

# THE CHENG-PO CODE

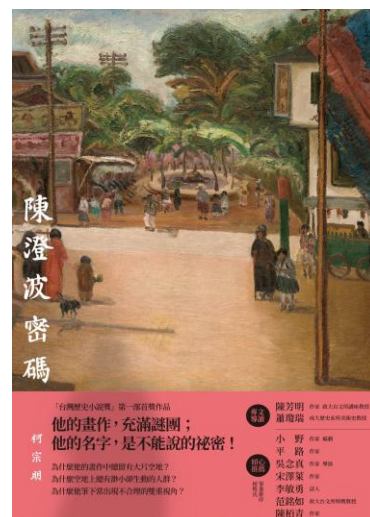
## 陳澄波密碼

*Why is this painting unsigned? A curious painting brought in for restoration suggests the existence of a tantalizing secret concealed in the paintings of Taiwanese artist Chen Cheng-Po, drawing the reader into a highly satisfying adventure filled with suspense, sleuthy investigations, actual historical happenings, and plenty of heart.*

The curtain on this story rises in the year 1984 during the waning years of the nearly four-decade-long Martial Law era – a time when freedom of speech, assembly, and association was still curtailed by Taiwan's single-party autocratic government. Cheng, a non-conformist painter working in disheartening obscurity, is approached one day by an odd individual who implores him to restore an unsigned oil painting. Curious, he and his reporter girlfriend Fang Yen engage in some sleuthing and gradually assemble a picture of the life of the man behind the unsigned work – the early twentieth-century modernist painter Chen Cheng-Po. In talking with Chen's friends and acquaintances, among whom are more than a few nationally renowned artists, the couple finds it curious that, while all are more than happy to share stories of Chen's studies in Japan, teaching career in Shanghai, and lectures at Zhongshan Hall in Taipei, each is mysteriously tight-lipped about the artist's death.

Included in this novel are images of a number of Chen's paintings, including the story's inspirations – "Linglang Mountain Hall" (1935) and "Self Portrait No. 1" (1928). Only when the couple's investigation leads them to the Chen family in Chiayi County do they finally learn why the original restoration request was so furtively made, why Chen's death is so taboo, why some artists hold things so close to their chest, and...why pursuing the truth can be hazardous to one's health.

Chen Cheng-Po, a member of Taiwan's first generation of Western-style painters, was born during the inaugural year of Japanese rule (1895) and died just a half century later in 1947, soon after Taiwan's



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absorption into Nationalist China. The author deftly weaves Taiwanese art and political histories into a suspense-filled story about Chen's life of struggle that, in many ways, captures the complex emotions and concerns felt by modern Taiwanese in their search for cultural and national consciousness.

## Ke Tsung-Ming 柯宗明

Ke Tsun-Ming has a well-established career as a writer and director of television and stage productions, most of which revolve around Taiwanese historical and cultural issues and themes. *The Cheng-Po Code*, Ke's first novel, took first place in the 3rd New Taiwan Peace Foundation's Taiwan Historical Novel Awards in 2018.

# THE CHENG-PO CODE

By Ke Tsung-Ming

Translated by Michael Day

Having said goodbye to Chiayi, Fang Yen sat aboard a northbound train, nose in a book about painting by Chen Cheng-Po. While Fang Yen read, Cheng stared out the window, chin in hand like Rodan's "The Thinker".

Suddenly, a scrap of yellowed paper fluttered down from the book onto the floor. Fang Yen bent to pick it up, crying excitedly, "Look at this!" It was a letter. Fang Yen leaned close to Cheng and slowly unfolded the letter, and together, the two began to read.

*Chieh:*

*I have two years of graduate school left, and even though I don't have the employment part figured out yet, my heart is set on fulfilling my duties as a husband. I'm not sure I can make a living off my art, but nothing would make me happier than painting full time. Making art fills me with joy, firstly because I enjoy what I'm doing, and secondly because I'm excited to share my work with the world. I still remember, when I was young, my grandma told me...*

## 1.

History is like a medicine cabinet in a Chinese pharmacy, the kind with countless drawers filled with all types of herbs. Open the drawers of the medicine cabinet of history, and you'll see a kaleidoscope of scenes from the past.

For instance, open the drawer labeled Minguo 49, 1960, and this is what you'll see: the opening of the Cross-Island Highway, President Eisenhower's visit to Taiwan, Yang Chuan-kwang's silver medal in the Olympics, Lei Chen's arrest. In the drawer labeled Minguo 53, 1964: the Great Baihe Earthquake, the crash of a plane filled with movie stars from Hong Kong and Taiwan. In the drawer for Minguo 59, 1970: the premiere of the televised puppet program *The Great Swordsman of Yunzhou*, Chiang Ching-kuo's attempted assassination in New York, the movement to impeach Taipei Mayor Henry Kao in the Control Yuan. In the drawer for Minguo 51, 1962: Fang Yu crowned Miss Republic of China, the first Golden Horse Award for Best Narrative Feature given to *Sun, Moon and Star*, the first broadcast on Taiwan Television. Minguo 57, 1968: the Hongye Junior Baseball Team triumphs over Japan. Minguo 63, 1974: the smashing success of the TV show *Justice Pao*. Minguo 42, 1953: the first car crosses Xiluo Bridge. Minguo 60, 1971: protests over the Diaoyutai territorial dispute at National Taiwan University, Taiwan's ouster from the United Nations. Minguo 68, 1979: the publication of the first issue of *Formosa Magazine*, the successful separation of conjoined twins Chung-jen and Chung-i. One year or another: the

dismissal of army commander Sun Li-jen. Some other year or another: the implementation of mandatory nine-year education for all...

More and more drawers fly open with increasing speed...Liu Tzu-jan acquitted of murder charges, a mob at the American embassy, the great August 7<sup>th</sup> flood in central and southern Taiwan, the declaration of martial law throughout Taiwan, the 37.5% Arable Rent Reduction Act, the death of Hu Shih, the publication of Chiung Yao's *Outside the Window*, masses of people welcoming Ivy Ling Po to Taiwan, the arrest of Peng Ming-min, the death of Chiang Kai-shek, the defection of Fan Yuen-yen, the Taiwan Nativist Literary Debate, the Zhongli Incident, the expressway opening, the severing of Taiwan-US relations, the murder of Chen Wen-chen, one hundred and ten killed in Far Eastern Air crash, the Land Bank of Taiwan heist, Lee Fu-an shatters decathlon records, Solzhenitsyn visits Taiwan, United World Chinese Commercial Bank truck robbed, fourteen million Taiwan dollars lost...

The drawers of memory open one after another, and the fragrance of history wafts in the air, like the subtle, mingled aroma of so many time-seasoned herbs.

The scene of Cheng and Fang Yen reading the letter is found in the drawer labeled Minguo 73 – 1984.

This was an eventful year for Taiwan. The president of the Executive Yuan, Sun Yun-suan, was hospitalized with a cerebral hemorrhage, Chiang Ching-kuo was reelected President, northern Taiwan was struck by a flood on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, students at Yingqiao Elementary School were doused with acid by a crazed assailant, cave-ins at the Haishan and Ruifang mines killed hundreds, Chinese-American writer Henry Liu was stabbed to death, and Operation Clean Sweep – a crackdown on organized crime – was launched.

It was also the year Taiwan's first McDonald's opened.

November 1984.

In a cramped living room stood a wood-framed 18-inch Synco TV. The news was playing: Taipei residents were streaming into Taiwan's first McDonald's. The camera lens captured vivid images of patrons' bright, smiling faces, and the cathode ray tube beamed them onto Cheng's retinas.

Cheng sat in the living room of the little apartment, eating minced pork rice and watching the news. The more he watched, the greater his irritation. He spat, "Thought we'd left ketchup-drenched hamburgers behind. Now those burger-scarfing Americans have launched an economic invasion on innocent little Taiwan. Shit!"

"Give me a break!" said Fang Yen, who was sitting with Cheng eating dinner. "Taiwan isn't so innocent. This is no agricultural society like you seem to think. Not anymore. Taiwan's foreign exchange reserves are growing, and skyscrapers are sprouting up all over the Eastern District of Taipei. The problem is you're behind the times. At least try and keep up with trends."

"Why you..."

"Be quiet!" Cheng was readying a retort, but Fang Yen cut him off. "Just eat your food. You're going to choke." Fang Yen finished with a harrumph, wagging a finger.

Cheng had returned a few years earlier from studying fine arts in the United States. At the time, wave after wave of new trends in postwar avant-garde art were sweeping through New York, from Jackson Pollock's abstract drip technique to Andy Warhol's pop art to new, multi-dimensional photorealist approaches. The sheer scope and range of these methods and techniques made Cheng's head spin. He had no interest in any particular trend, and cared only for natural landscapes, like those Monet and van Gogh had painted in the nineteenth century. Like them, Cheng strived to capture the spirit of natural landscapes by transferring them onto the canvas as they were.

As a stubborn adherent of impressionist ideas and techniques in the 1980s, Cheng may as well have been a visitor from the Middle Ages. Needless to say, he was a fish out of water in the US, but he didn't feel any more at home back in Taiwan. A month earlier, he had held his first one-man exhibition since returning from America in a gallery in Taipei's Eastern District, where he sold a grand total of just one painting. Aficionados of impressionism were few and far between, and Cheng was extremely sensitive to phrases like "behind the times" and "up with trends". He hadn't been happy when the outspoken Fang Yen had blurted, "The problem is you're behind the times. At least try and keep up with trends." This rubbed Cheng the wrong way. Like a hedgehog flaring its quills, he puffed with annoyance. But Fang Yen had no time to deal with Cheng's feelings, which was probably for the best. She had slipped away from the newspaper office on dinner break to eat with Cheng, and she had to hurry back to turn in an article.

"I'm outta here. You should get to bed early. And stop smoking like a chimney already." Fang Yen put on her gold-framed glasses, pulled on her overcoat, picked up her backpack, and made for the door, leaving Cheng still chewing on a mouthful of minced pork rice that tasted like nothing.

Of course, Cheng understood that Fang Yen hadn't meant to press his buttons. When he had returned from America a sad and deflated man, Fang Yen had been the only one who listened to his woes, encouraging him to look on the bright side. It was just that, considering the predicament the market for paintings was in, he couldn't hold back his knee-jerk emotional responses.

Just then, an episode of *A Sprig of Plum Blossoms* came on the TV. A gentle male voice sang the show's theme: "Our love is expansive like the grassland, and though nothing can stop the rain and wind, the clouds soon will part and limitless sunlight will pour down upon you and me..."

Cheng stood and, in one swift, irritated motion, switched off the TV.

The next day Cheng boarded the bus holding a canvas entitled "Impression of Zhuoshui River" that he had just finished painting. He was headed for Tung Hua Gallery in the Eastern District of Taipei, planning to discuss putting it on consignment. The bus was packed with people, and Cheng gingerly cradled the size-30 canvas, watching from the corner of his eye as Section Four of Zhongxiao East Road passed by, noting it was looking more and more like Fifth Avenue these days. It was packed with countless new skyscrapers and art galleries too, projecting the image of a

cultured, flourishing city. There must be buyers for oil paintings out there, Cheng thought with a growing sense of hope.

When Cheng carefully handed over "Impression of Zhuoshui River", the gallery owner, Mr. Li, made a show of thoroughly inspecting it.

"So this is another piece you'd like to consign."

"Yes," Cheng replied.

Mr. Li put the painting down, wearing a tortured grimace. "Ming-cheng, I'm going to be frank with you. Impressionist works are tough to sell these days, and they don't bring high prices. Even when some rich consortium does get a mind to buy an impressionist work, they look to the classics: Li Shih-chiao, Li Mei-shu, Yang San-lang..."

"Mr. Li, I know all that, but..."

"Listen to me," Mr. Li interrupted. "My point is, times have changed, and the new generation of artists has to bring fresh ideas to the table. To sell, art has to get people talking. You could learn something from Wu Hsuan-san. Look at the portraits he did in Africa...look at his cubist works. That's how you keep up with trends."

As soon as the words "That's how you keep up with trends" left Mr. Li's lips, Cheng stopped listening, and Mr. Li apparently had nothing else to say.

Cheng silently picked up "Impressions of Zhuoshui River", got on the bus, and went home.

That evening, Fang Yen and Cheng had dinner at the night market in Chien-Cheng Circle. Cheng took the opportunity to lick his wounds, telling Fang Yen, "'That's how you keep up with trends' my ass. In his infinite kindness, Mr. Li let it be known that the Taiwanese art world is coming to be dominated by agents, and he wants me to get one to help shape my style. He says that's the only way I'll ever crack the market. He says it will do no good to push back against the tide, clinging stubbornly to old styles."

"He has a point," said Fang Yen, her chopsticks pausing in midair. "Agents will be good for the Taiwanese art world. You've been overseas yourself, so it's not like you don't understand Western culture. And what do you want people to tell you, if not the truth?" With this, Fang Yen's chopsticks shoved some more rice noodles into her mouth.

"I..." Cheng sighed, trying to swallow a mouthful of food, but it wouldn't go down.

"Hey, why don't I be your agent?" Fang Yen suddenly lit up with excitement. "I'm an arts journalist. I can find out about the latest trends in the art world. I can give you up-to-the-minute advice."

"Up-to-the-minute advice?" Cheng looked dismayed.

"Yeah. Hire someone who loves you as your agent, that's the way to get honest advice, like van Gogh and his little brother."

"No way!" Cheng shook his head. "Van Gogh's brother was an insider in the arts world, true; but he never interfered in van Gogh's work."

"That's probably why van Gogh only sold two paintings in his life."

"Correction, one painting."

“Didn’t you already sell one painting at that last show?” Fang Yen’s excitement was unabated. “Par for the course. You’re still young. You’re not going to end up a sad sack like van Gogh. Let me help you!”

Fang Yen and Cheng had met in New York. Cheng had been setting up an exhibition with his teacher when Fang Yen visited the gallery as a journalist intern. The fact they were both from Taiwan and had crossed paths so far from home was probably part of what made them such fast friends. Later, as they continued exchanging letters and phone calls, they realized they shared similar interests and gradually became the kind of friends who told each other everything. It was after both had graduated and returned to Taiwan that Cheng finally made a move on Fang Yen, whom he admired for her sparkling eyes, generous spirit and boundless energy.

“I wasn’t expecting you to ever confess your crush. I thought you had a stick up your ass,” said Fang Yen with a grin, pushing her gold-framed glasses back onto her nose, then twirling a finger in her chicly shaggy, Meg Ryan-ish hair.

“It’s just that...” Scratching his head, Cheng explained sheepishly, “I’m afraid that since we’re back in Taiwan now, someone else will snatch you up.”

“They probably will. Actually, my mom is already trying to set me up,” Fang Yen teased with a grin. At that moment, the lanky, swarthy, handsome Cheng looked like a lost little boy.

These days, with Cheng in a creative dry spell, the two lovebirds were quarrelling more and more frequently. A few days earlier, Fang Yen had shown up at Cheng’s place at the exact moment the movers were bringing Cheng’s paintings back from the gallery. Fang Yen thought it strange and asked what was going on. Cheng said he was taking back all of the paintings he’d had on consignment at Tung Hua. Fang Yen asked, “What? They won’t let you keep them there, or you wanted them back?” Cheng said, sounding miserable, “Let’s just say both. It wasn’t the right place for them.” Cheng squatted on his haunches and gently caressed the paintings laid out on the floor, as if tending to his injured children.

Watching this, Fang Yen was more determined than ever not to give up on him.

Fang Yen was willing to keep supporting Cheng because he was so full of idealism and passion for his work; this made him unlike most other young people, who cared only about fame and money. No, Cheng clung stubbornly to his artistic ideals, putting himself through incredible difficulty for the sake of making slow progress. It was this peculiar character that so strongly attracted Fang Yen, who had been brought up by her family to help people in need. Cheng’s motivation, as far as his ideals and passion for his work went, was based on Tolstoy’s *What Is Art?*

“Tolstoy wrote a book called *What Is Art?*” Fang Yen and Cheng were chatting one day when Cheng mentioned the book. Fang Yen said incredulously, “I’ve heard of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, but I’ve never heard of *What is Art?* What kind of book is it?”

Cheng took the book down from the shelf and handed it to Fang Yen. “It’s an inquiry into the meaning of art. Tolstoy believed art should be a means of expressing human emotion, not a form of idle entertainment for the upper classes. So a village woman’s folk song, when sung with



real emotion, is a moving work of art; but a piece by Tchaikovsky played by a violinist in a tailcoat jacket may be no more than a meaningless display of technique.”

“Okay, I see what you mean. Since the advent of modernism, Western thinking about art has tended to favor purity and simplicity,” said Fang Yen.

“Right. Tolstoy explains in *What Is Art?* that the emphasis of art should be sincerity. If it doesn’t originate from a pure, deep place, even the most beautiful technique will fail to stand the test of time.” Cheng said all this with a pious, prayerful look.

“So between ‘truth’, ‘goodness’, and ‘beauty’, ‘truth’ comes first, right?” Fang Yen asked.

Eyes fixed on Fang Yen, Cheng nodded repeatedly. It was because he believed so firmly in Tolstoy’s ideas that he would rather paint a canvas ordinary people could understand than pander to trends by imitating the work of some new school of so-called art. One quote by Tolstoy was particularly close to his heart: “Art should not cater to the tastes of the upper classes; it should be a tool for the people to express emotion.” Cheng made it his motto.

This was exactly why Fang Yen so admired Cheng. Recently, however, she had noticed Cheng’s complaints about the art market growing ever more frequent. His passion and idealism was melting away only to be replaced by petulance and resentment. A few days earlier over at Cheng’s place, she had found him staring blankly at a half-finished painting entitled “Sunset on Mt. Guanyin”. Fang Yen had asked, “What’s wrong?” Cheng responded in a dour tone, “I can’t paint anymore.” Fang Yen felt a jolt of panic. She was afraid of Cheng losing his passion for creating. Later, the proprietor of a framing shop came to collect his fee, and he and Cheng got into an argument.

“Are you out of your mind? Thirty-six thousand Taiwan dollars for a few frames?” Cheng roared.

“That’s right, because you ordered wooden frames. They cost more.”

“But you said you wanted to work together long-term, so you’d keep giving me the special price.”

“No, you don’t have a broker anymore, so I can’t keep giving you the discount.”

“Where’s the sense in that?”

“That’s the way it is in this business. Don’t believe me, ask any other artist.”

Cheng was on the brink of flying off the handle when Fang Yen grabbed him by the hand. Restraining his temper, Cheng said, “Okay, you win. I’ll write you a check... post-dated.”

“For what date?”

“Two months out.”

“Too long.”

“How about one month out?”

“Fine. It better not bounce.”

The man snatched the check, looking frustrated, and left. Cheng went off to the balcony by himself to smoke a cigarette.

Seeing this aloof artist who distanced himself from worldly affairs squabbling over money with a businessman, Fang Yen didn’t know whether to be glad at Cheng’s return to the human



world or saddened by his fall from grace. "Maybe it's because he refuses to pander to the market that Cheng thinks there's no meaning in painting anymore. This could be the end of his ambitions." Fang Yen was beginning to worry. Would Cheng become a loser, unable to face reality? The question of how to help Cheng regain his passion quickly consumed her thoughts.

Then fate, or something like it, intervened. Several days later, the evening after the northeast monsoon winds died down, Cheng's doorbell rang.

Fang Yen opened the door to find a middle-aged man in a black business suit standing in the doorway.

"Pardon me, is Mr. Wang Ming-cheng in?" the man asked.

"That's me. What is it?" Cheng, who had been lying on the sofa reading *What Is Art?*, piped up.

"I'm sure you're wondering why I'm here," said the man. "About a month or two ago, a client of mine was looking around your exhibition at Tung Hua Gallery and fell in love with your work. He owns an oil painting very similar in style to yours. It's an older painting in need of restoration, and he would like to hire you to bring this painting back to life."

With this, the man handed over the painting. Cheng led the man inside, carefully removed the painting from its wrapping paper and placed it beneath a fluorescent light. Fang Yen sidled up next to him, and both carefully looked the painting over.

"Yes, although the colors are a little faded," said Cheng as he inspected the painting, "the landscape is still vibrant. The pavilion, the pond, the trees, all overflow with vitality."

Fang Yen listened curiously. "The brushstrokes and the use of color are almost impressionistic." Cheng nodded. "Yes, this painting is similar to my style. Or I should say, my style is similar to this painting."

"That's exactly why you should be the one to restore it," the man said, sounding pleased.

"Restore it?" Cheng appeared aghast at the suggestion.

"Yes, my client wants to hire you to restore the painting." The man responded, undeterred.

"No!" Cheng suddenly raised his voice.

"Huh?" The man looked puzzled.

"Why not?" Not even Fang Yen could understand.

"I'm an artist. Why should I restore someone else's painting?" Cheng wore a look of righteous indignation. "You should know that in the West, restoration is a specialized skill. Not every artist is qualified. You'd be better off asking somebody else."

"I understand it is presumptuous of me," said the man, "but first of all, there are currently no professional restorationists in Taiwan. Second, no one is better suited to this job than you. Your paintings capture light like none other. So, I must insist."

"Yeah," Fang Yen joined in. "Since the style is so similar to yours, it shouldn't be hard for you."