

# GOLD MOON LOTUS

## 金月蓮

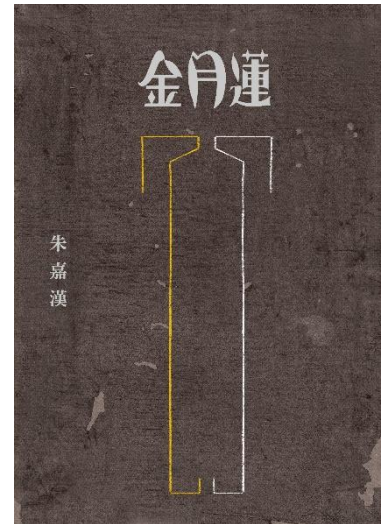
*After World War II, a veteran struggling with the loss of his identity marries a call girl beset by misfortune. As this new family struggles to survive against the conditions of their fate, ordinary tragedies become a mirror to Taiwan's tumultuous post-war history.*

In the aftermath of World War II, control of Taiwan passes from the Empire of Japan to the Republic of China. But for Goldie, a Taiwanese soldier who fought for the Japanese army, the celebrations taking place in the streets of Taiwan are meaningless. Robbed of his identity and purpose, Goldie leads an aimless existence until he meets Celine, a call girl.

Celine has been wrestling with fate all her life. Born into poverty, she was sold as a child bride, and eventually forced to make a living as a prostitute. Unwilling to accept these circumstances, she agrees to join the already-married Goldie as his concubine. However, their life together is far from easy. Finally, after a lifetime spent in defiance of the cards she was dealt, the elderly Celine enters a monastery, casting off the restrictive rules of a game she could never win.

The couple's eldest daughter, Lotus, stood by her mother throughout her stubborn campaign against the cruel dictates of fate. At the same time, she watched as her father's voice was silenced by an endless succession of political campaigns and changes of regime. Charting her own course through life, she is neither as combative as her mother, nor as resigned as her father. She only wishes to live. Because only those that stay alive have the strength to resist.

The latest novel from "the new monster of Taiwan literature" Chu Ja-Han, *Gold Moon Lotus* is a family epic that spans the eras of Japanese colonial rule, the White Terror, and, after the lifting of martial law in 1987, democracy and reform. Goldie, Celine, and Lotus each find their own ways to resist being crushed by fate, and when that fails, to rebuild themselves again. In the process, each also finds their own



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ways to love, hate, and make amends. Setting these ordinary lives against the implacable tides of modern history, the novel uses the intimate realm of individual love and personal memory to reveal the heart of a nation.

## Chu Ja-Han 朱嘉漢

After graduating with a degree in anthropology from National Taiwan University, novelist, screenwriter, and literary critic Chu Ja-Han went on to pursue a PhD in sociology from the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences in France. Greatly influenced by Gabriel García Márquez, William Faulkner, and Salman Rushdie, Chu Ja-Han excels at fictionalizing the hidden lives of ordinary people caught up in the vast currents of history.

# GOLD MOON LOTUS

By Chu Ja-Han

Translated by Darryl Sterk

## Chapter 1: The gaze

### 1

All that was left was the dream's warmth.

Goldie woke up bright and early and gathered his thoughts in the morning light. Before the dreamtide ebbed, he warmed his soul with the last spot of spume.

He was sitting up in bed, eyes closed, the sun shedding red through the lids. His extremities were limbering up, and the pain in his joints was easing.

It was always hard to get a good night's rest, at his age. He got tired easily and didn't sleep for very long. He'd doze off in his chair, but toss and turn in his bed, with coldness in his hands and feet.

Whenever he felt like complaining about the hardships of old age, he'd reminisce, and count his blessings. He didn't have to head out before dawn to make a living anymore.

He decided to go run an errand.

He heated up half a cup of soy milk and half a bun for a simple breakfast. Then he turned on the radio. Sometimes he listened to a radio drama, sometimes a Shōwa-era hit parade. He had a special place in his heart for those golden oldies, or maybe it was the other way around. Yes, sometimes it was like the tunes were all in the juke box of his soul, had been from the beginning. Maybe that was why it was so easy to sing along, like he'd heard them all before. When he heard one he liked, he pressed record. He'd filled dozens of tapes, which he played in no particular order, indifferent to repetition, careless of categorization. Two years ago, on an outing with his youngest son, they'd stopped at a stereo store. His son had gotten him a player and a Shōwa Greatest Hits collection and taught him how to load the CDs; he'd obliged by pushing the buttons according to his son's instructions. Just two days later, he'd gone back to his old ways, cassette tapes and radio plays, as if the excitement of a new device had peaked with a rare family visit and fallen immediately off when it ended.

He'd never wondered if he'd live long enough to see the twenty-first century. He'd been around since 1921 after all. He belonged to a different generation, or another world. Many or most of the people he had known were gone; some of them, even youngsters a decade or two behind him had passed along, just like that. He was like a living spirit who remembered his past life; no wonder he treasured old photos more than anyone could imagine.

He never showed them off, just flipped through his albums, alone. He had no mind to share them with anyone or talk about the people and places in them. He was taciturn, including, after years of practice, in his mind. In silence deep, emotions would come back sweet, like the lingering aftertaste of tea. What was left was the best. So why worry, why hurry? He took what was left of time, so that time might leave him be.

This was when time really belonged to him.

He did not believe in fate, and while he did credit karma, he didn't ask many questions, or any; he'd rather not talk about it.

He spent no time mulling over past lives, reincarnation, anything like that, and though he knew suchlike was a consolation to *her*, he'd never said a discouraging word. He owed her that. But it *was* a pity he'd never had a chance to have it out with her, not even about this. They'd rarely if ever argued, preferring the silent treatment. But make no mistake: they'd been each other's nemeses their whole lives.

He had a shred of hope that he might see her that evening, but didn't dare indulge it, because any assumptions he might make, conclusions he might leap to, were just pipe dreams. He just knew it.

She would never agree to see him again, not in this lifetime, no matter what.

He couldn't help but sigh at her bloody-mindedness. But after the pang passed, he knew it was time for him to let go, to stop bothering her.

"It's you," she'd say, under her breath, or in her mind. "It's always been you, making me suffer my whole life." The unsaid words echoed in his ear.

He was the only one who could hear. He assumed what she said was for his ears only, and therefore undoubtedly true. From the moment he heard her voice, he'd lived his life believing in a reality he alone could witness. The collective fantasy had vanished, but the reality that he'd recognized in solitude remained. It was inescapable.

He was willing to live by himself, with his memories for company. The voices that echoed there were all the more affecting.

## 2

Goldie had been hard of hearing for quite some time. For so long he wasn't sure how long.

He had his first suspicion when he couldn't hear the TV. He complained to Sammy. Sammy boy! The box is on the fritz! Can you come over and have a look? His first-born son had not been blessed in his career; actually the kid had never been able to hold down a job. But he had learned a thing or two along the way, to make a living. Like TV repair. He checked it, found nothing wrong with it, guessed what really might be the matter, and was going to talk about it with his dad, but Goldie just changed the subject and kept checking it himself. When his gracious daughter-in-law came to visit, he nudged it up a notch, or two, then sat there reading the newspaper, pretending he was deaf as a post. When slender Masako served him tea, she turned it back down. He knew

that even if she'd guessed it, his secret would be safe with her; she'd always been the best guardian of his meager dignity. Perhaps it was because she was half Japanese that she honored all the most stubborn parts of him.

Yes, he guessed she knew. She'd never advertise, so why should he? Better for them to keep things low key. He noted the numbers on the knobs, so he could maintain a certain volume on the radio and the TV. He practiced speaking at a consistent loudness, and watched his interlocutor's expression to see if he hadn't inadvertently raised his voice. Better too soft than too loud, even if he had to repeat himself.

Don't worry, he said to himself, it's better to speak softly, like an inner voice that carried words where they were supposed to go. The most important things didn't need to be said.

A man of few words like him could basically shut up and nobody would notice. He could play the quiet old geezer. It was only when he cast himself in this role that he realized everyone around him was already used to his reticence.

He hadn't learned to read lips, but did that matter? When people asked him something, or said something, he could hear them in his heart, and answer with a smile or silence. Most of the time, however, he just said: "Sure." That mostly did the trick.

People were always saying the same thing, no need to get hung up on the significance of this or that remark. An immediate and appropriate reply was more meaningful than any measured response. That was how he put people at ease, why his friends and family members opened up to him, told him what was on their minds, even their deepest, darkest secrets. Their voices had faded away, only the memories remained, which might have made him the best listener in the entire world. He made the best of an apparent contradiction. Somehow in the process of losing his hearing, he'd learned how to focus on what people were saying.

He didn't worry about not being able to communicate, heck, his heart was full of words.

Perhaps one day he'd be able to tell his own story.

Meanwhile, he let his ears go, and enjoyed the peace and quiet. He found the silence of the TV and the radio strangely reassuring. He could guess what the people on TV were saying, and he could recognize the songs on the radio by tune. Sometimes when Sammy and Masako were around, he would grab a tape of Japanese or Taiwanese tunes, put it on, and hum along. When she heard a familiar song, Masako would hum along, too, barely audible, somewhere between speech and silence. How could he feel lonely?

Gradual sensory deterioration was even a kind of consolation. Finally, he had a sense of repose.

His ears were big, his hearing had been keen. In his younger days, his aural nerves had been tormented under Japanese rule up to '45 by the roaring of his taskmasters at school, by the shelling and the screaming when he stepped on the battlefield. The clamor didn't let up after the war, when the Chinese nationalists took over; the slaughter in '47 was followed by an endless stream of stentorian propaganda and Chinese-language education. At the worst, he even suffered from tinnitus and sonic hallucination, particularly in the still of the night. Losing his hearing had been a relief, for his inner voices had quieted down, too, leaving only hers. For the first time, her

curses and complaints sounded sweet. After decades apart, her face was hazy, but her voice was clear as a bell, the last remaining memory. That memory hurt, but he didn't want to forget.

When he took things slow, he noticed that many of the things he could make out in a given day did not really need to be said, and it didn't really matter whether you heard them or not. However little you did hear seemed to be enough.

He forgot how long it took, but one day, it just happened: Sammy and Masako came right out and asked, How's your hearing, Pop? My ears had gone to shit, he said, smiling. He didn't put up any resistance, or throw a temper tantrum when they took him to get hearing aids. He wore them for a while; he didn't want to let his son and daughter-in-law down, but found the clarity disconcerting.

He turned the volume down, sometimes off, and eventually stopped bothering to put them in. By that point, folks had forgotten he'd ever had them. He'd accepted the way his life had turned out, but had to be patient. He had to wait until everyone else got used to it, too.

The same was true of old age, the same was true of death, which was waiting, had been waiting there patiently all the while, to give people the chance to get used to losing everything they once had without losing it. He had seen many people his age who seemed puzzled, confused, then angry about increasing decrepitude or imminent death. It was precisely because he was prepared that he looked younger than a lot of his peers.

He washed up, put in his dentures, got dressed up, and put on his hat. He picked up his cane and checked his hip sack to make sure he'd packed everything he needed for the trip: keys, billfold, pills for his diabetes, and, most important of all, the photo he wanted to have copied.

### 3

He limped on his cane down a street in Sanchung, the suburb of Taipei he called home, to the nearest photo studio. It had been in business for more than thirty years.

He knew the old owner of the studio, A-Hua, who had been two or three years older than him. A-Hua had retired in his seventies and passed away a few years ago. His son had taken over, but the place still had an old-fashioned atmosphere. Goldie walked in, smelled a distinctive odor, and smiled. It reminded him of those corner grocery stores, particularly the one by his apartment. In their heyday, such shops had lined the streets, but now they'd seen better days. Somehow one or two of them had held on, like old folks who'd lived longer than anyone thought they should. He never saw any customers in this one, and the displays were always the same, as if nothing had sold in the longest time.

The shop itself was an old photo album, the people inside like yellowed photographs. It was like they'd always been that old, and looked just the same as he remembered them from decades ago. Maybe the studio and the owner's son had changed, but he saw them through a fog that had been gathering in his eyes. He'd grown accustomed to it, like sepia-tinted filter on a lens.

Age affects your point of view. When you're young everything that catches your eye is new. In your prime, it's stability and fixity. When you're old, it's disrepair and decay. Goldie was touched to see the son's close resemblance to the father. A-Hua would have looked so much older now, had he survived. But Goldie still had the sense that time had stood still, another consolation.

He imagined himself at the gathering that evening, seeing himself and his wife in their children, and their children in their grandchildren. That warmed his heart, like time hadn't turned its back on him. Or perhaps he'd reconciled himself to the games time plays. He'd come to accept them.

"Uncle Goldie, what can I do for you today?"

"Sorry to bother you," he said, taking the photo out. "Can you make me a few copies?"

"I see... an old photo. I assume you don't have the negative. Okay, no problem, I'll have them for you in no time. How many copies do you want?"

He froze for a second. "Five," he said. "Ah, no, four'll be enough."

He sat in a chair by the door, staring out at the street, his chest on his hands, his hands on his cane. He was in a good mood today. He should be able to have a good talk with the kids. If possible, when he gave them the photo, he wanted to tell them the story behind it.

The story had begun before they were born, before their mother was born, on the day he got ready to go out and meet his maker.

#### 4

"Where should I start?" he thought. "Actually, where else but on that day?"

The day that photo was taken. Flash, click, his life had been frozen in an instant. He was gazing into the light.

He was all of fifteen. When they heard he'd volunteered to serve, his parents arranged a hasty wedding for him and Ginny, the family's child bride. She was three years older than him. She had been adopted to be the wife of the younger of his two elder brothers.

Goldie was shy and simple by nature, so what was he to do when he hit puberty, when desire began to burn? He had to suppress his feelings for his elder brother's woman. It was torture. He never imagined that by joining the army out of self-abnegation he would take his brother's place.

He had contemplated all kinds of deaths in those crazy days: his brother's, Ginny's, and, with the greatest guilty pleasure, his own. He had even drafted a suicide note in his heart, confessing his feelings to the illiterate girl. Little did he know that she felt the same, that she would be his, all of her. The thought weighed on him. He realized the irony. He could only love her if he could never have her. His love for her had ended, for good.

To add to his agony, after a ceremony that seemed to pass in a daze, he saw her look up at him, look him straight in the eyes, for the first time in his life, on his wedding night. In her eyes, which were as black as the nighttime sky, smoldered pure love.

Turned out that it was him that she loved, always had been. And he was afraid that he would never be able to love her again.

Following their elders' hints, which were half-explicit, half-euphemistic, the two of them made love again and again in the room they'd been left alone in, until he couldn't squeeze another drop of semen from his body, or an ounce of affection for Ginny, no matter how hard he tried.

He steeled his gaze, pretending to be grownup, trying not to reciprocate.

It couldn't be helped, he knew. It had nothing to do with him.

No matter what, Ginny loved him with the same desperation that would send him onto the battlefield.

Once you start running away, you never stop.

He had tried to turn his back on his illicit desire for her, but in the end, he fled from her love.

It was not that there was no karmic connection between them, but that it was too strong. It was so hard to break that trying had only left him shackled all the more tightly.

He forgot to ask if she regretted marrying him, if she even wanted to.

He remembered little about the day. He longed to go to war, far away from Taiwan, far from home. At least he would suffer, apt punishment for a fool. They dressed him in a uniform, handed him a huge Hinomaru flag, and sat him in front of the camera. The next thing he knew he was blind.

His sensitive eyes were on fire. He fought to stop himself from crying.

For a moment, he grieved that the last thing he would see at the moment of death would be this all-consuming light. Course he wasn't actually blind. For a fraction of a second, as the deep purplish-red afterimage slowly faded, he saw the future. Despite the burning pain, he couldn't look away. He thought that the shattered blur would clarify as his sight returned. One thing was crystal clear: there was no truer picture of the future than this shattered blur.

It was not an illusion, not a temporary loss of vision, but the promise of the power of prophesy, in answer to his sincerest prayer for forgiveness of his sinful mind. His willingness to sacrifice his life had granted him an instant of insight.

Then it was gone. He refused to move, as if to turn himself into a photograph. Everyone around him laughed.

Lucky for him he committed to memory the image, which he sensed was a key to something. It was another woman. She was pretty, tiny, friendly. She was surrounded by people he couldn't quite make out, but they seemed so familiar, and she, the center of attention, looked happy. It was a happiness that made his self-centered grief seem meaningless. He wanted to be a part of it.

It didn't matter if he couldn't see clearly, or if he couldn't remember the details; somehow he had an intuition that he would meet a girl who would save him and help him feel the joy of life.

But he had to find her and save her first. She was worth waiting for.

“Uncle Goldie, the prints are ready. Is this you when you were young? What a handsome boy!”

Goldie gazed at the glare on the transparent plastic sleeve. He was at a loss for words.

“They’re nice, but see here, this old one’s got more feeling.”

A-Hua Junior was taken aback. Maybe he thought Goldie’d gone a bit senile.

“Course it’s not the same. But just you wait a few years, and these prints will age before your eyes. They’ll yellow and fade, until they look like the one in your hand, older and warmer.” A-Hua’s booming voice was just the thing for Goldie’s tired old ears. He didn’t have to struggle to understand. “It takes time,” he added, trying to strike a reassuring tone.

Junior’s expression reminded him of the half-annoyed, half-sympathetic look on his daughter-in-law’s face on the rare occasions when he was stubborn. “I’m not trying to be difficult,” he wanted to say. “I do know what’s going on. I’m just old, and being old means getting thrown into a totally strange reality. Like a newborn baby, you have all kinds of aches and pains that your folks can’t guess, and needs you can’t express. The hardest part is not having the words.”

“I know, I know,” he was going to say. “It’s just a bit hard to accept.” But he didn’t. Explanations were not his strong suit. They might just be his worst.

“It takes time, yes, it takes time,” he finally said. “Sure.”