

PHANTOM HARBOUR

幻之港

By the late nineteenth century, the once quiet coastal town of Thaw-kat-khut had grown into a teeming harbour to rival the larger, more well-known ports of Lukang and the old Dutch-built Fort Zeelandia. That was, until a flood of cataclysmic proportions came running down the Dadu Mountains, swallowing the trading centre and erasing it from the island's maps forever.

And so became the Phantom Harbour.

Only for Ho Ching-Yao to rediscover and resurrect it over a century later, lifting Taiwan's very own Atlantis out of the water. Arranged into five stories spanning different periods in the town's history, we encounter merchant families, migrants from across the straits and lovers united and divided across social class, culminating in the story of the disaster that was to sink the people of Thaw-kat-khut and their home forever.

Making use of the riches of local folklore, ghost stories and uncanny happenings, *Phantom Harbour* bursts from the page, demanding to be read and never forgotten.

Ho Ching-Yao 何敬堯

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PHANTOM HARBOUR

By Ho Ching-Yao. Translated by Gigi Chang.

Excerpt from the chapter: Demon Mō-sîn-á

The people of Min were great believers in ghosts and spirits, especially in Changchow and Chinchew. Commoners toiled all their life, making barely enough for subsistence or death rites, yet they often spent half of what little they made on offerings and sacrifices to the gods. When they were ill, they prayed to the gods for cures; at burial, they prayed to the gods for land; to the point that on any occasion that did not go as hoped, they turned to the gods.

—Yao Ying, *Supplementary Collection on the Eastern Chinese Sea*, Volume 4

I.

Thunder drummed in the distant sky, a cold wind stole in from the sea. The light moisture in the air acted as an invisible herald, whispering the approach of the rainy season.

Wu A-Lu walked along the Dadu River, water chattering loudly. A flash of brilliant white slashed across his vision.

White feathers and a black beak circled, swooped and croaked. A-Lu ducked quickly, dodging the night heron's sharp bill.

It was the season when night herons raised their chicks after mating. Strongly territorial, they protected their offspring jealously; anything that came close to their nests was a threat. Of all waterfowl, the night heron's call was the most discordant and shrill. A-Lu vaguely recalled that the reeds in the swamps near the mouth of the river had always been their preferred nesting place.

Tutting and shaking his head, A-Lu adjusted the bamboo basket in his left hand.

This side of the Dadu River by the ox cart road was deserted, out of the way. But he knew that, once upon a time, there were settlements along this bank. After the waterway was re-routed, the site had lost its appeal.

The wind whistled more aggressively as A-Lu walked from Pientzutou village to the port of Thaw-kat-khut. He squinted into the distance. Ripples shimmered where the river joined the sea. Further out, clusters of large junks dotted the water's surface, the setting sun filling their sails with gusts of red and gold, obscuring the ships' names.

Ships have difficulty entering the harbour after dark. They must have just left Thaw-kat-khut to cross the strait. For Amoy? Taku? Maybe, Hanchiang?

As the harbour of Wuci silted during the Taokuang period¹, Thaw-kat-khut—situated where the Dadu River flows into the sea—emerged as the only viable harbour in central Formosa. The volume of goods and cargo coming

¹ 1820 to 1850.

through its waters expanded year after year. So much so that, in terms of trade value, it grew comparable to Lok-kang in the south.

A-Lu recalled what the village elders had once told him: Thaw-kat-khut was a different place decades ago; a small fishing village that doubled as a secret port for pirates and smugglers. The trafficking of illegal firearms brought wealth and a burgeoning population. But that soon brought the Ching court and their administrative offices too, pushing the blackened pirate ships out of sight.

Today, traders vied on the streets of Thaw-kat-khut. Since Hsienfeng's reign², merchants had gathered here in unprecedented numbers. The harbour, which could hold more than two hundred junks, had grown busier than ever. With so many comings and goings, ships queuing to enter the harbour sometimes crashed.

Thinking about this bustling trade always made A-Lu happy. The efforts he had personally put into the port in the last few years hadn't gone to waste.

Tomorrow was Sister's big day. This thought lifted his spirits even higher.

In the large woven bamboo lacquer basket he was carrying were pineapples, ponkans, jujubes and other fruit offerings. Each perfectly formed, vibrant and competing with the red silk lining of the basket. A-Lu checked the sky as he walked. Fearing that it might rain, he quickened his pace, nearly upsetting the basket. That would have ruined the fruits from Siluo. It had taken some effort to source them in trading houses in Pientzutou.

It was dusk. The market shops and stalls along the harbour had long since closed for the day. But the crowd grew bigger as A-Lu walked down the waterfront's South Street. Chattering voices mingled with gongs and drums. Red lanterns lined the streets. *Ba-li-ba-la*—the Teochew shawm trumpeted; its fanfare bounced down alleyways, among houses, punctuating greetings between excited neighbours.

'The Tsai family is welcoming their Chinchew daughter-in-law tomorrow. They've got a puppet troupe performing tonight. Are you coming?'

A-Lu could hear percussionists playing music in accompaniment to the ceremonial plays for the immortals that preceded the main performance—*The Three Immortals* and *Blessings from the God of Fortune*.

'I think I'll make it.'

The music from the *naoting* ceremony—making noise in the hall—had just begun, blessing the performance and signaling its start.

I should be able to present the fruits at the altar the Tsai family has set up for the Heavenly Grandfather.

Local traditions required the groom's family to set up an incense altar to pay homage to the deities, the Heavenly Grandfather, the Officials of Three Realms and the Lords of the Southern and Northern Dippers; as well as to hire a puppet troupe to give thanks to the deities for watching over their son, who they had bestowed with good health and a suitable bride. The puppet troupe named Peaceful Spring Pavilion from Lok-kang had been introduced to the Tsai family by A-Lu to celebrate the 'ritual of fulfilling marriage vows' on the eve of the wedding day. The marionette master, A-Jung, was a childhood friend of A-Lu. They had got back in touch in recent years.

The people of Thaw-kat-khut worshipped gods and spirits fervently, fearing local legends about Mō-sîn-á: mountain ghosts who haunted the Dadu Mountains just outside the township were said to morph into this demon, Mō-sîn-á, to hunt children.

² 1850 to 1861.

Missing children supposedly ended up in M^ô-s^{în}-á's belly.

But then some said that M^ô-s^{în}-á was actually a ghost, transformed from the spirit left behind after a person's death.

Or, that M^ô-s^{în}-á was an accumulation of grievances that could not be undone, transfigured into something formless that roamed amongst men.

No one explanation could ever be proved definitively though.

Yet, the collective fear of M^ô-s^{în}-á wasn't only founded on legend.

About a decade or so ago, children began to disappear in Thaw-kat-khut. The town was gripped in fear of the demon and worship grew more elaborate.

This was why, in local custom, the ritual of fulfilling marriage vows was commonly performed, to give thanks to the deities for protecting young males in the family from M^ô-s^{în}-á.

Today, the ritual was organised by the Tsai family. Their son was marrying the daughter of the Wu family, A-Lu's sister. He was only helping out because the puppet troupe had made a pig's ear of it.

The troupe was responsible for providing sacrificial offerings. Master A-Jung had set up the altar outside the main hall of the Tsai family mansion. He had arranged five tables of offerings in front of the three-tiered seat for the Heavenly Grandfather, which was made out of coloured paper. He had reverentially placed the offerings—red tortoise cake, betel nut, red *tangyuan* glutinous rice balls, *malao* sesame puffed rice cakes, sweet *kuo* rice cakes and the three meats—in the correct order.

A-Jung scratched his head in disbelief, 'Fie, I forgot the four fruits!' He immediately asked for the missing items to be purchased.

Frowning, A-Lu crossed his arms and began to scold A-Jung. But half way through his lecture, he sighed and volunteered to go to the fruit traders himself. After all, he had recommended the troupe to the Tsai family in the first place. The last thing he wanted now was to let his future family down on the eve of his sister's wedding.

'Master Wu? Congratulations! Family Tsai are blessed to marry your sister!'

As A-Lu walked through the market, many bowed and made gestures of respect and congratulations—it was clear that A-Lu commanded influence over the town. The infectious laughter and excitement of those heading to the puppet performance lightened his heart a little. Even the stiff muscles around his lips responded, turning up the corners of his usually stern mouth.

Aside from paying homage to the Heavenly Grandfather, the performance also announced the imminent wedding to the neighbours, attracting more people—and thus more joy—to the celebrations. Needless to say, A-Lu was happy about his sister Jung-Fang's impending nuptials. But he could not stop thinking about their conversation of the previous night. It cast a shadow, visible on his brow. Had Jung spoken to Pa about it yet?

'Jung can also see ghosts. And she's seen M^ô-s^{în}-á at home...'

Thunder rumbled, faraway. A-Lu prayed that the rain would hold off—hold until three *keng* at least, hold until the ritual was over.

He turned into a lane and arrived at the square in front of the Tsai mansion. A boxy bamboo theatre had been erected for the occasion.

He looked around and saw Jung-Fang and his father standing side-by-side at one corner of the stage.

Silk of different sizes hung from the bamboo scaffold. This formed the temporary stage, one *chih* in height, framed by red fabric. The Eight Immortals and the troupe's name, Peaceful Spring Pavilion, were embroidered on the curtain. White sugarcanes and red lanterns adorned the stage. A sea breeze from the harbour had wormed its way through the lanes and alleyways, making the lanterns sway and the silk whip audibly. On one side of the stage was a bamboo stand. More than a dozen marionettes hung there, their heads bobbing in the wind—the gallant *sheng*, the beautiful *tan*, the aged *laosheng* and the black-faced Marshal Tien Tu³. Every stock character. At the far end, a marionette of a child; its face painted white, hair tied up.

Compared to the others, the child was gaunt. Tiny nose, tiny eyes, white face, wearing pastel clothes under a red bib. Its arms fell stiffly by its side. Its expression was lifelike, but it was impossible to tell whether it was a boy or a girl.

Catching sight of this androgynous marionette child, A-Lu's demeanour changed. He pursed his lips. He had to place the fruits on the altar. And to reach the altar, he had to walk past the marionette.

Exhaling, he walked quickly.

He brushed past the marionette. He felt the gaze from its white face. On his arm.

It numbed his upper body.

If it was up to him, he would never have anything to do with puppet troupes. But this time, he had no choice, Old Master Tsai—his sister's future father-in-law—had asked him with such grace. Reluctantly, he had reached out to Master A-Jung, with whom he had not exchanged words with for years. In fact, he had long made up his mind: when it's my turn, I won't hire any theatre troupes.

He set down the fruits and walked round to the other side of the scaffold. In front of the stage a Red Head Taoist priest, joss sticks in hand, led Master A-Jung and the whole Tsai family to pay homage to Heaven and the deities—a mandatory ritual before the start of a performance. The priest, wrapped in black ceremonial robes, an embroidered thunder cap on his head, muttered incantations.

'... Unto the Heavenly Grandfather and the Earth Lord, we give thanks. For you have bestowed blessings on Yu-Wen, son of the Tsai clan. With your blessings, he has grown strong. And with your blessings, he is now to be married. To all gods and deities, we humbly extend this invitation: be masters of this evening. May the Heavenly Grandfather grace this household with his presence. May he bestow upon us his blessings! We stand humbled, before your image, and offer incense. Grant us mercy and absolution! With fresh flowers and other offerings, we prostrate ourselves, giving thanks unto Heaven and the Jade Emperor, the Earth Lord, the Lords of the Three Realms, the Lord of the Southern Dipper and the Lord of the Northern Dipper. Grant us mercy and absolution!'

The priest made three deep bows, then threw the *poe* blocks—two half moon shaped pieces of bamboo—seeking divine guidance on what the theatre troupe's first play should be. After a pause, answer came. 'To give thanks, we shall perform *The Principal Graduate's Homecoming*.'

'Prayers ascend amid wafting fragrance, golden flutters leap from burning incense. From golden cup into golden cup flows the sacrificial wine. The gods propose a toast, your student humbly accepts. Success and prosperity to all, we bow to you Marshal Tien Tu!'

After speaking the words to invoke the gods, the priest put his hands together, bowed and drained his cup. He

³ Tutelary deity of traditional folk opera. Also refers to the marionette used in ritual worship in puppet theatre.

then placed the joss sticks in front of the image of Marshal Tien Tu to invite the deities to grace the performance with their attendance.

Master A-Jung leapt onto the stage, following the musical cue: a racket of drums, gongs, clappers. The performance had officially begun. Old Master Tsai guided Jung-Fang and her father to their seats. The groom-to-be, Young Master Yu-Wen, rather uncomfortable given all the attention, also found a place to sit.

It was completely dark. Thunder growled, but the crowd's excitement could not be dampened.

Seeing A-Lu standing on the side, Jung-Fang waved and smiled.

Her smile made him wonder—had she resolved the anxiety and concerns from the previous night?

He sincerely hoped that she could take control of her emotions and walk into her new life unburdened.

The puppeteer's dexterous manipulation of the dozen of black silk strings brought the principal graduate to life. The pasty scholar swirled his fan, recited poetry, circled the stage on a black steed. His agility drew waves of cheers.

But A-Lu's mind was elsewhere. His attention kept wandering to the backstage. Was that eerie child marionette still hanging back there?

Sweat poured down his neck and shoulders. He turned to look at Jung-Fang and their Pa, sitting side by side, absorbed by the performance. 'She's not looking nervous. Not like last night.'

She must have spoken to Pa. About A-Ching.

He closed his eyes and prayed that everything would be fine after her marriage. 'I'll have done my duty as a brother properly then.'

It was going to rain soon, A-Lu could feel the dampness in the air. The rainy season was upon this seaport.

The premonition of rain also stirred up an inexplicable restlessness in him.

2.

Yesterday, when the clouds were low and dusk's thin veil began to settle, Jung-Fang—who rarely stepped into the kitchen—washed her hands and started preparing dinner. Not only did she help servants pick green beans, she made a seaweed egg drop soup and prepared a dish of braised bitter melon all by herself. She seared the slices of melon until golden and translucent before adding vinegar, sugar and garlic. Just as its name suggested, bitter melon tasted bitter, but when matched with the reddish black *meikan* dry pickled mustard leaves, it gained an aroma and even its astringency was enriched by a nectarous aftertaste. Jung-Fang chose this dish—also called 'melon for later life' as the appreciation of its bitterness often came with age—for her father because she was concerned about his health. The cooling, summer vegetable was known to nourish the blood as well as help maintain the body's internal balance. She knew that after her marriage, she would no longer be able to care for him whenever she wanted. However, when she sat down at the table after working long and hard in the kitchen, she was preoccupied, barely touching her chopsticks. Her father and brother shared an unspoken thought with a wan smile—it's impossible to guess what's on the mind of a girl about to get married.

It was the sixth month of the lunar calendar. The last month of summer and the height of the season's heat and humidity. The swelter of impending rain doused their bodies like a damp duvet. A knot in Jung-Fang's heart had troubled her all evening, drowning her in a bottomless lake, suffocating her. She laid in bed, staring at the mosquito

net. Her mind twisted and turned along with her restless body, unable to find sleep though it was past midnight. She got up, put on her lotus shoes and tottered on her bound feet through the silent courtyard to the accounting office in a side quarter of the house. She knocked on the wooden door. She knew A-Lu would be working late, updating the ledger and counting on his abacus.

'Brother...'

The hand that had been flicking through the ledger paused at the sound of Jung-Fang's voice and invited her to sit down. Her troubled eyes locked briefly onto A-Lu, before drifting around the room in the wavering candlelight. It was a small office, furnished only with an old peach wood bookshelf and a carved desk with matching chairs. Her gaze was searching.

'Looking for something?'

A-Lu was surprised that to find the response stuck in her throat: She has always been so frank and outspoken. Has marriage really been so worrying for this tough little nail?

'Ah, the wedding. Pa and I have made sure everything's ready. Nothing to worry about.'

She took a deep breath before sitting down. Pressing her thin lips together, she said, 'Brother, thank you for everything.'

'This isn't like you. So formal.'

Jung-Fang tried to smile at A-Lu's uncharacteristic dig. He had always been a serious man of few words. The warmth radiating from his expression soothed her a little. His eyes took her back to the evening she first came to the Wu family. Pa introduced him, then a boy—half a head shorter than her—and he looked at her with an unwavering half-squint. He patted her on the shoulder, then said with an old man's solemnity, 'From now on, I'm your big brother.' The memory always raised a giggle.

How pretentious. She had looked down on the dark-skinned, thickheaded boy with disdain.

But the boy lived by his word. When she was bullied, he was always the first to come to her defense. There was one time when Jung-Fang played hacky sack with a girl in the neighbourhood. They made their own shuttlecock by wrapping a copper coin in paper. Jung-Fang was not a gracious loser. She tore the makeshift shuttlecock and waved the coin in the girl's face, 'So what? You don't even own a hacky sack at home.' Ashamed and angry, the girl pulled Jung-Fang's pigtails. A-Lu had been walking by on his way home from school. He did not care who was right or wrong. Nor did his fist recognise that the girl was younger, and so much smaller, than he was. For she was no weakling either. She hauled a pebble into his temple. Jung-Fang could only stand by and gawk... She had apologised on their way home, but he kept his hand pressed to his bleeding face and his lips tight. This was the moment she knew he truly was her big brother.

'I know you're nervous, all the rituals and ceremonies. But those are the customs. The wedding day isn't until the day after tomorrow. First it's just the vow fulfillment ritual. Don't worry.'

A-Lu's hand left the ledger and rested gently upon her shoulders. His open, smiling face gave her some comfort.

'I'm worried that...'

'Jung, the Tsai family would never mistreat you. Don't worry. You've only met Yu-Wen a few times, but on my head, he will absolutely treasure you.' A-Lu hoped his earnestness would steady her heart. He had known Yu-Wen for a long time and was confident about his character. Yu-Wen was the only man to whom he could imagine entrusting

his sister's future and happiness.

The Wu family ran a trading business by the name of Wu Sheng Hsing, meaning victorious and prosperous. They were the most powerful force behind Thaw-kat-khut's sugar traders co-operative, known as *kau*, formed by dozens of trading houses. The family made its fortune from exporting 'white jade'—the name given locally to refined sugar. Several years ago, Wu Chan-Po, Old Master Wu, stepped down and his son A-Lu took over. An astute businessman, A-Lu expanded Wu Sheng Hsing to include other agricultural products. Today, all the rice, beans, linen and cowhide going through Thaw-kat-khut were processed by Wu Sheng Hsing. The town honoured A-Lu as 'Master Wu'.

Engaged to A-Lu's sister was the only son and heir of the Tsai family, Young Master Yu-Wen. His family dominated the harbour's trade in Chinese medicine. He won widespread praise for how he ran the business. Two years ago, A-Lu wanted to expand Wu Sheng Hsing to export Chinese medicine made with longan and turmeric, so he began to collaborate with the Tsai family. Tsai Yu-Wen's cultured, genteel manner made a deep impression; the two young men soon became close friends. A-Lu played an instrumental role in the engagement to his sister. He believed with all his heart that this was the man to look after Jung for life.

It might be a match made in heaven for the young couple and the families concerned, but for Thaw-kat-khut, their engagement was controversial: because the Wu family originated from Chinchew and came from Upper Thaw-kat-khut, northeast of the harbour, and the Tsai family were Changchow people of the old neighbourhood known as Lower Thaw-kat-khut.

Han Chinese had been moving to the area since the time of the Chienlung Emperor.⁴ The people from Chinchew and Changchow fought continuously over resources and trade. A street brawl could turn into an armed battle. Surprisingly, in the past decades, such disputes had ceased. The two tribes had found some manner of peaceful coexistence.

It was mainly due to the efforts of Old Master Wu of Wu Sheng Hsing. Using his influence as the leader of the trading *kau*, he persuaded fellow Chinchew traders to partner with those of Changchow for their mutual benefit, thus easing the friction between the two peoples. However, a marriage between the groups was unheard of.

Jung must have been worried that the historic rivalry would cast a shadow over their union, A-Lu thought.

'Jung, there's nothing to fret about. I know Yu-Wen. He's a solid man. He'll treat you very well... If you're concerned that his family comes from Changchow, don't be. We've been on good terms with them these past years. Isn't this marriage a symbol of our peace?'

'A-Lu, I know that they're a good family, respectable and reasonable. I know they will give a good home to me. And you know my personality. I won't let anyone bully me. It's... it's just that something's bothering me.'

'If they ever mistreat you, you can tell me. I'll roll up my sleeves and you will have justice.'

'No, not that. I'm not worried about that...'

'What then?'

'A-Lu, remember the day I came to this family?'

'Oh?' A-Lu couldn't quite see why she wanted to talk about the past now.

'You said, from then on, you would be my big brother. No matter what happened, you wouldn't let anyone bully

⁴ Reigned from 1735 to 1796.

me. I've always been so very grateful.'

'Really? Did I say that?' He cocked his head and tried to remember.

'When I first met you, I hated you. It took me a long time to realise that you're like me, not born to Ma and Pa. Pa brought you back here a homeless orphan.'

'Mm... that's right. A year before you. Pa brought me home. Ma really loved us. Even though we weren't her own.' A-Lu blinked in the faint light. 'If Ma was here to see your wedding, she would weep with joy. Don't worry, go to your wedding happily. Let Ma see from above how wonderful you look in your wedding outfit.'

'Mm...'

'Cat got your tongue? That's not the Jung I know.'

'Actually, I lied to Pa. I lied to Ma. I lied to you.'

'Eh?' He looked at her, confused, 'You lied to us?'

'I wasn't alone. I... I had family. A sister.'

'What?' He frowned, not sure what to say.

A-Lu remembered Ma and Pa said, for years they tried to conceive after their marriage. Business was such a success that their only regret was not having someone to pass it on to. So they got the idea of taking in homeless orphans. Wu Chan-Po found A-Lu near the harbour. As for Jung-Fang, he took her a year later from the sugarcane field near Dadu Mountains.

A-Lu knew that his sister was originally called A-Tsu. Her birth parents died in a fire. She took on the Wu last name and Ma named her Jung-Fang, hoping her new life would be as lush as young green leaves.

'You were both orphans. As the older brother, you must look after her!'

A-Lu could hear his ma's kindly reminder.

She's grown into a beautiful young lady. I don't think I've disappointed you, Ma. But, the 'family' she mentioned just now. What is she talking about?

'I called her A-Ching. She was family... although we weren't sisters by blood. That year, when I lost my home and my parents to the fire, I somehow escaped. What could do a child with nothing and no one? Beg. When I couldn't stand the hunger, I stole eggs from chicken coops. There was one time, I was so hungry that I could barely see. I broke into the boiling house at the sugar mill in Dadu Mountains at night, thinking maybe I could find some cane juice from the pressers to ease the hunger. I tripped. I was so frightened! Then I saw... A girl curled up on the floor, shivering...'

She was covered in grime. Looked to be about five or six. Her face was sallow. And there in the corner she cowered. Probably a homeless orphan too, hiding. She must have fainted, her body was so weakened by hunger.

It was off-season. The boiling house was deserted. The old lady, even the cows that worked the sugarcane press, all gone. There was nothing to eat, but it was a temporary shelter. The girl regained her strength under Jung-Fang's care. Perhaps she was born that way. She was a mute.

Jung-Fang looked into the murky pool into which the cows driving the pressers would lower themselves to cool down. Mosquitoes and insects infested its surface, breeding and multiplying. She said nothing.

It's hard enough to survive alone. Where would I find the energy to drag along a mute that I can't communicate with? She had decided. She'd steal away one night.

But her heart gave in. She woke in the night chill. Just as she was about to get up and leave, she heard a thud. The girl was sleeping with a corner of Jung-Fang's top in her hand. She had shifted as Jung-Fang moved and banged her head on the stone wheel of the sugarcane presser.

Jung-Fang felt her pain as her own. She caressed the girl's face. The night air added to her pallor. She was fast asleep, despite having just hit her head. Jung-Fang smiled, 'Let's call you A-Ching. After your dark complexion.'

From then on, Jung-Fang took A-Ching with her wherever she went. When they were tired, they rested in the sugar mill. When they were hungry, they begged in the harbour markets.

Living was exhausting. Orphans were subject to mockery and abuse. But Jung-Fang was happy. She had a companion.

A-Ching might have been mute, but it was obvious that she regarded Jung-Fang as a big sister, the one person upon who she could trust and rely. Wherever Jung-Fang went, she held tightly to the corner of Jung-Fang's top.

'But... I left her in the end...' Jung-Fang had tried to hold back, but the floodgate of emotions had opened. Tears rolled down her cheeks. A draft had crept through the gaps in the window. The candlelight wavered. The air was filled with a saltiness from the harbour.

Jung-Fang continued. Some months later, they sneaked into the sugarcane field by the mill. She was going to cut some sugarcane with a small rusty knife they had stolen. But then, footsteps. She was petrified. What if someone found out that they had been hiding there and threw them out? They had nowhere to go.

Jung-Fang forced the knife onto A-Ching and gestured at her to run. A-Ching refused. Her large eyes were brimming with tears. Her mouth moved. Her thin, weak hands held tight onto Jung-Fang's wrist. In a panic, Jung-Fang pushed A-Ching over, then ran towards the footsteps to create a diversion.

Her feet plunged into the marshy field, across it and out again, straight into an old man dressed in blue.

The old man did not chide her. Instead, he helped her up and asked where she had come from.

'Pa was very kind... When he heard that I was an orphan, he took my hand and said he'd take me home and give me hot soup. I was scared stiff... Scared, but I needed no persuasion... It didn't matter if this grown up was coaxing me. Or that it might be dangerous. It didn't matter. I was so tired, so very tired. The only thing I wanted was rest... I looked back at the field. I steeled my heart. I looked ahead and left with Pa, without saying anything...'

Dejection overwhelmed Jung-Fang. She could not withstand anymore the constant rebuking of her conscience.

I... I abandoned her. Turned my back on her. Was she trying to speak to me? Her mouth moved. Like she was trying to speak...

A-Lu wiped his sister's tears with his sleeve. He had never imagined that the sister with whom he had shared the same home for so many years could have a secret. Guilt had driven Jung-Fang back to the sugar mill the next day, but A-Ching was nowhere to be found.

In the last few years, she had sent staff and servants in the sugar business to ask around for A-Ching. She had never heard any news.

'A-Ching is dead. She must be.'

'How do you know?'

'I've seen her ghost in the house.'

'Ghost? You've seen her ghost?' A-Lu eyes widened, taking in Jung-Fang's crumpled face.

'Since I moved into this big house. Late at night, in my room, in the kitchen, even... in Ma and Pa's bedroom. A greyish shadow. Like... like a ghost. Just like how the scholar outside the temple described. Hovering without feet. Mò-sîn-á. No one else can see it. Only me. Who's that if not Mò-sîn-á? A small body. Like a child. A ghost child. It's A-Ching! A-Ching's turned into a ghost! That grey white face. On the red brick wall. Smiling at me. And then she disappears.'

As she spoke, her gaze kept drifting to the window.

'How come you've never talked about this before?' A-Lu's shoulders rode up. He swallowed.

'I... I didn't dare.'

'Is A-Ching in this room now?'

She closed her eyes and shook her head, 'No. She's not here.'

His breath caught, 'You're not scared?'

'Not for a long time. I made a detour as I walked through the courtyard just now. I was looking, hoping to see A-Ching.'

'Did you?'

She shook her head again, disappointed, 'I've rarely seen A-Ching these past few years. I heard only the eyes of children can see ghosts...'

'Maybe she's finally left this world, to reincarnate. That's a good thing.'

'Is it... really so?' She blinked tiredly. Conflicting emotions fought across her face.

A pause. A-Lu didn't know what to say to comfort her. The heavy silence made him squirm.

He looked around the room. He only noticed now that the insect-repelling incense in the burner by his chair had burned out. A trace of sandalwood haunted the room.

'At first, I was so scared. Brother, I was scared that... I thought I must've brought A-Ching's ghost with me. If I told Ma and Pa, they'd probably have thrown me out. And... I was the one who abandoned A-Ching. I'm so full of shame and regret. If I had told them, Pa might have gotten a Taoist priest to cast her out. I can't bear to think that I'm abandoning her again... I was so scared... At night I hid under the bed with my eyes closed. Every time I opened my eyes, I'd see a grey shadow drifting in the room... I can't keep going on like this. I want to... tell Pa.'

Now A-Lu could see why she had been so distraught. She was worried that after her marriage, A-Ching would still haunt the Wu's mansion. A lost ghost never to be reincarnated. A wandering Mò-sîn-á.

By speaking to Pa about this, Jung-Fang hoped that rituals could be performed for A-Ching, to bring her peace. A hope she had carried for years, a bad sister.

'Jung, I think Pa will understand. You're about to get married. Pa's almost more ecstatic than the groom. He hasn't smiled like this since Ma's passing. Your union is our family's blessing. For yourself, for us, Jung, you must live the best life you can. The past is the past, let it stay there.'

'So...'

She didn't seem to have heard him. Her mind was somewhere far. She stared at the top of the bookshelf, lost. Her confused gaze set on the shelf, as if trying to see through it. A-Lu glanced over. There was nothing. Only the gloom. Only an oppressive darkness.

The candlelight was growing dim. It had been a long night.

She stopped looking into the distance and took a deep breath. Nodding gently in A-Lu's direction, she said, 'Thank you so much. I feel much more at ease... I'll speak to Pa. Thank you, Brother.'

Jung-Fang stood up and took her leave. The door squeaked as it closed. The stifling heat of the room returned.

A-Ching's ghost. Mò-sîn-á...

Jung could see it too.

He opened the ledger, tried to pick up from where he was interrupted, to reconcile revenue and expenditure from the season's trading, to arrange the company's next voyage. But his heart refused to co-operate.

A pebble had been thrown. Its waves stirred the lake of his memories. He leant back and sank into a reverie.

The grey-white face swayed across his mind's eye. A marionette covered in white powder.

The memory swelled like raising tide at Jung-Fung's description.

He had seen that ghost. That eerie Mò-sîn-á.

He knew that it wasn't A-Ching. Because he had seen it. The year he came to live with the Wu family.

It was just as Jung-Fang had described. A blurry grey-white shadow. A tiny body. The build of a child. Drifting between rooms. Silent.

But it was not the spirit left behind after a person's death. A-Lu knew full well. He simply chose not to correct Jung-Fang.