

LAND OF SERENITY

安雅之地

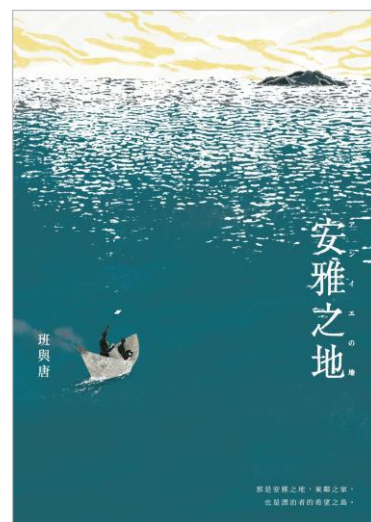
A young reporter hides his identity and talks his way onto a fishing boat to escape his postwar island's military-led bloodbath. However, the remote island in the Ryukyus where he lands continues to present dilemmas that leave his fate in the hands of others.

In the spring of 1947, with Lee Tsan-Yun's fellow reporters mostly either imprisoned or dead, he sees escape to the "Land of Serenity" with Chen's cryptic instructions and a hand-drawn map as his last best hope. Trekking from Taipei to the Yilan coast, he catches a fishing scow bound for the Yaeyama Islands with just the map, a gold chain, a picture of his crush, and his memories.

Lee sees himself fated to a life of mediocrity and just "getting by". Before becoming a reporter, he enrolls in Tokyo's Waseda University on a benefactor's endowment, but when the funds dry up, keeps up the pretense of being a student while making ends meet writing homework for former classmates. Finally professing love to his university crush at the end of the war, he is devastated to learn she is already married. Returning despondently to his hometown, he takes a job as a cub reporter; but, unlike his ambitious colleagues, is there only for the steady paycheck. However...when the nightmare finally comes, it is to him that a respected pillar of the community turns, out of desperation, for help.

So what about this so-called "Land of Serenity"? Would he be able to complete the mission entrusted to him? With nothing to go on, he clings to the kindness of strangers...even though some, he finds, expect something in return.

Land of Serenity is the first Taiwan-authored novel inspired by the real-life stories of Taiwanese émigrés to the Yaeyama Islands in Japan's Okinawa Prefecture. For the people of Yaeyama, contact with Taiwan has long been heavily colored by smuggling, illicit



Category: Literary Fiction

Publisher: Gaea

Date: 8/2023

Pages: 352

Length: 118,250 characters
(approx. 77,000 words in English)

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immigration, and conflict, with their experience largely elided over by chroniclers and historians alike. Pan Yutang's emotive style of writing lends palpable authenticity to Lee Tsan-Yun's sense of insecurity and bewilderment, showing powerlessness as a state of mind common to all fated to live through history's epochal turning points.

Pan Yutang 班與唐

Born in 1993, Pan Yutang is a recipient of a 2019 TSMC Literature Award merit award for her novella *Carnivore Hill. Land of Serenity*, Pan's second novel, reflects her talent and passion for historical research, which she also regularly pursues through her history-themed Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube channels (@benanddon).

LAND OF SERENITY

By Pan Yutang

Translated by Mike Fu

To you whom I can't see:

In this moment, I'm far away from the turbulent seas. Rest assured that no one will get hurt anymore. Don't be afraid. At least it's this way for the time being. Memories have been forcibly seared into the lot of us. It's not easy for us to casually use spoken language or written words to pour out our hearts. But please don't worry, because we have faith.

Please have faith that time will dissipate this bog reeking of blood. In no time at all, we'll be able to meet again in a place of light.

We'll be awaiting you in a land of serenity.

Late spring, 1947

Nanfang'ao, en route to the Ryukyu seas

Vicious winds

The merciless crash of waves against the boat feels worlds away from the tranquility that springtime is supposed to bring.

The boat suddenly lists, and a heap of burlap sacks falls on top of me. When I come to, the acrid stench of vomit on my body assails my nostrils and stomach once more.

A huge wave lifts this fishing boat of more than twenty tons, tossing us into the air and then swiftly slamming us back down onto the surface of the sea. There's a shattering sound as though the boat has crashed onto a rock. The fishermen on the front deck are making small talk as usual, but I'm close to being unable to keep my gastric juices from reaching into my throat.

The crest of another wave comes.

I can't take it anymore. Vomit bursts out of the corners of my mouth again and onto the clothes that were given to me by the widow in Chiaohsi. The sour-reeking liquid seeps into the fabric and clings to my skin. If the man who once owned these clothes has already crossed over into the other realm, it occurs to me that my time to die may not be far off either.

"Hey, you can't puke on other people's cargo."

"Kid, is this your first time on a boat, *da*?"

I want to look up to see who's talking to me, but my head is much too heavy. I lay my head on a burlap sack and gaze at them at an angle. It's the two men who came aboard with me at Nanfang'ao. They banter occasionally with a crew member in Ryukyuan, which I can't understand

at all. When not fully occupied with trying to suppress my nausea, I've been thinking about how to get to know these two countrymen of mine.

"Looks like you two fellows are much more solidly built than me. Got any tips for avoiding seasickness?"

They laugh coldly and look away. It seems my signal of friendship was not successfully received.

"That's right," says the gaunt one whose clothes are so threadbare they only cover the bones under his skin. "You're nothing like us folks who'll never wear glasses."

"Young man, boating life is really tough," the other one chimes in, a short man with a sturdy physique that shows through beneath his light garments. "You'd best think it through before getting onboard, *da*." He has high cheekbones and sharp canine teeth that reveal themselves when he smiles, adding that "*da*" sound to the end of his sentences.

The gaunt man walks before me and squats down. He produces a black pill of something that looks like medicine from his pocket, shoving it under my nose while I'm still lying atop the burlap sack. A urine-like stink wafts towards me.

"Boatmen have a pretty wretched existence. You'll save yourself some trouble if you can stomach this."

I peer at the black pill in the man's hand, trying to make out what lies beneath the shiny surface.

"He's afraid you're gonna poison him, *da*," says the short, sturdy man. "Young man, not just anyone can come aboard the boat, *da*. Have you prepared something valuable to give to the island chief, *da*?"

The waves rise again, and the black pill falls from the man's hand. My stomach turns. I can't see where the pill has rolled. The voices of the people around me are muffled as though they're coming from behind a layer of fabric.

Young man, what's your name? What are you doing here?

Their cold laughter and the reek of vomit blend into the confused mess of my head.

No, no, I can't tell them. Mister Chen taught me that I have no name.

A huge wave again lifts the boat skyward, shaking it so hard that everyone is thrown to the deck. The burlap sacks slam against the cabin walls, splitting them open and spilling sugar and rice. The fragrance of cane sugar clings to my seawater-soaked nostrils.

The Ryukyuan fishermen rush out from the cabin and bellow at everyone to tie up their wares, mixing in some words I've never heard before. The only thing I understand is that I have to quickly find a rope and secure myself to the boat.

The fishermen swiftly find a place to sit, expertly fastening themselves with ropes and waiting to ride out this storm. They look at me coldly as a Ryukyuan, muttering under his breath, unties my rope and then reties it properly. There's still a long road ahead before they'll accept me as their companion.

Waves crash ceaselessly against the boat, the froth of seawater soaking my entire body. I desperately try to contort myself to protect the wallet inside my pocket, which has Miss Lee's photo, the gold chain, and the map Mister Chen gave me.

I squeeze both eyes shut, the only way I can temporarily escape from this moment. As soon as I enter that darkness, it becomes impossible to tell whether my eyes are open or closed. I can only feel the curved ridges of my eye sockets. I look again and again as I travel across the mountains for countless days and nights, committing to memory the thick black ink marks that guide me along a hidden path, taking me past Pinglin, along the river to Lanyang, and continuing by the seaside to Nanfang'ao. A string of numbers are written at the very bottom of the map. I don't know who these numbers will connect me to, only that I must make that connection on behalf of Mister Chen.

In the end, there's no escape. Mister Chen long ago forced me into this situation in which I must choose to either live or die. I open my eyes wide to see how the boat is tolerating the ruthlessness of the waves.

The sky above seems to have changed from murky black to indigo. I can't tell what time of day it is. I wonder if Father and Sister are walking along the banks of the Keelung River, carting another monstrous stack of bamboo baskets. I wonder if they're heading towards the roundabout, or if they're already returning to Siā-á.

Fuck, why didn't Mister Chen flee himself? Why did he have to entrust the map to me? And why did he have to say what he said to me?

Lee Tsan-Yun, do you know what the price of freedom is?

I had no idea the price of freedom was becoming a wanted man, hiding in mountain forests perpetually shrouded in fog, like wading through water without end so my body was forever damp. The only thing that kept me breathing was that soft map within my pocket.

Gold chain, wallet, map, I repeated to myself. Gold chain, wallet, map...

These things reminded me that I still knew who I was, even if I didn't have a name.

But why didn't Mister Chen flee himself if the map was ready? I couldn't understand how he mustered the courage to wager his own life, handing over to me the plan that he'd painstakingly worked on, asking me to board a boat to this island in the east. All so I could send a specific radio frequency to an unknown person far away, using a code woven into memory to retell what we had witnessed.

From this moment on, Lee Tsan-Yun no longer exists. You're a person without a name.

I didn't have a chance to ask Mister Chen who would trust the stories of a nameless person.

Only after entering the mountains does one become aware that humans are much too reliant on streets for their visceral experience of the world. Lead a person away from the familiarity of streets, and he'll lose the capacity to find his destination. He'll sink into an endless confusion until he regains his orientation.

Mister Chen's map showed triangulation stations, elevation contours, and the locations of villages from Shihting and Pinglin all the way to Chiaohsi. I had a rough sense of where I was on the map, thanks to my year of naval training. But how would I know if I was on the right path? What if I couldn't find it, or if I misjudged? My cold, wet body trembled; I couldn't imagine that my salvation was even possible.

There were many quiet moments in my escape when all that remained was a dialogue with my own thoughts, when I couldn't discern whether what I was hearing came from my surroundings or my imagination. The gold chain in my pocket – I'd never have a chance to use it to free my sister from our father's control.

I have no memory of my mother. There wasn't a single photograph or painting of her in the household. Father never brought up anything about her. Sister only mentioned her sometimes while brushing her hair, talking about how she used to love getting her hair brushed and braided by our mother. Sister never looked directly at herself in the mirror, paying attention instead to the height of her updo, making sure everything was firmly in place after she'd bundled it all up. She never stopped to examine her own face. Then, when her hair was secured, she'd move briskly through the house to prepare Father's breakfast and going-out clothes with her thickly callused hands that had matured all too soon.

When I was little, I used to ask Sister why our neighbor always said we should be thankful we hadn't lost two lives, thanks to the midwife's ample experience. My sister, who was one head taller than me, would turn to me and ruffle the short, spiky hair freshly grown on my scalp.

"Yun," she'd change the subject, "what happened to all the rice you've been sneaking at night? Are you working hard enough on growing taller?"

I did get taller and taller later on, while my sister conversely shrunk into perpetual girlhood. She was always on the ground scrubbing the vomit left over from Father's drunken antics.

"Yun, make me proud when you grow up."

My father knew that my sister's precocious and industrious nature was for the sake of appearances only. Our family would forever remain sunken in the mud of Siā-á, with nothing on the dinner table but rotten leaves, sweet potatoes, and salty pickled melon. No matter how much Father twisted his knees to hoist burlap sacks, stuffed with tea and larger than a person, and hustle down the streets of Tataocheng, we knew we'd never have a chance at inheriting the Lee family's ancestral fortune.

It was a massacre, Father would yowl, throat seared with liquor, describing the day the Japanese came to town and robbed him of his true destiny. The real him should still be sitting inside the old Lee family estate, a young master collecting farm plot rent from hard-working farmers.

Father had been born in the wrong era. Now, his happiest times were spent squatting by the door, drinking to the last drop the liquor he'd spent all of his wages on and then vomiting up the pitiful dregs of what remained in his stomach. If I wasn't worried that one of our neighbors might walk by and see Father passed out on the street, I wouldn't have bothered to bring him

inside. I wouldn't have tolerated him acting like an animal with its limbs cut off, curled up on the ground, writhing and slamming his head against the floorboard in anguish.

No matter how badly Father scraped his head, nothing would change the fact that this rotten home raised from the putrid mud summed up his whole life. It didn't matter whether he was living in the right era or not. Rather, the wavelet rippling down the river of time didn't care that he was an outsider who'd gotten his feet stuck in the mud, and now had to absorb all that had accumulated over generations.

Yun, are you leaving to go home?

By the time I returned to my senses, I'd already reached a dilapidated village where banyan roots were wrapped around crumbling red-brick walls. I could still see the general layout of the village. There was a small Earth God temple covered in moss near the slope. I spread open the map, but couldn't find any village marked where I was. Perhaps it had ceased to be even before the Japanese colonial period, or maybe the ink on the map had faded. Every time I opened the map, I worried too that the greetings at the very bottom would also be faded beyond recognition, and that no one in the world would be able to confirm the existence of those words to me anymore:

May you swiftly reach a land of serenity.

I selected a brick house with a partial roof and sat down for a break, leaning against the wall. I felt the irrepressible beating of my heart in my chest. When I shut my eyes, I couldn't tell whether I was hearing my heartbeat or the footsteps of someone in the distance. I didn't keep my eyes closed for too long. It was dangerous for me to be outside of the forest.

Nightfall would soon disperse the sunlight. I decided to hide out in the abandoned house. It would be better to sleep beneath an actual roof than in a tree hollow. The village looked like it had been abandoned for some time. Nobody would be coming back here. What had happened here? I could only imagine. Maybe the land had been barren, or maybe disease had swept through the area. Maybe there was a war. Had they experienced the same thing as my ancestors? I spread the map on the crumbling brick as daylight gradually dimmed and the entire mountain entered the dark of night.

The mountain by night became a whole other realm. Although there was the occasional sound of a distant howl, more often than not it was deathly quiet. I forced myself to focus on my breathing, concentrating on the air entering and exiting my lungs. It was the only way I could confirm that I physically existed within the darkness.

Inhale, I'm Lee Tsan-Yun.

Exhale, I'm Lee Tsan-Yun.

Inhale, I'm going to take a boat to the island in the east. I'm going to complete Mister Chen's mission and safely reach the land of serenity.

"Yun, don't catch a cold."

I leapt to my feet, my heart beating violently, my eyes struggling to make out the source of the sound in the still and heavy darkness.

The woman's voice came again. My sister's voice.

Then, the moment passed and there was only the rustle of the wind in the trees.

I desperately tried to go to sleep, but kept hearing a voice next to my ear every now and then. Sometimes it sounded like an animal wailing. Other times it sounded like a woman's voice, waking me up right as I was about to nod off. The border between the real and the imagined seemed porous and penetrable. It wasn't until day broke that I realized I'd managed to fall asleep.

A light mist hung over my surroundings in the morning sun. I was still in the abandoned village, my body intact. The crunch of leaves beneath my feet was the only sound. I cleared moss from the Earth God temple and put my hands together, praying for a while. The sun was so bright that my eyes hurt. Finishing my prayers, I looked in the direction of the sun and discovered a faint path leading into the distance. The path continued in the direction of the rising sun. I never imagined that I could also become a believer like this.

My heart beat furiously as I set out on that hidden path and pressed onward toward the sunrise. Occasionally, I heard the sound of a waterfall gushing in the distance. After a while, it sounded like a machine gun firing. My ears began to feel swollen, but the path continued on and on.

The sun moved back and forth between the silhouettes of trees. Just before the light faded from the world around me, I caught a glimpse of buckets filled with liquid fertilizer, the kind used by farmers, beyond the dense bamboo forest. A rooster in a nearby chicken coop pattered restlessly behind the fence, tilting its cockscomb at me as I emerged from the thicket.

I walked silently past the coop and stepped gingerly on stones and tree roots as I descended the hill. When my two legs finally found their footing on a paved road, I couldn't help but fall to my knees for a moment.

Phew, I'm still alive. I've got to stay alive to complete the task entrusted to me by Mister Chen. Now how do I get through this town to reach Nanfang'ao?

It's all too easy for someone to track your path on flat land by looking for a plume of smoke rising from a house, birds fluttering away, silhouettes in a house. You are much more visible here than in the forest. Remembering my circumstances, and the fact I had a face that was wanted, I hurried in the direction of the mountain bluff. From the shadows, I looked back to see if anyone had followed.

Nearby was a patchwork of rice paddies. The sun was setting in the west behind the mountain, and scattered groups of people were returning to their *thôo-kat-tshù* adobe houses. As night fell, the windows in every house became illuminated in pale yellow lamplight. I resolved to make the most of the dark and continue onward towards Nanfang'ao.

Following the same path, I found myself in a townscape with more and more houses. Some of them still had signs from the Japanese colonial period hanging at their front doors with the characters "Chiaohsi Village" written on them. I wanted to know what the date was, but it would be too dangerous to approach the train station. I would have to rely on my luck, I thought, and see if I could come across a newspaper or hear a radio somewhere.

The streetscape seemed the same as it had always been. People were living out ordinary lives, eating, walking, and talking amongst each other. I looked around and saw no trace of

soldiers. Maybe I was being overly cautious, but I felt like the atmosphere was too calm... I had a feeling of stifling pressure all around.

Knock knock. There was a knock on a door behind me.

Fuck. I hadn't noticed the soldiers back there. I held my breath, hiding in the shadows. I glanced out again and saw the soldiers interrogating a household. From this distance, I'd certainly be discovered if I made a break for it. After they finished their questioning, the soldiers would probably start investigating every single dimly lit alley, in which case I'd have nowhere left to hide.

Right near me, I noticed that one family had left their backdoor open. Light from within the house spilled out onto the mountain bluff.

I snatched this heaven-sent sliver of hope and darted inside.

Someone immediately shut the door behind me and locked it.

A woman looked me dead in the eye, several children crowded behind her. They'd been clamoring over how to split the congee in the pot, but were stupefied into silence at the sight of me. The ladle fell into the pot with a clang.

"I-I'm sorry."

It was the first sound that I'd made with my own throat in who knows how many days. My voice sounded rough and wild, and I was even startled to hear it myself.

The children looked frightened. Their tender faces twitched slightly – especially the smallest, whose eyes were aglimmer with tears.

The woman turned around and gently tousled the children's hair.

"This is a-pa's friend, Mister Chen. A-bó has to talk with him about some things, so you all behave now. Big brother, take your siblings upstairs and go to bed."

The oldest boy glanced at me. He had seen right through his mother's ruse, but he simply nodded and gathered up his brothers and sisters. They filed up the stairs in an orderly fashion, disappearing into the attic. Through the wooden plank ceiling, I heard the oldest boy call his siblings' names, then the sounds of them lying down and the rustling of their quilts. Only then did the silence return. The woman shut the entrance to the attic with a crisp clacking sound.

Amidst the now stifling tranquility of the house, the woman and I were left looking at each other. Her eyes appeared to be filled with endless questions. What was it she wanted from me? Perhaps she had planned on leaving the backdoor open so I could dart in. Then, once I was here, she'd lock every door so there would be no way for me to escape. The soldiers were still patrolling outside. If I got into any confrontation with the woman, I'd draw their attention. Would she hand me over to the soldiers?

No, there was something strange about this house. The tranquility felt forced and unnatural. I looked around at the furnishings. It was a commoner's home with an attic. Even though it was surrounded by farmland, there were no agricultural implements to be found. Rather, there was a desk on the other side of the dining table and a bookshelf made of wooden crates in the back. A man's hat hung next to the front door. Perhaps the man of the house was a literary sort, not a farmer.

"You must be thirsty."

The woman retrieved a bowl from the table. As she glugged water into it, I felt a hotness rise in my throat.

A weak light flashed on the water as she handed the bowl to me. I accepted, staring blankly as my reflection covered up the light on the water's surface. My throat continued to burn, craving the water before me. Ever since the day of my escape, my grasp on my sanity had gotten looser and looser. Perhaps the woman in front of me wasn't even real.

"Don't be afraid. Drink up."