave!’ The young man shouts breathlessly, his face full of fear. The Boxers have entered the city, he says, and they are laying siege to the foreign quarters. They have launched their attack in several groups, and are after foreign legations, missionaries, local converts, individual westerners. And those connected with them, too, Tiansheng reminds Mingzhi.

Panic stirs in the restaurant, among the customers, mostly westerners. More tables, more chairs are knocked over, more cups and bowls and plates are smashed on the floor. Anxious footsteps thump the ground, fearful cries tear the ears, and everyone is rushing for the main door, the only exit.

Mingzhi, Martin and Tiansheng stay close to Meilian and Jiaxia, who are almost weeping. They are pushed towards the exit by people behind them into the fleeing crowd. Outside, there are more people, running in all directions. The sound of gongs and drums is getting nearer, and they begin to run, too.

‘Come on, faster!’ Tiansheng urges. Meilian and Jiaxi lift their long gowns, struggling on their tiny feet.

But not fast enough.

They are waylaid. A team of Boxers stands facing them, dressed in black, swords on their backs, angry eyes staring at Martin.

‘I’m Chai Mingzhi, the Mandarin of Pindong Town, a sixth grade official.’ Mingzhi goes to stand in front of Martin. ‘This is my friend.’

‘To hell with the mandarin!’ One of the Boxers pushes Mingzhi to one side and points his sword at Martin.

Mingzhi hears a light *Ah!* among the group as he falls to the ground. Familiar. He searches. In the dimness of early evening, he sees him, Little Mouse. Dressed in black, a sword on his back, looking stout and strong. Mingzhi captures a flicker of pain in his former servant’s eyes. He opens his mouth, and is quietened by Little Mouse’s silent *shoo*.

‘How about we send him to the Western Paradise?’ The young man who is aiming his sword at Martin turns to Little Mouse, apparently the leader of this squad.

‘Hey, someone’s trying to get away!’ Little Mouse shouts, pointing in the opposite direction. The group curses and turns to chase after the presumed enemy.

Little Mouse lowers his voice: ‘Go now. Leave the city right now!’

‘Come with me, please. Stay with me, like in the old days.’ Tears well up in Mingzhi’s eyes.

‘It won’t be the same. And it’s not over here yet, not till the last foreign devil is gone.’ Little Mouse shakes his head. ‘Leave now, please. Go back to where you come from. I can only save you once.’ He glances at Martin.

Mingzhi looks on as Little Mouse hurries away, a black figure dissolving into the distant darkness. As though he’s simply disappeared into the air, now thickening with smoke. Gone.

Something sticks in Mingzhi’s throat. He gasps for air and chokes, coughing ferociously.

\*

They manage to find a carriage and rush to Tianjin. Tiansheng secures places for them in a salt boat and they take off, sailing southwards along the Grand Canal.

It is fully loaded with people, this boat. They all sit squeezed against each other on the deck. Fear hovers in the night air, intensified by the frightened eyes, the suppressed sobs. Opposite Mingzhi, Meilian and Jiayi, exhausted from their flight, have fallen asleep leaning against each other, their dresses tattered, their faces covered in soot. He feels a twinge of guilt, and hides his face between his knees.

Someone grasps his arm. Martin. Sitting next to him, he pats his shoulder lightly:  
*It's all right, it's all right.*

There are whispers in the darkness, talk of travelling across the sea, southwards to the tropics. Of sun and beach and coconut trees, of fruits, fishes and forest produce in abundance. Martin listens attentively, and Mingzhi notes the embers of longing in his friend's eyes. Martin looks back at him, smiling, a knowing nod, a decision is made.

'Are you coming?' Martin whispers. 'You want to see the world, don't you? Let's do it together, then.'

Silence. His government office, the townsfolk, Da Niang, Uncle Liwei, and the articles in the Prince of Wales Gazette flash before Mingzhi. The building, the faces and the lines of black print sway like the waves underneath and around the boat. His head spins, his eyelids feel heavy, and he sleeps.

A string of young coconuts falls into Mingzhi's dream. Green, juicy, sweet.

\*

Things have changed in just a few days.

They return to Pindong in a carriage. Mingzhi asks Tiansheng to crouch inside the carriage, aware of the danger of him being recognised. Once at Pindong they will head for Plum Blossom Village instead of the government office. *It's safer there*, Mingzhi suggests, and they all agree.

But trouble persists.

The news of the Boxers' siege of Tianjin and the Imperial City has whipped up antifoignner sentiment. At first there are only stares, angry, hateful, at Martin who sits at the open front of the carriage. Then come the abuse and the stones, aimed at Mingzhi, too, the foreign devil's friend. *And I have done so much for them*. Mingzhi feels the pain not on his skin but inside him.

*What else will they do?* Suddenly Mingzhi's heart sinks. *Father Terry*. He directs the driver to head for the church.

There are only a few pillars left, still smoking, slant on the rubble where the church once stood. Before Mingzhi can stop them, Meilian and Jiayi have rushed to the building next to the ruin, the orphanage, which is unscathed. The door and windows are shut tight, and there are placards on the walls, *Down with the Foreigners*. The mother and daughter hammer on the door, calling for Father Terry. A reply comes from behind the door, low and deep, with a foreign accent.

Mingzhi sighs, relieved. Meilian and Jiayi cling tight to each other and cry with joy.

Despite their lengthy pleas, Father Terry is determined to stay with the children, to rebuild the church when the situation is under control.

‘They need me here, and it’s my mission.’ The priest stands firm and confident at the doorstep, persuading Meilian and Jiayi to leave instead.

‘Go now, all of you. They know you are friends of mine.’ Father Terry shuts the door.

A click, and they are two worlds apart.

Mingzhi drags his sister and his niece away, in tears.

\*

There will be a ship tomorrow and they decide to shelter for the night in Plum Blossom Village.

Mingzhi looks round the dinner table: Da Niang, Uncle Liwei, Meilian, Jiayi, Martin and Tiansheng. *My friends and family*. The perfect dinner he has always dreamed of, though with one person missing. He thinks of her, his wife, sitting beside him, and he would pour tea, scoop dishes for her as Martin does, not the other way round.

If only he could.

But for now, he will do what he still can. He pours a round of *wu jiapi* for the table, and proposes a toast: ‘To better luck and the future!’

‘To better luck and the future!’

Drinks, food, an evening of laughter and chatter, of warmth and togetherness.

Da Niang spills her wine. She hurriedly pulls out her kerchief, but a soft piece of silk is already dabbing at the back of her hand.

‘Are you all right?’ Uncle Liwei, sitting next to Da Niang, wipes the remaining wine off her sleeve.

The same kerchief, the same familiar smell of sandalwood. Distant memories resurface: the soft whispers at night, the kerchiefs, the fragrance.

Mingzhi stares up at his mother's blushing face, the same shyness he saw in Meilian just a few days before.

He feels dizzy, and everything, everybody seems to be moving into the distance. He sees their smiling faces, but in his ears, Er Niang and Golden Swallow's frivolous voices bob, loudly.

His mind turns blank.

In his room, Master Chai hears their noise wafting through the empty courtyards. Earlier in the evening Mingzhi came in and brought him his dinner, feeding him rice porridge with a spoon, carefully wiping away the excess from the corners of his mouth and his beard.

*My grandson.*

The old man's anger melted away in the spoonfuls of gruel. He wanted to say something but his voice clattered at his throat. He wanted to tell his grandson that the ancestors would always be proud of him, as he was. But his head drooped before he had finished his dinner. Drifting, he heard the sounds of footsteps, drifting too. Away.

Now that he is awake, Master Chai thinks of the dragons in the central hall. He sees them slide off the pillars and begin somersaulting in the empty hall. Their tentacles spring up, their mouths spurt fire, their claws sharp and glistening. Then they lunge at him, their faces turn to Mandarin Liu's, laughing hysterically, swooping down—

Master Chai closes his eyes tight, puffing, and everything stops. He drifts off again, this time a sea of poppies billow in his dream. Red, beautiful, waving at him.

Mingzhi sits alone in a quiet corner of the deck. The morning breeze sends over the fresh, muddy smell of the river. Not far away, Jiaxi is holding Meilian's hand, admiring her mother's engagement ring. Last night Mingzhi delivered Martin's proposal to his sister, and Meilian did not hesitate for long, encouraged by her brother. Days of feeling frantic on the road together has allowed Meilian to learn more about Martin: the way he takes care of her and Jiaxi, his tenderness, his laughter, his optimism. She has missed out on much in the earlier part of her life, and doesn't wish to let happiness slip away.

Mingzhi is proud of his sister, her brave decision. She will have a second chance, of her own choice: a man who will serve her, and serve her well.

The morning sun falls on the smiling faces of Meilian and Jiaxi. Bright and luminous, like the future they envisage. Next to them, Martin and Tiansheng are engaged in a discussion, working out plans for their arrival in the new world, perhaps. His practical and efficient friends.

Mingzhi feels the contents of the bundle in his lap, the chess set Da Niang insisted he took with him. *Remember, yinshui siyuan, never forget your origins.* And a letter. He had steeled himself against his mother's tears. The decision was too sudden for her. Uncle Liwei tried to dissuade him, too. We are a family, let's stay together, his uncle said. Mingzhi kept his head down, silent. Said he would write to them.

*What do they expect me to say?* He shakes his head. *And what are they going to say to me?* He holds the letter up against the sun and wind, squints, and sees a thin sheet of paper inside the envelope, the soft corners flutter in the gusts. He is afraid. Uncertain if he should open it, if it contains the truth he is running away from.

He puts it back in the bundle and goes to stand at the front of the deck. The ship cuts through the waves like scissors, white foam bubbling off along the sides of the hull. He wishes it were the books of Confucius he has read that are lying on the surface of the water, being cut open, torn to pieces, turned into foam and bubbles. Pop, pop, pop. Vanishing into the air.

But they are inside him, the black and white of the dos and don'ts. Of what is moral and what is not. The thousand-year-old rules that have made men stand as men.

Mingzhi takes out the letter, holds it in his hand, then lets it go.

The thin sheets of paper swirl in the air, before falling into the river and floating on the surface of it like a withered lily on a pond. Then they sink, disappearing into the frothing water.

Tomorrow the ship will enter the sea, across which the naval fleets of the Eight-Nation Allied Powers - Britain, France, Italy, America, Austria, Japan, Germany, Russia - will soon sail, bringing with them tens of thousands of troops. All ready for a bite of the cake they have been hungry for, sweet and soft and creamy.

A cake called China.

Standing on the deck Mingzhi lets the hem of his gown flutter in the wind. He stares ahead at the horizon, where flocks of seagulls hover, where the water turns a deeper blue and the river widens.

## 2.2 Summary of Findings

### 2.2.1 Content

In Georg Lukacs's discussion of the historical novel, taking writings on the French Revolution as an example, he claims that 'it has to reveal the social content, the historical presuppositions and circumstances of the struggle, to connect up the war with the entire life and possibilities of the nation's development' (1989: 24). This conception is reflected in 'Little Hut of Leaping Fishes' as great historical events of the period – the aftermath of the Opium Wars, the conflict with Japan, the incursions of the West, and the Boxer Rebellion – are woven into the fabric of the protagonist's life. Through an unsentimental depiction of one perceptive individual making his way through a time of dramatic change, a time of war, empire and dislocation, the novel not only portrays social struggle and the nation's development but also reaches across cultures and continents to tell a story that resonates here and now.

As it is a historical story, presenting the social context and events through the narrative requires an accurate definition of the relevant period: the geography, demography, cultural artefacts and ways of life such as food and clothing. For instance, I began the novel with a description of autumn in Plum Blossom Village, sketching a picture of hardworking yet happy peasants who are busy harvesting paddy. Information about paddy plantation as the livelihood of the villagers is instantly provided so that their present happiness will be cancelled out later when the peasants are forced to cultivate opium poppies.

The above example will serve to illustrate my discussion of the necessity of depicting cultural elements in the writing of this novel. The descriptions of place and

time and ways of life do not exist simply for art's sake. They are there for a purpose: to provide essential information that moves the narrative forward. The lengthy description of the Full Moon ceremony a month after the protagonist's birth, for example, highlights the child's special status as heir to the family fortune; so does Mingzhi's birthday ceremony which again, stresses the importance of the boy to Master Chai:

Early morning, Mingzhi is seated on a table top in the centre hall of the east court, surrounded by a set of brushes for calligraphic writing, a pair of scissors, a couple of copper coins, copies of books, a bowl with five grains, a ledger, a shovel, a set of mandarin costumes, and many other items, each representing a particular occupation.

Master Chai's eyes follow Mingzhi's hands as he moves and touches the surrounding items. He grins when his little grandson lays his hands on the set of brushes but drops his smile when Mingzhi reaches for the handle of the shovel. *No!* Mingzhi moves away. The worried grandfather is relieved. The colourful mandarin costume catches Mingzhi's eyes. He grabs it. *Yes!* Master Chai holds his breath, but exhales immediately when the infant at once pushes the costume away and snatches the ledger instead, observes it, opens it wide, tears it, giggles, and looks at nothing else. (p.74)

In this scene, I wish to augment the grandfather's obsession with having a Mandarin grandson which is the pressure Mingzhi experiences through out his childhood and adulthood. So strong is Master Chai's will that despite his superstition, he 'dismisses

the ceremony as flawed' because Mingzhi 'is predestined to be a scholar, a successful one. A Mandarin'.

Detailed descriptions of this kind can also be found in scenes such as the calligraphy session Mingzhi has with his sisters (p. 93-94), which expresses not only one of the few happy moments the boy shares with his sisters but also the gender inequality as girls are barred from schooling, and the lantern festival scene (p. 100-102), which, again, exposes the practical function of a girl in a feudal family – to be married off to improve the family fortune.

However, I did not opt to fill the pages with descriptions. Although characters are important to move the narrative forward, they function as agents that expose 'the social content, the historical presuppositions and circumstances of the struggle' (Lukacs, 1989: 24), which is the theme of the story. Portraying the functionality of a character, making him alive, does not necessarily require a detailed painting of his appearances. As Milan Kundera observes, 'Making a character "alive" means getting to the bottom of his existential problem' (1993:35). To achieve this, according to Kundera, it is necessary to '[get] to the bottom of some situation, some motifs, even some words that shape him' (1993:35). This conception is reflected in my writing, in which I shunned describing the characters' appearance unless in places where the details are necessary to 'shape' the characters. For example, I highlighted Uncle Eagle's hooked nose to symbolically associate him with the cruel nature of the eagle. It is the situations surrounding the characters that are my focus. A prominent example is the Peking Opera scene in Chapter 5. The situations surrounding the arrival of the opera troupe and its performance serve to indicate the wealth of the Chai family, and establish the friendship between Mingzhi and

Little Sparrow, and the relationship between Er Niang and Golden Swallow which leads to the exposure of their adultery in a later scene; most importantly, the opera performed is carefully chosen to indicate metaphorically, at the beginning, Er Niang's longing for 'worldly pleasure' and in the final verses, Mingzhi's sadness and his inability to change his fate. All in all, Mingzhi's loneliness and vulnerability in his environment are enhanced through these sequences, and the pressure accumulated is the cause of his longing for freedom.

By the same token, I decided to draw in detail certain features but ignore others. I gave a careful account of the details on the curtain that opens to Mingzhi's Taohua Yuan, as it symbolises the door to his childhood utopia. The peace, love and joy contained in Taohua Yuan are ideals Mingzhi pursues throughout his life. This little corner of his childhood is later echoed in the study of his adolescence – the 'Little Hut of Leaping Fishes' - for which, again, detailed accounts of the room and the pond of fishes are given. The details of the peach blossoms embroidered by his mother on the curtain indicate her love for him, a supporting force for Mingzhi to realise his dreams. I also provided a clear picture of the items presented to Mingzhi on his first appointment as a mandarin in order to highlight the importance of this posting (p.295). For the costume, I described its colour, design and material so as to compare its elegance with the position it represents - the status so coveted by Master Chai through his grandson. There are many other examples of this kind but for objects descriptions of which would not have helped to shape the characters or advance the narrative, I simply saved the words.

My discussion so far indicates that the portrayal of the cultural settings in my novel is limited to the essential circumstances surrounding the characters. These are part

and parcel of the characters' daily life during that period: the reality of their experience. When I was writing about the legendary Taohua Yuan, the opera performance, the ceremonies of the Full Moon, birthdays, weddings and the opening of the orphanage, and the artefacts involved such as the mandarin costume mentioned above, Mingyuan's jade tussle, the pottery, the bamboo flute, the painting Martin bought and many other items, it occurred to me that the details of them, which are unfamiliar to Western readers, could easily become objects of exoticism in their eyes. A prominent example is the red colour in Mingzhi's Full Moon and wedding, which has the same symbolic meaning as the lanterns of the same colour in Raise the Red Lantern. An audience familiar with Chinese culture would instantly interpret the meaning it conveys: a sign of good fortune. However, those without prior knowledge of the cultural meaning would only marvel at its striking visual effect which is 'beautiful' and 'exotic' to look at.

The above discussion points to an obvious finding: through the process of writing a novel set in China, I realised that it was not my intention arbitrarily to include cultural elements in my narrative. They are required as part of the narrative, moving the story forward and building up the characters, making them alive. This is particularly important in view of the technique experimented with in this novel - 'filmic' style.

### **2.2.2 Technique**

By 'filmic' style I mean adopting the concepts of film language in the writing of the novel in order to present the readers with a 'written film'. There have been extensive studies of film adaptations, the process of converting literature to film, but my experiment and the discussion subsequent to it reverse this tradition, focusing on film to literature. My focus was on two aspects: firstly, narrative form, and secondly, writing

techniques. In terms of narrative form, I opted to present the narrative as a series of scenes, minimising interior monologue, and using the camera's point of view rather than restricting myself to the conventional viewpoints of first-, second- and third- person narrations.

By writing a series of scenes, the narrative is gradually built up as we move from one scene to another. Meanings are conveyed through descriptions of the settings and the characters' actions in each scene, both of which provide clues for the readers to interpret. In this approach, the notion of 'showing' is preferred to 'telling'. The readers become spectators as they are 'shown' rather than 'told' the story. If in a film the audiences witness before their eyes the sequences of the story, in my novel, I use descriptions to bring them alive for the readers. I let my characters 'act' out the story, revealing their feelings and thoughts through actions, rather than expressing them directly through words. For example, in the final scene in Chapter 11, I listed clues that indicate that Mingzhi has been appointed to a mandarin post:

Home. A feast is ready. Strings of firecrackers are hung by the doorpost. More candles and joss sticks are lit in the ancestral hall. And in the central hall, there is a scroll with an imperial stamp laid on a piece of yellow silk on a silver tray.

Along with the costume that comes with it: silky green, embroidered with a quail in the middle, front and back. The symbol of an eighth-ranking official. (p.295)

Immediately following this scene, in Chapter 12 (p.296), I detailed Mingzhi's visit to Old Scholar Yan's grave. With this kind of scene arrangement, I allow the readers to deduce

that Mingzhi knows about the appointment, and that he is expressing his gratitude to his teacher for the part he played in his success. The undertones of the ceremony are Mingzhi's respect and feelings for Old Scholar Yan, and his nobility in following the Confucius tradition.

Although I began the novel with the plan of presenting the narrative through actions and scene descriptions only, and excluding interior monologue, I realised later the need to emphasise certain expressions, thoughts and feelings in order to arouse sympathy in the readers, and to provide information that would be impossible or less economical to 'show'. To counter the problem, I decided, first of all, to adopt the concept of the 'omniscient observer'; secondly, to allow the characters a 'limited consciousness', that is, to give a careful and restricted presentation of their thoughts from their own perspectives; and thirdly, to use the device of italics to present the characters' thoughts and to supplement information that is necessary but would be uneconomical to divulge at length.

I limited the role of the 'omniscient observer' - who observes events and the characters' thoughts - to encourage an atmospheric enhancement which in turn would augment the readers' sense of the characters' feelings. When Mingzhi bids farewell to Martin after their first meeting, he is sad at having to part with his friend and this reminds him of Little Sparrow whom he misses. Instead of writing: 'It reminds him of his long lost friend, Little Sparrow', I let the omniscient observer 'see' that: 'In the yellow dust, he sees the eyes of his long lost friend, Little Sparrow: empty, helpless, staring at him' (p.235). In this sequence, the 'camera' in the position of the omniscient observer, is still rolling, presenting before our eyes what is in Mingzhi's mind—that he misses his friend—through the image of Little Sparrow conveyed through a close-up shot of his

eyes. However, there are occasions in which I let the omniscient observer deliver information directly as it is economical to do in those particular situations. In Chapter 6, for example, as Mingzhi realises that his uncle will not be able to spend time with him during the harvest of the opium poppies, I mentioned that: 'He yearns for them [the poppies] to stop growing, for time to be frozen' (p.143). Still, I let the readers deduce the meaning of Mingzhi's thoughts.

By allowing the characters 'limited consciousness' as exemplified above, they do not just act out the scenes but their thoughts are sometimes revealed to the readers. However, instead of describing psychological feelings using terms such as 'sad', 'happy', 'frustrated' and the like, I focus on the description of the characters' physical states to reflect their inner feelings. To take the example of the scene just discussed, I present Mingzhi's feelings at this moment as follows: 'His stomach feels sour, and he knows his journey home will seem unbearably long' (p.295). This kind of presentation provides a more vivid picture of the characters' feelings.

The device of 'italics' serves as a channel whereby the characters express their 'limited consciousness', providing information which is necessary to enhance emotion, and giving emphasis to certain expressions and feelings. In one of the early sequences, when baby Mingzhi reminds Mama Wang of her own child, the following information is provided: '*A lovely boy like him, naming him after an animal will blind the jealous evil spirits, stopping them from taking him away.* But then her smile turns bitter. *Yet he was taken*' (p.4). The purpose of this scene is to establish the bond between Mama Wang and Mingzhi, which would see her departure leaving a deep scar in the boy's fragile heart. Hence, a detailed description of Mama Wang's child being taken away and her

immediate reaction at that moment is unimportant. While I found this device an economical way to express the characters' thoughts, I restricted the use of it only to places where it was strictly necessary, in my effort to minimise interior monologue.

The scenes, the characters in them and their actions are shown as though through a camera's eye. The point of view, or rather the 'post of observation'<sup>1</sup> from which the narrative is built, shifts from one character to another with a rotation of viewpoint. For instance, although my main character is Mingzhi, I sometimes shift the narrative to the characters around him – Master Chai, Da Niang, Li Wei, Mingyuan, Mandarin Liu and others – whose actions have effects on Mingzhi's life and thus are important in moving the narrative forward. Nevertheless, the post of observation is sometimes taken from the perspective of an outsider who resembles the omniscient observer in a third-person narrative. This is essential to provide an overview of certain scenes, particularly those that do not immediately focus on the characters' point of view, such as the opening sequence of autumn in Plum Blossom Village, or the quiet display of the items symbolising Mingzhi's first official appointment as mentioned above.

In terms of writing techniques, I have aimed to present the narrative and deliver its meanings in ways that result in effects resembling those created by using filmmaking techniques. In their discussion of film art, David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson define and explain in detail the elements of film style: *mise-en-scene* elements such as setting, lighting, costume and the behaviour of the figure; cinematography, of which the most important elements are the framing of the shot and editing, which creates effects such as

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<sup>44</sup> Henry James introduces the term 'post of observation' to describe 'point of view' which rotates from one character to another. See Morrissette, 1985:84.

fade-in and-out, dissolve, superimpose and montage – a device for temporal ellipses achieved by quick-cutting of a series of shots (2001:156-290).

The most comprehensive example of utilising filmmaking technique in this novel is in the scenes in Chapter 19 which end with Mingyuan's death (pp. 399-406). This sequence involves five major characters in more than six separate locations: Da Niang in her room in Plum Blossom Village; Mingzhi in his sedan hurrying back to his office; Master Chai in Mingzhi's office; Mingyuan running in the rain and before that, in a shack in the east end of town and then in his room, and Tiansheng at the marketplace. The settings of the different places inform us about the locations. With 'rain' as the major link between the scenes, I shifted/cut from one scene to another, inter-cutting them. I began with Da Niang's scene which ends with her watching the dark cloud moving towards Pindong Town, where, in the following scene, Mingzhi, who is inside a sedan in Pindong Town, observes the same piece of cloud moving towards him. In the next scene, the rain (presumably from the same piece of cloud) has fallen onto the roof of the mandarin office where Master Chai is waiting for Mingzhi. Immediately after this, we 'see' Mingyuan running in the rain. The transition between the scenes bears a close resemblance to film editing technique. There are imaginary sequences as when Master Chai imagines '[rain] water filling up the cracked land, seeping through the dried earth', which are dissolved or faded into when Master Chai listens to the raindrops; and flashback as in Mingyuan's earlier encounter with the thugs and his vain effort to find money, and Mingzhi's reaction to Mingyuan's death. By shifting from one scene to another, I moved the narrative quickly across time and space, and the cutting between shorter scenes using short sentences resembles montage:

He remembers the night when Er Niang was caught. The chaos, the spitting and cursing, and the order to kill: to drown her and her lover.

The evening of Meifong's death. The refusal to call a doctor. The order for a quick disposal of her body.

The moment when his foreign books were found. The shock and humiliation, and the order for his being housebound.

The scene of Master Chai's sixtieth birthday. The broken cup, the opera, Charcoal, the Green Snake. The order for Little Sparrow's dismissal from the opera troupe. (p.405)

I also created effects that are similar to camera angle, direction and framing. In the scene when Mingyuan is killed, we 'see' (and 'hear'):

A flash of metal.

A splash of red.

A scream.

Mingyuan falls to the ground; blood spouts from between the fingers that clutch at his chest.

The hawker drops his knife, standing stock still. He rubs his face with his blood-stained hand.

Tiansheng. (p.403-405)

There are close ups of the knife ('A flash of metal') and the blood ('A splash of red'), and even a sound effect ('A scream'). Only then are the readers directed to the two characters involved in this incident. Eventually, as '[h]e rubs his face with his blood-stained hand', the readers are given a close-up of Tiansheng's face.

As in film, I used *mise-en-scene* elements to enhance the atmosphere and foreground the characters' psychological states. In Chapter 19, for example, the sounds and patterns of rain are carefully designed to create different effects: it drums on Mingzhi's heart which is heavy with worries, it patters on the roof and stimulates Master Chai's imagination, it hits against Mingyuan's body and hurts him, and it conveys no sound to Tiansheng who thinks his life has ended (pp. 399-406). An example of the use of lighting to reflect the characters' psychological states is in the scene when Mingyuan dismisses Mingzhi's suspicion that he has hurt Mingzhi's dog (p.125). When he walks away towards the sunlight, he casts a long shadow that falls on Mingzhi, implying the vulnerable state Mingzhi is in, in contrast to Mingyuan who is very much in control of the situation. In addition to lighting, colour is another tool I used for atmospheric and emotional enhancement. The colours I described represent particular emotions and meanings: happiness and good auspices (red in Mingzhi's birthday ceremony, the New Year celebrations and his wedding), bad luck (a black dog), and grief (white in Mingyuan's funeral and the Taiwanese candidates who have lost their homeland).

In conclusion, while I enjoyed presenting the narrative by using hints and clues through scene-by-scene descriptions, and adopting creative mechanisms similar to film form, there were moments when I had to deploy the conventional technique of 'telling' in order to deliver the message in an economical way. However, this does not diminish the

visual effects of the scenes as the telling only serves to speed up the narrative in order to convey the situation or the characters' psychological state. Taking the rain sequence in Chapter 19 as an example, after the scene in which Master Chai waits for Mingzhi, the following scene begins with 'Mingyuan would have wished he were in a position as comfortable as his grandfather.' His action in the subsequent sentence immediately shows us why he might wish this: 'The young man is running in the rain' (400). Thus, the information is given without slowing down the narrative, so that it compliments the filmic descriptions. In doing so, the novel can be read more smoothly as a film on pages.

## Conclusion

From my research into adaptations in Chinese cinema and my practical experiment of writing a historical novel set in China, there is a clear need to incorporate cultural elements into both film adaptations and the novel. There are several reasons for this. First of all, from the perspective of a creative writer, fictional cultural products, be they films or novels, are results of personal observation and research. They are a serious engagement with the culture. As Walter Besant points out with reference to the novel, '[the novel must be] the result of personal experience and observation' (Perosa, 1978: p.1). Applying this principle to another fictional product, film, both Zhang Yimou and Ang Lee drew on their cultural and technical experiences in their film adaptations which were started 'with a conscious moral purpose' (Perosa, 1978:1); while I, as a fourth generation Chinese in Malaysia who has always clung tightly to my cultural roots, present the lives of my characters as accurately as I can. Undoubtedly, culture is the main issue here, which leads to my second argument. In his discussion of fictional narrative, Edward Said argues that '[stories] become the method colonised people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history' (Said, 1994:xiii). This is particularly true in my case as an overseas Chinese who wishes to maintain my own cultural identity and to be recognised by others as having this identity. The urge to provide an honest engagement with and representation of historical and cultural facts is the 'conscious moral purpose' Besant refers to. This urge is similar to Ang Lee's search for 'a kind of dream of China' (Lee, 2001:1) and Zhang Yimou's depiction of an 'ugly' China in his films, where the stunning cinematic effects he created, as in many other

films with a historical and cultural setting of China such as Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, ironically become attractions to a Western audience<sup>1</sup>.

These kinds of effects, which I tried to experiment with in my novel, aim to provide a more vivid scenic impression, bringing the scenes closer to the readers. The descriptions of sounds, colours, the textures of objects, lighting and other elements arouse sensual responses, allowing readers to associate these sensitivities with their past experiences so that feelings and emotions are enhanced, thus encouraging them to identify with the characters.

Although the existence of an 'omniscient observer' proved unavoidable, I used it only to encourage the narrative to flow more smoothly without interrupting it with lengthy revelations of the characters' thoughts. As such, I do not view it as a flaw as the effects of the overall scene-by-scene presentation were not undermined. Having gone through the creative process of writing the novel, I now realise the considerable degree of the similarity in terms of creative mechanism between film and literature. A writer can place a camera before his pages to capture the scenes he carefully arranged, direct the shots by structuring the sentences that present the subjects or objects which need to be focused on, and cut the shots, controlling time and space by calculating the length of sentences or scenes, or adding colours, lighting and sound to enhance atmosphere and emotion. These are evident in my novel, a written film.

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<sup>45</sup> Zhang's earlier films have always been criticised by the Party and the mainland Chinese for exposing the backwardness of the country.

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