

# TAINAN REQUIEM

## 西來安魂

*When colonial exploitation breaks the limit of endurance, a spirit medium steps forward to lead a resistance movement that quickly snowballs into Taiwan's largest anti-colonial uprising. The dual narrative in this fantasy-tinged novel plumbs the hopes and struggles of all who fight for liberation.*

Modest Xilai Temple in Tainan City owns an outsized place in the history books, for it was from here in 1915 that Xilai's spirit medium Ū Tshing-Hong launched an anti-colonial uprising that left over 10,000 dead or wounded and 2,000 executed. While many see superstitious beliefs driving the rebels, author Wu Hsin-Han suggests a more fantastical force might have been at work.

In the 1970s, the god of Xilai Temple tells Tsing-Hiông his paternal grandfather is now a god in the immortal realm. Perplexed, he is told his grandfather was once the temple's spirit-medium facilitator and one of the few survivors of the "Xilai Temple Incident". The *what* incident? With this historical event having long faded from living memory, the temple faithful settle in to learn the full story firsthand from the god through his medium.

In 1912, seriously ill labor camp inmate Ū Tshing-Hong is miraculously healed by an old man who tells him his destiny is to "walk with the gods". Ū subsequently fulfills his promise to the old man to serve as Xilai Temple's spirit medium. Together with a prominent local businessman, Ū grows the temple faithful. However, the ulterior motive is to prepare for an uprising against Taiwan's colonial oppressors timed to take advantage of a series of disastrous setbacks for the Japanese predicted by the temple god.

In *Tainan Requiem*, author Wu Hsin-Han not only interweaves his unique spiritual perspective with real-world history but also complements the main colonial era narrative with a sub-narrative set



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during Taiwan's postwar Martial Law era. Unfolding in two distinct historical periods, the dual narratives highlight that autocratic governments of all stripes share much in common and that the subjects of such rule all yearn to be happy and free.

## Wu Hsin-Han 吳欣翰

Born in 1989, Wu Hsin-Han works by day as an engineer in the Hsinchu Science Park and, in his off hours, enjoys reading books on history and historical fiction. *Tainan Requiem* is Wu's first novel.

# TAINAN REQUIEM

By Wu Hsin-Han

Translated by Cheng-Yi Tsai

## Prologue

Winter Solstice, 1912

Karoran Furōsha Labor Camp

The crescent moon hanging in the night sky shone upon the sea and the shore, rugged and rocky. Waves of wind and tide battered the gaunt stones on the coast, splashing sprays into the air. At a twenty-minute walk away from the coastline, in a desolate stretch of land, stood a lonely cluster of barrack-like buildings erected in the Japanese style. Flickering lights shone out from a few of them, feeble and insignificant before the majesty of nature.

“Cold...still so cold...” Curled up, Ū Tshing-Hong shuddered from the chill. His fellow inmates had already collected every piece of ramie cloth they could find and covered him with them from head to toe. Even the vent built into the brick wall was blocked by their own bodies in an attempt to shut out the piercing, ever-present chill. None of it helped.

“He’s having a fever. These worthless pieces of cloth the Japanese dogs gave us don’t keep him warm at all. He’ll die if it goes on like this,” said Little Ông, an inmate who was once a medicine-man, shaking his head.

Dominated by the harsh summer sun during one half of the year and by howling wintry winds during the other, the east of Taiwan was a harsh land. Even well-equipped Japanese policemen struggle to withstand its fury. The inmates, having nothing better than rough-spun linen, fared even worse. They labored long and hard for the Empire of Japan each day under close watch, be it surveying native land, building roads for guards, or digging up precious mineral resources – gold dust, copper, nickel, phosphorus, marble, and Taiwan jade. The men, both young and old, also had to toil unceasingly every season in the barren alluvial loess outside the walls of the labor camp, painstakingly cultivating fields of rice and yam.

A few steps away from the electrified chain link fencing lay the pigsties, chicken coops, and vegetable patches. Every day one of the inmates would come and water the tubers, greens, melons, and beans. Even though the inmates could manage to feed themselves, the dilapidation of their dwellings, as well as the extreme scarcity of medical resources on this unforgiving coast, made it very unlikely they would survive their stay and return alive to their homes on the west coast.

“Has anyone asked Old Ong for help? Maybe he can do something?” Old Ong was the eldest among the inmates and had been there for as long as the labor camp existed. It was said the man was arrested when he, at that time a resident of Tsumuna in the mountains, protested Japanese

incursions on land with ancestral, spiritual significance. They came to blows, after which he was arrested and sent to the labor camp.

“I heard he’s a priest and has the gift of the third eye. Maybe he’ll be able to tell whether young Ô is afflicted by sickness or if it’s something less wholesome,” murmured Little Ông with hope in his voice. “He lives in another building, though, and someone will have to risk getting caught to fetch him.”

“I’ll go!” cried Little Ting, who had known Ô Tshing-Hong since they were both young men making their ways in the world on the streets of Kiâm-Tsuí-Káng in Tainan. “The worst that could happen is the guards beat me for breaking curfew. But, for him, it’s his life on the line here. I have to help him!”

*Furōsha*, a Japanese term not unlike the more antiquated and local *lô-hàn-kha*, refers to individuals without fixed dwellings or occupations. They were considered by the Japanese police force as a potentially negative influence on public order and mores. These *Furōsha*, despite not being criminals, were regularly detained pre-emptively by the Empire of Japan, which sought to “reform” those “indolent and shiftless” individuals through regimented labor and community living.

Life in a labor camp was not as strict as in prison. While inmates were forced to work by day, their time during the night was relatively unrestricted. And so Little Ting snuck out during night-time roll call and found Old Ong, a man of remarkable appearance – lean as a beanpole with eyes the color of jade and an aquiline nose – who surprisingly agreed without hesitation to visit his dying fellow inmate.

The arrival of the mysterious elder aroused much interest amongst the crowd, which quickly surrounded him and his patient. They were eager to see how the situation would resolve.

By that point, Ô Tshing-Hong had fallen into a coma, his body hot to the touch like a furnace. In the cold room housing the inmates, clouds of vapor rose up from his body before dissipating into the air.

Old Ong took a stick of charcoal, which the inmates regularly made themselves from scorched branches, and drew a talisman on a piece of paper. Muttering incantations none of the assembled could decipher, he ignited the charm with candle fire, held it between his fingers, and circled Ô Tshing-Hong’s body with it again and again until the charm had burnt down to ashes.

“The gods have marked his fate. He must not perish here,” croaked Old Ong in his coarse voice. Asking for water, he proceeded to write words on his patient’s forehead with it.

Ô Tshing-Hong gradually awakened, but still clung to life by a thread. The old man crouched down and whispered into his ear in Hokkien, “There is something special about your constitution that makes it a fit vessel for a great undertaking. My family has a special medicinal recipe that could turn you into a shaman, after which a serendipitous spirit or deity may be willing to lend you their strength. Are you willing to throw the dice?”

Ô Tshing-Hong nodded weakly and replied in the same language, “I have lived a spiritually pure life and accrued much good karma by helping others...”

“Excellent!”

Standing up, Old Ong took a quick glance across the room. “Tomorrow, on your way to work, look for acacia trees and peel off the bark, all the way from branch to root if possible. Avoid peeling too deep into the juicy parts, and bring back the peeled bark in rolls.”

“Acacia tree bark can be used as medicine? We’ve been chopping those trees up for firewood,” stated Little Ông in curiosity.

“You cannot simply boil the bark. A certain secret ingredient is needed.” Old Ong carefully took out from his wide sleeves a small, square package of medicinal herbs wrapped in many layers of waxed paper. Inside, small, dark brown seeds sat quietly.

“These are harmel seeds from Tibet. Boil them together with a good deal of acacia bark, and you’ll have a potent medicine in your hands.”

The inmates, out of a feeling of fellowship forged from shared hardship, agreed readily to this simple request. They immediately began to prepare the hides needed for wrapping the bark as well as to plan how to cover for each other so they’d have enough time to sharpen the stones needed to strip the bark from living trees.

The next day, after their labors were done and the sun had dipped below the horizon, the temperature dropped precipitously. Inside the house, Û Tshing-Hong could not stop shuddering from the cold, his teeth clattering audibly. Greatly weakened, he was hanging onto to life by the thinnest thread.

This was when Old Ong returned with a bowl in hand full of foul-smelling medicine, viscous and deep black, that repelled the curious crowd with its odor. “This is acacia soup. Drink it,” murmured Old Ong in a faint, breathy voice.

As his patient obediently drank, the crowd, worried and curious in equal measure, gathered to witness whether the mystery medicine they had all helped make would work. After an hour, Û Tshing-Hong continued to lie still on the bed, torpid and unresponsive.

Suddenly, he started shouting, shaking his limbs wildly as if they were on fire. His fellow inmates made to help him, but were held back by Old Ong’s gaunt fingers. “Do not touch him! This is when his fate shall be decided!” he warned.

Once again, Old Ong lit his charms and circled his patient with ash and smoke, all the while chanting loudly his cryptic spells. With all his might, he staked his claim and banished all of the unseen spiritual influences from his patient’s body. Moaning in anguish, Û Tshing-Hong fell from the bed and rolled to and fro on the ground vomiting, immobilized by fatigue.

“They come! The Lords of Blessings are here to save you!” exclaimed Old Ong with an undertone of joy in his voice.

It was then that Û Tshing-Hong, his body emaciated and his consciousness drifting, heard a clear voice in his head—

## Part One: The Wheel of Fortune

### Chapter One: The Tâng-Ki

Late Summer, 1970

Gû-Buâ-Āu, Tainan

As night fell, the hubbub of the city died down, and people returned to their homes. But in a certain temple, a growing crowd was gathering. Taiwan Xilai Temple, relocated and rebuilt on a new site after the Second World War, sat along Lane 28, Ximen Road. It was not particularly big. The east-facing, 70-square-meter main temple building was connected to a south-facing 17-square-meter annex that was dedicated to an affiliate deity.

Most of those gathering in the small square in front of the temple had brought their own benches to sit on. Chatting away, they tried to ward off the late-afternoon heat with hand fans.

As per usual for Friday nights, the experienced tâng-ki of the temple – Tēnn Tsín-Khìng, better known by his nickname Tsuí-Peh, was here to channel the temple's patron deities and answer on their behalf petitions from the droves of eager faithful who had come. This weekly ritual often took up his entire evening all the way until midnight.

"It's been a while, Tsìng-Hiông! How have you been?" Before the man even stepped into the temple, he was greeted warmly by Mrs. Tân in Hokkien.

"Good, thank you. Are you here to petition His Excellency too, Mrs. Tân?" Tsìng-Hiông, a man around forty years old, was the third-generation proprietor of Ganweitang, an old, famous bakery in Tainan.

"That's right. Rats have been making a hell of a ruckus late at night in my house the last few days, so loud that nobody can sleep! I'm hoping His Excellency would help make them leave. Anyway, come, sit!" Mrs. Tân pointed at the chair in front of her.

"Well, I'm sure His Excellency won't say no to taking care of something so simple. I'm going to go pay my respects now – let's talk later."

Following the corridor on the right, Tsìng-Hiông entered the main hall, performed his worship with incense, and went out into the temple courtyard, where the censer was, greeting people all the while. He had attended this temple ever since his grandfather first took him along as a child, so most worshippers there were familiar faces to him.

The faithful came in all sorts – men and women, young and old, rich and poor. The petitions varied as much as their petitioners. Some asked for success, others for love, yet others for the just arbitration of disputes...No matter the trouble, all seemed to end up petitioning the temple's patron deities.

The will of these deities is expressed in a myriad of ways – through medium's pens, ouija boards, spirit writing, palanquin writing, and so on, with priestly interpreters tasked to read their

will from the signs given. But the most direct means of communion is no doubt bilateral communication via *tâng-ki*, through whom the faithful can pose queries and receive answers.

*Tâng-ki*, the Hokkien name for this particular type of medium, are able to summon spiritual beings into their own bodies, serving both as bridges between the supernatural and the mundane and as spokespeople for their deities. Such individuals are extremely rare. Although innate talent is required, *tâng-ki* initiates must painstakingly practice the art of synchronizing themselves with the deities they seek to channel.

In 1970, when Taiwan had only around 3,800 temples serving a population of 14.8 million, temples with *tâng-ki* possessing both sufficient skills and the requisite affinity with supernatural beings were still few and far between.

That evening, the temple was busy all the way up to midnight as usual, leaving Tsing-Hiông waiting in the vestibule until the lively crowds of worshippers had departed. Tired from working at his bakery the whole day, the man was quite confused.

*How strange, I'm only here for my usual request of a good-luck charm for my business, so why am I the last?*

As the thought crossed his mind, the interpreter shouted, "Faithful Tsing-Hiông, His Excellency will see you now."

"Finally!"

He crossed the dragon-marked door to the right of the central gate and knelt reverently, incense in hand, before the robe-clad Tsui-Peh, who had already begun channeling his patron.

The lean, old man, nearly seventy years of age, had served at the temple for seventeen years with great dedication. In everyday life, the old man was ordinary, timid, and reserved. But when channeling his deity for petitions at night, he was self-confident, energetic, and spirited – a vital pillar of the religious community. Lacking a successor from the younger generations, he had been unable to retire, as he desired, for a long time.

Tsing-Hiông, just about to make his petition, was stopped by the deity with a gesture. "Are you here to petition me for a charm of fortune?"

"Yes, that's right, I was hoping Your Excellency would bless my business with prosperity and success," Tsing-Hiông said with a deep bow.

The deity responded with a faint smile, "That is a simple matter. However, I've delayed your petition for this opportunity to speak with you."

Confused, Tsing-Hiông replied without thinking, "I'm ready to hear your wisdom, Your Excellency."

"It was twenty years ago that your grandfather passed, was it not?"

"Indeed it was, I paid my respects in a memorial service for him just last month," said Tsing-Hiông with faint surprise.

"The Jade Emperor, in recognition of his deeds during his living years, has decreed that he be deified and made a military officer of the senior fourth rank under my command."

"Goodness gracious! A mortal made deity! This is big news!" Before Tsing-Hiông could react, the interpreter Little Kueh, who had been dozing off, shouted in surprise, blurting out in

Hokkien, "I've never heard of such a thing in my whole life! General Yue Fei, Lord Guan Yu, Lady Matzu...They were all deified centuries ago. The most recent cases – the versatile Koxinga and the other Great Founders, Prince Ningjing and his five concubines – were three hundred years ago too...Well, what are you waiting for? Thank His Excellency for the honor!"

Tsìng-Hiông, honored yet also quite confused by his words, bowed in thanks to the deity without thought.

"Your grandfather will visit you and your kin in dreams to inform you of this news. Remember his visage and attire, then paint portraits of him as a deity accordingly." The deity took out two charms and blessed them. "These are your charms of fortune. Bring them to your bakery's door and burn them to unleash their power, as usual."

Thanking the deity for his blessings, Tsìng-Hiông returned home, but not without a good deal of confusion.

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One week later, Tsìng-Hiông returned with his entire family of six to the temple, and was again called last. This time, however, many of the faithful, wanting to know more about the deified man still lingered, forming a curious crowd. Speaking for his family, Tsìng-Hiông spoke with incense in his hands, "Your Excellency, it is as you said. My grandfather has visited the elders of my house in dreams over the past few days to speak to them about his deification."

The deity offered a faint, enigmatic smile.

"Then what brings you here to me?"

Embarrassed, Tsìng-Hiông replied, "Well, our neighbors have been asking us about what deeds specifically my grandfather had done to merit deification. We were hoping to record these so that posterity may be inspired to follow his example. But...my grandfather would not speak of them during our dreams, and he never spoke of his youth at all while alive. That is what brings me here to you today, Your Excellency."

The deity sighed and shook his head lightly. "Many of this island's tales have been obscured. It is not your fault you do not know, but rather the fault of those in power who hid the truth."

The deity's words captured the attention of Tsìng-Hiông and his family sitting before the deity as well as the watching crowd seated in the back rows. "This temple has a long history, but it does not sit today on its original site. What do you know of this matter?" asked the deity.

"I'm sorry, Your Excellency, but I only know that my grandfather devoted much effort into rebuilding this temple. I do not know the story behind those efforts," replied Tsìng-Hiông.

"When the original temple was destroyed, only the idol of the founding deity remained with it. The other eight were sent to Zhuxi Temple." The deity glanced southeast and fell silent, as if casting his presence yonder. "That was almost sixty years ago, when the island of Taiwan was still under Japanese rule..."

## Chapter 2: the Squire

Spring Equinox Eve, 1913

Daihanroku, Garanpi Township

Sailing through Bashi Channel, the busiest strait in the western Pacific, a steamship navigated between Taiwan's two southernmost capes and slowly entered Daihanroku, a whaling base built by the Japanese. The estuary port in Shajō Bay on the west coast of the Kōshun Peninsula, nowadays called Chechen Bay in Hengchun, was still incomplete after twelve years of construction, leaving the southern sea route between the Pacific and Taiwan Strait incomplete. As such, ships laden with essential goods sailing the east route from Keelung to Garanpi, passing through Taitung, had no choice but to set anchor at Daihanroku.

After the coolies at the pier finished laboriously unloading the cargo, the crew opened their ship's side gate, unleashing a torrent of rag-clad men who proceeded to stampede down the ladder. It was obvious to onlookers on the shore that these were inmates from the Karoran Labor Camp. Indeed, the cargo ship, which made regular stops at Daihanroku, was carrying the fortunate survivors of those sent to work the undeveloped lands in eastern Taiwan.

While nearly all rushed out as soon as they could to enjoy their new freedom, one stayed behind, taking a deep breath of the warm ocean air on the deck. Another boat in the harbor had arrived towing a humpback whale, which had dyed the sea red in its wake, and most of the fisherfolk available in the moment were working together to drag the behemoth ashore.

The whale was covered in wounds still gushing blood. It had been impaled with a harpoon that left a huge crater in its body. The creature, so gigantic that it looked like a small island, lay unmoving and without sign of struggle, as if its sense of pain had somehow been severed. Its teary eyes, however, betrayed its sapience and, perhaps, even deeper spiritual qualities still.

The winds that again blew in from the sea carried the scent of flesh and blubber. Moved by compassion, the man stood still in a moment of silence for the chance-met leviathan before he too stepped on the ladder and walked slowly down. Under the sun's harsh glare, the man, about thirty years of age, resolutely opened his eyes. His face showed a hint of sophistication and learning, while his lean body and deeply tanned skin told a story of weathered hardship and grueling labor.

The marketplace, with its Western shops offering exotic Western food and Western clothing, and its wide, clean streets seemed absorbed in never-ending hustle and bustle. Vendors and visitors alike conversed in a rough admixture of Japanese, Chinese, and Hokkien. The man, although unnerved by the activity swirling about him, and standing out like a sore thumb in his ragged clothing, persisted in his quest, asking the same question of everyone he met: "Which way to Xilai Temple?"

This man was Ū Tshing-Hong.

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In truth, Xilai Temple was not hard to find. Any local would, if asked, eagerly reply, “Walk to the roundabout the Japanese built two years ago and turn east, and you’ll see it after about a three-minute walk!” The 400-square-meter temple complex was a square enclosure in three tiers that contained the temple vestibule and main and rear halls. The parallel annexes along each side connected the three tiers together, and two rectangular, open-air courtyards were situated between the tiers. Its roofs were decorated with gorgeous flying eaves and colorful tiles that glittered in the sun. This brand-new temple complex, funded in its entirety by Soo Íú-Tsi – a local squire of prominence in the township of Tōa-Bák-Kàng – began construction the year the roundabout opened.

Of the many chatting faithful who congregated at the temple, one woman stood out in particular. She was wearing a kimono, and her tidy hair was fixed in place by a hairpin. She shuffled back and forth elegantly with a piece of children’s clothing in hand. Worshippers wearing Japanese clothing were a rare sight at the temple. Her vivid facial features, pale white skin, and impressive height all suggested an origin other than that island nation. Perhaps thanks to her clattering getas, she stood taller than even the male worshippers wearing cloth shoes with leather soles or going barefoot, making her quite the salient sight.

From time to time, she would crane her neck to see what was happening inside the temple. After all, the waiting time on that day seemed to her to be longer than usual. This troubled Liāu, the steward of the temple, who feared any slight might result in trouble with the Japanese police. “I’m sorry, milady, you need only wait just a little longer, it is your turn next.”

Curious, the woman stated, “Please, call me Thng Giók. But tell me, that man has been inside for half an hour. Is something wrong?”

Liāu nervously replied, “Milady, the man is petitioning the gods.” Seeing her lack of comprehension, he further explained, “I mean to say, he explains his grievances, which are relayed to the celestial courts above through our priests’ magic. Afterwards, His Excellency adjudicates the case and makes a decision. As you’re in a hurry, I’ll tell him to leave right away!”

Having said that, Liāu rushed inside the hall. However, Thng Giók, not wishing to interrupt the petitioner’s business, hurriedly followed the steward inside to stop him.