

# THE OTHERWORLD PAWNSHOP

## 神鬼當舖

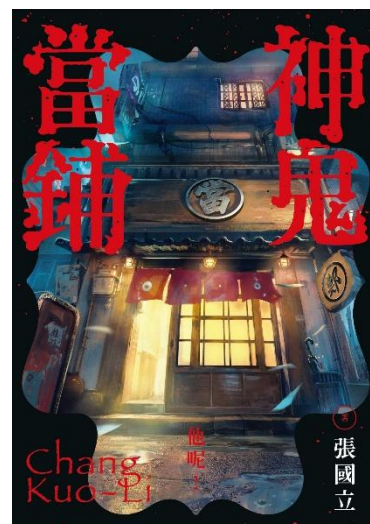
*After his father's sudden death, a high school student takes over the 400-year-old family business – an unusual pawnshop that trades goods between this world and the next. As he investigates his father's death, he probes the shop's deepest mysteries, and acquires first-hand knowledge of the spirit world.*

When his father dies unexpectedly in his pawnshop, seventeen-year-old Chieh has to take up the reins of a business that has been in the family for eight generations. By tradition, the pawnshop only opens at night, and this is just one of many unusual rules of operation. Occupying a narrow, run-down storefront, the shop boasts a massive underground storage room for pawned goods: everything from clothing to motorcycles to Ming dynasty antiques to... astrological birth charts. Like the store, the customers also have hidden depths, and, according to the rules, Chieh must uncover the real reasons behind their visits before they can redeem their pawned items.

From there, things only get more bizarre. The dark shades that haunt the shop seem to be looking for someone... could it be the proprietor? But Chieh's father is already dead... After a Daoist priest fails to exorcise the spirits, Chieh uncovers what he believes is the real reason for the hauntings in the pawnshop's ancient records.

Meanwhile, a police detective discovers that a series of seemingly ordinary deaths in an elder care facility may have actually been murders. Three years after turning himself in, the killer was executed, but the items he stole from his elderly victims are all still in hock at Chieh's shop, and the killer was a friend of Chieh's father...

With one foot planted in the mind-bending world of the supernatural, and the other in the legal and psychological realities that follow the death of a loved one, *The Otherworld Pawnshop* illustrates what it takes



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bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw

to get through tough times, and what it means to die well. Packed with family secrets and folk superstition, this coming-of-age/supernatural mystery mashup will charm readers with its distinctive characters, dry humor, and otherworldly suspense.

## Chang Kuo-Li 張國立

A former editor-in-chief of *China Times Weekly*, Chang Kuo-Li has won numerous awards for his writing. A linguist, historian, military expert, sports fan, food critic, as well as poet, playwright and novelist, he is truly a Renaissance man. He has over sixty published works to his name, mostly mystery novels, including the recent *The Otherworld Pawnshop* and *The Spirit Medium Detective* series. Outside of Taiwan he is best known for *The Sniper* series, which has been translated into Dutch, German, French, English, Russian, Turkish, Vietnamese, and Japanese.

# THE OTHERWORLD PAWNSHOP

By Chang Kuo-Li

Translated by Roddy Flagg

## Chapter 1: The Chain-bearer, the Light-bringer *or* Natural and Unnatural Deaths

### November 2020

It was six months and seven days since Mr. Tsai's son had placed him in the long-term care center. Winter's first wave of cold air had descended over Kamchatka, leaving snow in its wake over Beijing, Pyongyang, Seoul, and Tokyo, before continuing south, over the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and to Taipei, where it turned noon's 32°C to midnight's 11°C. Did Mr. Tsai feel the sudden drop in temperature? It seemed unlikely: he was seventy-seven and had been bedbound for three and a half years; motionless bar the five times a day the nurses rolled him about.

And that explained the flurry of activity in the building when, on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November, he raised a hand and began to speak. Not that all the rushing about did Mr. Tsai much good. At 3:42 a.m. the following morning he died.

\*

And that was the time of death recorded by Officer Yao, dispatched from the local police station. Not that Officer Yao himself had been sat at the bedside, his watch in one hand and Mr. Tsai's wrist in the other, watching the display flick to 3:42 a.m. as the man's pulse stopped.

He hadn't even arrived until 4:52 a.m. The nurse, still in shock at the bedside, didn't respond to the question until the third asking:

"3:42 a.m."

"Why 3:42 a.m.?"

The plump woman pointed to the clock.

"I checked the clock after."

He didn't ask how long after. You get born, time of birth gets written down. You die, naturally a time of death gets written down. The accuracy of that time was not a police matter. He entered the information into the correct box on the form, demonstrating a basic commitment to his duties.

"So, he's been a vegetable for three and a half years, then yesterday he suddenly says something?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"There you are."

“‘There you are?’ Had you just arrived?”

“Oh, not to me. To the ceiling. Two of us quit recently and they can’t find replacements. I’m meant to watch eight beds on the second floor, but at night I have to cover the third floor as well. I was already on the stairs when I heard the alarm go off. Didn’t even get to the restroom.”

“So, he was unconscious for three and a half years, then he looked up at the ceiling and said: ‘There you are’?”

“Then he asked: ‘What’s that you’ve got?’”

“And what did you have?”

“Nothing.”

“So, he said ‘There you are’ even though he didn’t expect to see you, and asked you what you were carrying even though he wasn’t looking at you. What did you say?”

“I said ‘Nothing.’”

“And he never looked at you?”

“He was looking at the ceiling. Then he asked: ‘Are those chains?’”

So, on the 15<sup>th</sup> Mr. Tsai had come to, seen a familiar face up on the ceiling, who may have been carrying chains.

“Then?”

“Just now? I was covering the third floor, on my rounds. I came in, checked his pulse, no, checked if he was breathing, no. He didn’t say anything.”

“And this was 3:42 a.m.?”

“3:42 a.m. by that clock on the wall. I saw the minute hand tick over.”

So, the day previous, Mr. Tsai had seen a “you” he recognized, a “you” carrying chains. This made Officer Yao think of the statues of the chain-bearing Black Guard and his White Guard companion in the City God Temple, both of whom are charged with escorting souls to the underworld. All Taiwan knew of the two guards, the Black and White Impermanences, who crept in in the dead of night and dragged the souls of the deceased away in chains.

What book was the story from? Some man, a seer, his mother at death’s door, rushed to the temple gate. He waited for the emissaries of the underworld to emerge on their official business, stopped them, offered to buy them a drink. He had no money or influence with which to protect his mother, but that man could drink. And he drank them under the table, buying his mother a few more days of life. What was the moral of the story? That even death’s emissaries can be corrupted? Or that they can’t hold their drink and had to delay their work several days due to hangovers?

“Must have been delirious, seeing and hearing things. A last gasp, imagining some relative or other,” concluded Officer Yao, in the same tone of voice he would use to tell a colleague he had had a McDonald’s Filet o’ Fish, no fries, for lunch.

So, the Black and White Guards turned up and were somehow corrupted into going away and giving Mr. Tsai one more day. Seventy-seven years – that’s a lot of life to see flash before your eyes, movie-style, before taking your last breath free of regrets. Officer Yao did not tap these thoughts into his police-issue tablet; the death certificate did not require witness statements or

theorizing about the cause of death. This wasn't a crime scene. Although—

"Who took the oxygen mask off?" he asked, still thinking of the two deities staggering around stinking of booze. Both had tongues hanging down to their chests. Did that make it hard to drink?

"Wasn't me."

"Did he do it?"

"Who knows. It wasn't on when I got here. His tube had been pulled out as well. Look, all the lines from the machines are out. Wasn't me, though."

Officer Yao glanced at the dead man's withered hands, resting by the sides of the bed. A long illness followed by heart failure. He couldn't resist a sniff though. The room stank of alcohol. Then, he couldn't help but peek at the ceiling. Nobody carrying chains up there.

\*

The doctor was quick to agree: simply put, Mr. Tsai's heart hadn't been pumping enough blood. Like a car running out of fuel, he had shuddered to a halt. Like a drone running out of battery, he had crashed into the ground. Not that Mr. Tsai had really crashed, as such. He'd simply stopped moving.

The deceased's son arrived before the medical examiner, pushing his blank-faced mother in a wheelchair and followed by an entourage of relatives. Nobody was crying. One, perhaps a grandson, was still texting away with both thumbs. A cellphone engineer once said that, in theory, at least, cellphones would never break, just get regularly updated. The batteries, though, would fail. Mr. Tsai had been alert enough to talk to the Black and White Guards yesterday, so he hadn't been broken then. His battery, though, had failed just an hour ago.

"They can hear," the nurse said, eating a zongzi.

Officer Yao hadn't eaten zongzi for a long time, thanks to his cholesterol levels. He didn't miss them, but eating one of the big lumps of stuffed glutinous rice right in front of him seemed excessive.

"Hear what?"

"Dr. Yang, he says they seem like vegetables but their brains are still working. The brains go last."

"Last?"

"Yeah." She swallowed half her zongzi and didn't wipe her mouth. "Heart stops, body goes stiff, breathing stops, but the brain doesn't, it keeps going a while. You're only dead when your brain's dead, the doctor said."

He recalled the question his wife always directed at him: "Do you even have a brain?" Maybe she wanted to know if he was still alive?

"I'm always careful what I say around the unconscious ones. They hear it all, you know, and remember it. What if I say something and they wake up and come looking for me? What would I do then?"

Now that he thought about it, his wife did prefer accusing him of being brain-damaged, despite his being perfectly able to hear her.

\*

No son remains filial through a long illness, they say. Unfairly, though. Mr. Tsai had been unresponsive for three and a half years and the grief had already been felt. The dying had finally died. And while Officer Yao couldn't say it, it was true that death is sometimes a liberation for those left behind. And for the dead too.

Why couldn't a battery simply get updated, like a cellphone?

"You must be Mr. Tsai's wife?" he said, approaching the lady in the wheelchair.

"My mother, yes, but she has dementia," answered the man pushing the wheelchair. "I'll take care of whatever needs to be done."

Officer Yao lowered himself to one knee and patted the lady's hand: "Sorry for your loss, ma'am."

The old woman looked at him, unseeing. Or as if she saw someone else? But who? Could she hear the clinking of chains? Officer Yao glanced at the ceiling again.

His cellphone, its battery not yet dead, rang. Another matter he had to attend to, he explained to the center director, who nodded: he didn't need a policeman right now, anyway, just the undertaker.

Thoughts of what Mr. Tsai might have seen up on the ceiling lingered in Officer Yao's mind. The mention of chains naturally led to thoughts of the Black and White Guards and, while he was no Christian, he knew he personally would prefer an angel than that terrifying presence. He had dealt once with a case involving a man who had come back from the dead: forty-seven seconds after being declared dead his heart had started beating again. The doctor had made a big show of his surprise to distract from his inaccurate diagnosis of death and asked the patient what he recalled. Gasping for breath, the patient talked of blinding lights shining from a hole in the sky.

"What kind of light?"

The patient immediately explained: "Like the floodlights at an evening baseball game."

Officer Yao wasn't a Buddhist either, but wasn't the bodhisattva Guanyin meant to take the dead to paradise? She didn't come with floodlights or flashlights though – just a jar of pure water in one hand and a willow branch in the other. So where had the light come from?

Finishing the report only meant his doubts plagued him more insistently. He called the center director.

"Hello, Officer Yao here. Could Mr. Tsai have removed those tubes himself?"

"You saw his hands, right?" the director asked with a sigh. "All withered up like that with age and lack of use, muscles withered. He couldn't have raised them two inches, never mind pulled out those tubes or taken his mask off."

"So, the patient couldn't have done it himself," he confirmed. A professional habit.

"No." Officer Yao could now smell the sesame oil chicken noodles through his cellphone.

“The drip was keeping him alive, but no more. He couldn’t have lifted so much as a pair of chopsticks.”

Officer Yao’s doubts remained, but what had happened? A man had died after a long illness; the family had no concerns. He finalized the report and hit the send button. It flew off on invisible networks and, several seconds later, squeezed itself onto the full-to-bursting police server. If the duty officer wasn’t napping, it would be printed out a few minutes later and passed to the station chief who, if he wasn’t napping, would check that the names and suchlike matched before sending it on to the district and city offices. Once the medical examiner had completed the autopsy the case would be closed.

*That’s you filed away, Mr. Tsai. Best of luck in the next life if there is one. Or if there’s a God and a Heaven, may you be happy up there instead.*

He stopped his bike in a gloomy alley, by a takeaway sesame oil chicken noodle place. He hadn’t covered all the possibilities, he realized. *May the King of Hell take account of your labors in this life and permit you a return, rather than condemn you to the eighteen hells.*

Were there really so many hells?

Hsieh, with his one bar and four stars, was at the entrance to the apartment building, next to the ambulance. Waiting for him.

His cellphone pinged. Mr. Tsai’s son, asking if he had noticed a ring in his father’s bedside cabinet. He tapped out a reply: “I didn’t look in the cabinet. If anything is missing you can file a report at the station.”

He stepped into the building and noticed joss money still glowing in a burner. He glanced at Hsieh, who shrugged: “Got to pray to get protection.”

## June 2023

### 1

He hadn’t expected to find his father laying on the floor behind the counter in that strange position. Face-up, with limbs splayed as if trying to make himself big. By his head there was a candle-holder in the form of a lotus, about the size of a fist. By each hand there was a candle, both fallen over. Both eyes were wide open and fixed on the chandelier-like ornament Gramps had fixed to the ceiling, a metal thing looks like a chandelier which swayed in the breeze and sent reflections dancing about the room, like the shadows of windblown branches outside a window. Or maybe the crisscross network of TV cables over the alleyway.

Chieh was an infrequent visitor to his father’s store. When he was eleven his father had spoken to him: “On your eighteenth birthday, you’ll start coming to work in the shop, to carry on the family business.”

You’d think his dad was the boss of Fubon Bank or Cathay Life, the way he’d announced it. Family business? Crappy little store, more like. Sun Yu-fu was going to take over his father’s bicycle repair place, at least he’d learn what tires suit what terrain and that kind of thing. Ya, his elementary school friend, was helping out at her parents’ coffee shop. Hell, learning to draw love

hearts in the cappuccino froth seemed more of a family business than this. His dad wasn't keeping up with the times. Why would Chieh want to take over some failing little store that hardly even got any customers? To learn skills nobody had used since the last century? "Get real, old man," his friend Roman would have said. "You think that's the best I can do?"

But today his father was lying there staring at the ceiling, rather than asking his usual question: "Finished school? How much trouble did you cause today?"

\*

Panicked, he shouted at his dad to wake up and tried to feel for a heartbeat or pulse like they did in the TV shows. He couldn't recall anything from the CPR lessons in school. Should he put something under his father's head? Put a damp towel on his forehead? Dial 119, that was it!

"My dad's lying on the floor," he said into the phone.

"No, he hasn't fallen. He's lying there," he said louder into the phone.

"My dad's dying!" he shouted into the phone.

He followed the instructions from the woman on the other end of the line, crouching down at his father's side to try and find a pulse again. Nothing. He looked for a mirror. The only one was fixed to the bathroom wall and wasn't coming off. He used his cellphone, holding the screen to his father's nose. If he was still breathing the screen would mist up. The woman on the phone reminded him – scolded him, almost – to hold it under the nostrils, not just in front of the nose.

No mist.

He paced around his father. There had to be something to do, other than wait for the ambulance. He remembered reading about souls in a story, and that on death they floated about near the body, unsure of where to go. A passing sorcerer could summon a soul back with incantations and the deceased would, after some violent coughing, return to life. He hadn't learned any incantations, though, so all he could do was swipe at the air, hoping to catch his father's soul before it left. He could keep it in his pocket until he found a sorcerer to return it to his father's body.

He didn't seem to catch anything, but he kept jumping up, swiping at the air, urging his father to stick around. *I'll catch you, dad. Don't go.*

\*

The fire-service ambulance turned up three minutes later. One of the orange-uniformed first responders grabbed hold of Chieh.

"Breathe, big breaths like I'm doing. That's it, out then in. How long were you jumping about like that? Wow, you're drenched in sweat. Do you have a change of clothes?"

He didn't have a change of clothes, nor the energy to change into them if he did. He collapsed into a corner, still panting for breath, watching his motionless father. He put a hand in his pocket – empty. But souls were formless, right? He must have got it. He carefully removed his

hand and patted his pocket. *Have a rest, dad.* What would Roman have said? “If you’re gonna get that drunk, buddy, let me know,” maybe?

Although his dad didn’t drink.

The other first responder, the one with the broad shoulders, finished checking his father’s breathing and came to stand next to Chieh. Together, they looked at his father, still lying there making himself big. “He’s not breathing and his heart’s stopped. Is this your father? Weird way of lying down.”

Chieh was still reeling from the news his father was dead. He didn’t look dead. He used to lie like that in summer, when he was too cheap to turn the aircon on and the floor tiles were the coolest thing in the house. He’d beckon Chieh over: “Lie next to me. Natural aircon, this is. Lovely.”

As if. The old man had already warmed up every tile in the house.

\*

“We’ll need to let the police know. They’ll get the medical examiner out to decide if it was a natural death or not.”

The guy looked around the room.

“When did you find him here. Was the store open then, or not?”

Chieh had finished school at half past four, then played guitar at San’s for a while. He left for the store at half past five, but had stopped to pick up the takeaway. He’d arrived at about ten to six.

“The door was locked.” Chieh pulled out his keys. “He doesn’t open until seven. Why do you want to know?”

“He’s still warm. Hasn’t been dead long.”

“How long is not long?”

“Ten minutes, twenty. The medical examiner will decide.”

“How can he be dead? He’s only forty-five.”

“Whether he died of natural causes or not is for the police and the medical examiner to decide.”

“What’s natural causes?”

The two first responders shared a glance and the better-looking one replied: “If he was sick or something, that’s natural causes. If it was something else...”

“That’s unnatural causes,” said the one with the shoulders, butting in.

“Unnatural? Like what?”

They looked at each other again and the better-looking one answered: “Like murder.”

\*

The first responder immediately pressed his lips together and looked down at the floor, regretting what he had said. The other looked back towards Chieh.

“Did you have to ring to get in?”

“I’ve got my own key.”

“And the door was locked? Nobody else here?”

“Nobody. You said he hadn’t been dead long?” Chieh ran his hand over the outside of his pocket.

The two of them looked at each other, but neither spoke.

His pocket felt hot.

### **Half an hour earlier**

Chieh left San’s house and headed for the takeaway place. His dad had set a budget: NT\$170 for their two meals.

Last week the budget was NT\$120, but his dad had looked in the boxes and shaken his head at what his money would buy. He placed half a chicken wing into Chieh’s box and announced a NT\$50 increase in the dinner budget. You’re a growing boy, he’d said. You need your proteins and fats.

Yes. That’s where he was thirty minutes ago. The takeaway. His dad loved chicken legs – fried, braised in soy sauce, it didn’t matter. But he had to have a leg of chicken every day. Not a wing. Chieh preferred braised pork. Their father-son dinners were a sort of rule, a rule neither of them had set. His father would brew some tea and set out two cups. When Chieh arrived with the food he would put down a thick Chunghwa Telecom phonebook, maybe twenty or thirty years old, for the boxes of food to sit on. Then he would tell Chieh to tuck in. They sat side-by-side on the stools behind the counter and his dad always gave him half a chicken leg.

“We like chicken in my family. Take half, keep up the tradition.”

Was that part of his inheritance as well? Eating chicken? The sight of that half chicken leg always made him feel tired. That kind of spiritless feeling that leaves you no option but to lie down.

He’d told the lady at the takeaway: one with a chicken leg, one with braised pork. But she didn’t give him the braised pork, she put in fried ribs.

“Children shouldn’t eat the same thing every day. I’ll give you ribs today, and some extra greens.”

He didn’t know her name. Everyone called her Boss Lady. She was the boss of the whole world, except North Korea.

As she spoke, Boss Lady crammed his box full with three portions of different greens. She wiped the drips from the outside of the box, but it kept on dripping.

\*

It was all Boss Lady’s fault. If she hadn’t gone on about eating pork and taken so much time giving him greens, he might have got to the store five minutes earlier.

