

THE LOTUS PRINCE AND THE LOST RAILWAY BOYS

太子與鐵道上的男孩

Missing children are reappearing in unusual locations. Even more bizarrely, the children were all born on the same day of the lunar calendar, and dream the same dreams at night. A child psychologist, a Daoist scholar/priest, and a police detective team up to stop further disappearances, but are stymied by a string of supernatural occurrences.

Ten-year-old Hsiao-chiu disappears on his way home from school. Three days later he is found 200 kilometers away deep in the wilderness of the Alishan mountain range. He appears to be in perfect health, but he has no idea that three days have passed. All he can recall are vague memories of a man leading him from the subway station into the forest, and of a one-legged owl that he followed through the trees. The next thing he remembers is being found by a group of hikers. The only other clue Hsiao-chiu can provide is that every night he dreams of old railroad tracks in the forest, and a boy's voice saying, "Only I am the prince."

Hsiao-chiu's bizarre testimony prompts the police to form a special investigations team. The boy represents the fourth in a series of disappearances involving young boys who are then found in remote forests. The boys all came from different parts of Taiwan, and appear to be completely unrelated. The only clues that link them are their shared birthdate on the lunar calendar, and the voice they all hear in their dreams.

The pattern of disappearances suggests another boy will become a victim within fourteen days. Racing against time, police detective Entotsu invites child psychologist He Jo-fen to assist on the unusual case, and He, in turn, enlists the aid of a Daoist priest and scholar. Han



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Hsi-yuan. The motley team of detective, Daoist, and child psychologist are soon confronted by further unfathomable events. Everywhere they go they encounter lightning, strong winds, and earthquakes. Soon, reports arrive from across Taiwan that idols of the god Nezha, also known as the Third Lotus Prince, are spontaneously rocking and turning in place.

As the investigators become mired in supernatural mysteries, Entotsu discovers that Han Hsi-yuan has been hiding his true identity. Could the Daoist somehow be connected to the disappearances?

Starting from the case of a missing child, author Chang Kuo-Li builds a gripping tale of suspense blending elements of Daoist legend with the history of Taiwan's railroads. As Daoist cosmology sheds an alternative light on the investigators' understanding of the case – and their own pasts – a unique dialogue is forged between the modern thriller genre and the adventurous tales of Daoist folklore.

Chang Kuo-Li 張國立

Chang Kuo-Li, one time editor-in-chief of China Times Weekly, has won numerous awards for his writing. A linguist, historian, army expert, sports fan, food critic, as well as poet, playwright and novelist, he is truly a Renaissance man. He has published over 60 books over his career, mostly mystery novels, including the recent *Pawnshop of the Otherworld* and *The Spirit Medium Detective* series. Among all his works, *The Sniper* series has been translated into Dutch, German, French, English, Russian, Turkish, Vietnamese, and Japanese.

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By Chang Kuo-Li

Translated by Jim Weldon

Part One: A Missing Person at Hsinkaokou Station

1

“Hsinkaokou Station?”

“Used to be called Hsinkaokou-eki; that was the Japanese name for the station. The ‘station’ bit is the old character for ‘post station’, which is read as ‘eki’ in Japanese.”

“And it still exists?”

“It does, way off up in the mountains.”

“Why build it away up there?”

“Miss, that’s a question you can ask me, but then who I am supposed to ask? If the Japanese wanted to build a station somewhere, it’s not something my old grandpa had any say in, nor my old dad, so it’s not like I do now, is it? And I only just got notice. My bosses sent me to fetch you; will you come? There’s a helicopter from the aviation division can fly us there direct, though I’m afraid I can’t promise an in-flight meal.” He gave a hollow laugh.

“Can you get airsick on them?”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Will I need my passport for boarding?”

“Just have your Easycard topped up, the more the merrier.”

“Do I need to take anything with me?”

“Come on, it’s only Chiayi. I guarantee I’ll have you back in Taipei in time for dinner. No need for a nightie and a toothbrush.”

So He Jo-fen just grabbed her daypack then was hustled aboard the helicopter. It was a very big backpack, containing the textbooks she used in class, her notebooks, makeup, purse, key wallet and cell phone. It made Jo-fen look as if she might be heading off to the market to buy all the makings of a meal for a family of five.

She rummaged for her phone. It was down at the bottom of the daypack, sticky with some egg yolk from yesterday’s sandwich but otherwise fine, though there was only one bar of battery left. As for the signal strength from Chunghwa Telecom, not even a single bar there, so she had no way of messaging her mother that she probably wouldn’t be coming home for dinner that evening.

For the daughter of a single parent who had not seen her father since she was five years old, this was a matter second only in seriousness to her entanglement with that married man the year before.

The campus was rotten with shameless men of his stripe; the best thing would be to class the lot of them as a gang of habitual fraudsters, lock them all up and throw away the key. His wife had come straight back from America as soon as she heard about it, and he instantly turned into a contemptible coward. I know I've let you down, Jo-Fen, but I can only choose her, because of the children. I'll make it up to you in the next life.

Was she going to be seeing him again in her next life? Fate would surely not be so cruel. She wanted to say, no need to wait for the next life, you can get down on your knees right here and knock your head to me three times. But she couldn't summon the energy, these loose men who fancy themselves were quick to shed more tears than a dog drops drool.

It wasn't just the in-flight meal that was missing, there were no air stewards either. She was wedged in between two policemen, the smell a mixture of sweat, tobacco, and periodontitis. The pilot up front did not offer a polite invitation to fasten her seatbelt in Mandarin, Taiwanese, English and Hakka; he just shouted out, "Sit tight!"

Shuddering and shaking, the helicopter left the ground. The pilot's tone was more friendly when he next spoke, "Control, this is Zero-One-Sevener lifting off; heading from Songshan to Alishan in Chiayi, *over*."

Well, at least Jo-fen now knew that their destination was to be Alishan.

That morning, just as she was rushing about getting ready to head into college, her phone rang. She usually never answered if there was no caller ID, but for some reason today she had pressed receive. It was a man she did not know, "Ms. He, I am downstairs outside your building."

"What are you doing outside my house? I can call the police."

A middle-aged man was standing at her gate, trying to push a cigarette butt into one of the gaps in a drain grating with the tip of his shoe. He showed Jo-fen his warrant card, "I'd like you to come with me."

The man handed her his phone. She heard the gravelly, Hakka-inflected voice of Professor Huang from her time at the research institute, "Ah yes, Jo-fen; you should go with Officer Yen, seems to be quite a serious business. Help them; these men have no idea how to deal with children."

So, this man, who looked more like some street tough, was in fact Officer Yen. He opened the door of a patrol car for her with no word of explanation or clarification. Jo-fen, still not sure what was happening, got into the police car and then into the police helicopter, and she learned just how thoroughly different a police helicopter was to the tourist charter airplane that had taken her to Japan. The cabin had no soundproofing and the clattering of the rotor blades was giving her a headache. It came to her that the vitamin C tablets she had forgotten to eat with her breakfast were still lying on the table; mother was sure to curse her out. Mama He's loving regime demanded Jo-fen consume a mixture of vitamins mornings and evenings to keep her always

healthy and pretty, so that they might find a way of securing her a suitable marriage partner before she turned thirty-five.

Mama He would say, there's not much worse in life than being some man's mistress; you just need to hurry up and find someone who looks the part, then we can let that success be atonement for your past misdemeanors. Her grandmother was not so sanguine. She had said, how's that count as making up for anything? Managing to marry before you turn thirty-five, most you could say is better late than never.

Jo-fen was having more contact with men today than at any other point in the past six months. She was the only woman among all of them in the helicopter.

The man beside her pressed two pieces of chewing gum into her hand. Had he washed his hands?

She seemed to hear her mother's voice, "Always have to be the picky one, don't you?"

The Alishan Forest Railway run by the Forestry Bureau set out from the station in Chiayi, winding its way up past Fenqihu until it arrived at Alishan Station. Jo-fen had been before, on a trip after graduating high school. They'd taken a branch line after Alishan, north on the Shenmu line to Shenmu Station. There were two planking trails there through the stands of giant trees, you could stroll along and get the benefit of the phytoncides. Even her mother knew the difference between phytoncides and pesticides. The branch line running east was the Zhaoping Line. North of Zhaoping Station you could connect with the now abandoned Mianyue Line. That turned below Tashan to head south until you came to Zhushan Station. That was where you could put your down jacket on while it was still dark and squeeze your way into the crowd that had come to watch the sunrise. Jo-fen recalled their tour guide kept trying to get her to buy cedar tree oil, supposedly good for mood relaxation, de-stressing, and countering fatigue. She had given in to the patter and bought two bottles. When she got home, she got an earful from her mother, "What have you come back with that for? Where's my High Mountain tea?" Her mother was especially clear about the difference between cedar essential oil and mountain tea.

"Does this mean we're off to watch the sunrise?" Jo-fen asked her question via the helmet mike.

"No such luck." Officer Yen, who the others all called Entotsu, yawned as he replied.

"Where will we be staying tonight, the Alishan Hotel?"

Entotsu made a show of guffawing loudly, laughing so much that the whiff of betelnut nearly conquered the smell of gasoline pervading the cabin. Jo-fen immediately thought of the cedar tree oil again. The men on this helicopter could certainly do with some.

"It's getting on for ten thousand for one night in the Alishan Hotel, you know. You'd be all right staying at our station, you can see the maple leaves through the bars of the detention block windows, they'll be turning red soon, though you'd have to wait another week or two if you want to get the full autumn show. But you're welcome to stay a bit longer, guest of the department, free of charge."

"Why do they call you Entotsu?"

“It’s Japanese, means stovepipe or chimney.”

“Why Japanese? Are you Japanese?”

Entotsu laughed at that, and those of the others with headphones on laughed too.

“He gets through two packs of smokes a day, proper chimney and no mistake.” The pilot answered on Entotsu’s behalf.

“Why do they call it Hsinkaokou-eki?”

“Eki has a touch of class to it, Doctor He; Hsinkaokou-eki. It used to be the way onto the mountain for people climbing Hsinkaoshan.”

“What’s Hsinkaoshan?”

“Another name for Jade Mountain.”

“We’re going to Jade Mountain?”

“No, we’re off to Mount Fuji.”

That brought more laughter. It was not often you heard laughter in the cabin of a police helicopter flying to an emergency. He Jo-fen adjusted her headphones and decided to stick to looking at the scenery outside the window. Where had God gone wrong when he set out to make men?

There was a line her mother said pretty much every day, “Men; beyond saving.” The next line was an exhortation to her daughter, “Hurry up and find yourself a man; if you save just the one, that’s one more than otherwise.”

They disembarked from the helicopter and went to get aboard the little Forestry Bureau train waiting at the station. Glancing along the carriages from the platform, it seemed there was no dining car. It was almost noon.

They passed the sunrise viewing platform at Zhushan, but at twelve noon there was no sunrise to see. They went by the Alishan Gou Hotel; it was not the Alishan Hotel that Entotsu had been unwilling to spend police funds putting Jo-fen up in, but it was a place for travelers to stay; a little, old place nestled in a mountain col, likely far cheaper than its near-namesake. A group of men in slippers were clustered, shoulders hunched, round the ashtray outside the main doors, smoking. They put Jo-fen in mind of penguins on an ice sheet huddling together against the bitter wind and snow. They certainly hadn’t come for the phytoncides.

The little train came to a halt at Zhaoping Station. She had not seen a 7-11 or FamilyMart anywhere en route, which rather dashed Jo-fen’s hopes of having a tea egg. There was no car to meet them out front of the station. Jo-fen was both pleased she had worn sneakers but also annoyed not to have put on waterproof approach shoes. Still rather baffled by this whole business, she got off the train behind her three male companions and set out along the narrow, muddy train tracks.

The local Alishan police officers seemed much kindlier than Entotsu and his colleagues from Taipei. One officer, barely twenty by the looks of him, slowed down to wait for her, asking in a tone of worry and concern, “Ms. He, are you used to walking along train tracks?”

Bloody hell. Jo-fen cursed inwardly. Does anyone in Taipei walk to work along the tracks every day? How was she going to be used to it?

"It's about sixteen hundred meters up ahead. This is the Shuishan Line, so you'll see the Sacred Tree of Shuishan in a bit."

"I'm not here to look at sacred trees."

The young officer had no time to reply before Entotsu up front sent over a whiff of tobacco smoke as he said, "Ming, lad, Doctor He is a child psychologist, not a botanist."

That put the young man off speaking all together, but he kept solicitous attendance close to Jo-fen, concerned she might stumble and fall. Jo-fen unceremoniously took her backpack and hung it on his shoulder. The men of the twenty-first century were getting further than ever from gentlemanliness, be a good light year off soon enough.

A few years back, she'd walked down a stretch of abandoned railroad in Badouzi, now called a sightseeing trail. There was a sleeper at every step, and if you put a foot wrong, like as not you'd twist your ankle, which rather put you out of any mood for sightseeing.

"Sixteen hundred meters is not so far," the young officer carrying her pack was talking to himself, "That's about two thousand steps; one go around the park on patrol is at least twelve thousand."

You could hear the overtones of a contempt for women, like the last thing that married post-doc scholar had said to her: I can't give up on my family; I can't give up on the children. Not a word about the wife he'd been cheating on from the bastard.

The section they'd just come down was at least dry, but the trees grew denser and taller as you got deeper into the woods, so the little path in their shadow never saw sunlight from one end of the year to the next. It was damp and your shoes stuck. Before they reached the Sacred Tree, they could see a railroad push-cart up ahead blocking the track. There was a crowd around it, some in police uniforms, some in the uniform of the Forestry Bureau, wearing hardhats. When they came closer, they could see that all these men were staring at a small, thin boy who was lying on a bench outside a wooden mountain hut. The boy was curled up asleep. One of the men gathered round the boy had his foot up on the bench. Another held a hammer, and somewhat ridiculously, another was brandishing a chainsaw. He Jo-fen at last realized why she'd been brought by helicopter to Alishan and not to see the sunrise.

The boy never spoke; it was a police officer who told Jo-fen that at five twenty-five a.m., just as the first light of dawn was beginning to show, three college student trekkers had almost reached the very end of the track when they heard a hooting sound, and then a bird came swooping low over their heads. The students assumed it was a bird attack. A few seconds later they were surprised to see a young boy come walking out of the dense fog at the far end of the rail tracks. The boy was all alone, no adult accompanying him.

According to the students' account, the boy had been staggering, dew-soaked leaves and grass stuck all over his head and clothing, feet entirely caked in mud, and a blank look in his eyes. The boy had collapsed into their arms without saying a word.

He was heavy, heavier than anyone might expect a child one hundred and fifty centimeters tall to be, even though plainly he wore no backpack or satchel. Still, it took two of the college students to carry the boy to the mountain hut.

The students had not helped the boy down off the mountain; he was not willing to go. He sat on the bench drawing long breaths, still seemingly far away, as if entirely overcome by his experience. Two of the students stayed with the boy while the other ran off to the nearby police post at Zhaoping Station to raise the alarm. Thus it was the police who were first to the scene, followed afterwards by Forestry Bureau staff, then at half past six the push-cart had arrived bringing food, drink and a gas camping stove. They boiled water and made instant noodles. The boy ate two bowls of noodles and drank a large cup of hot water, and then, ignoring all the questions the police were asking, stretched out on the bench and fell asleep.

The plan had been to lift the boy onto the push cart and take him back to Zhaoping Station, but strange to relate, they simply could not pick the boy up, not with two big men, one taking the head and the other the feet, and not with four of them trying to lift him, bench and all. He would not budge an inch; it was as if boy and bench were nailed fast to the ground and not even an earthquake would shift them.

An older officer said he had encountered something like this before, and a wise man at a temple had told him that when someone was possessed by a spirit it made them very heavy, heavier than two people combined.

They could find no ID in the boy's pockets; what they did find was three hundred and sixty-two dollars in notes and coins, a small toy figurine that one of the students identified as the character Tanjiro from the manga *Demon Slayer*, and two convenience store receipts.

At the police post, a message was sent up to the National Police Agency to check on missing persons cases but there were no leads there. A whole series of calls to all the elementary schools in Alishan Township revealed that none of them had a student missing. One of the college students said he didn't think the boy would be local, because not only was he wearing Nike trainers, but the t-shirt he had on under his shirt was from Gap; kids up here in the mountains didn't go in for these sorts of Western brands with the big English writing on them.

The receipts proved the student's deduction to be correct; the address printed on them was for a convenience store in the Shilin District of Taipei.

The duty doctor from the local clinic and a nurse gave the sleeping boy a check-up. His blood pressure and breathing were normal; heartbeat was slow, fewer than sixty beats a minute, however the doctor felt that did not present any health issues. The initial prognosis was that the boy was simply overtired and sleeping very deeply. That was something everyone present could see for themselves, but they made of a show of exclaiming as if greatly surprised by the verdict, for appearance's sake. The boy's shoes and socks were covered in mud and grass; he must have walked a long way and not on asphalt roads, mountain dirt tracks with puddling water.

They could not just leave the boy sleeping like this. In addition to the Forestry Bureau men ready to set about the bench with their chainsaw, command had dispatched a detective specializing in child missing persons cases down from Taipei along with a child psychologist. The

Chiayi County police also had a team of officers out searching in the mountains, just in case there were other children lost up there.

Just as He Jo-fen caught her first sight of the boy on the bench, the satellite phone Entotsu was carrying rang. He took the call, and then turned and reported in a serious tone to all the men present that a boy's school bag had been found in Taipei. A passenger on the Tamsui Line had picked it up and handed it in to the MRT offices at Zhongshan Station. From the student ID and EasyCard attached to the straps, the bag belonged to a boy named Lin Min-chiu. Entotsu held up his phone and compared the picture he had been sent with the sleeping boy and found they looked exactly the same. He replied with conviction, "Sir, yes, this is Lin Min-chiu."

Lin Min-chiu; a very interesting name. The character *min* denoted the sky in autumn, and *chiu* meant "to seek". Alishan had not yet become a sea of red maple leaves at this point in time, but they were beginning to turn. A boy whose name implied he was in search of autumn had come to a mountain area that was one of the places where the leaves turned red earlier than anywhere else in Taiwan. Was this in some way significant?

The boy's home was on Wenlin Road in Shilin District, and he was a sixth grader at Shilin Elementary School. It would take him around ten minutes to walk home from school, so why had he taken the metro?

Something the police found very puzzling was that Lin Min-chiu had failed to come home after school three days previously and his father had reported him missing that evening. The officer who had entered the report swore on all the accumulated credit of his ancestors to the eighteenth generation that he had indeed made a record and uploaded it to the national reporting network, but no such report could be found anywhere on the agency computer system.

Based on Lin Min-chiu's habit of heading straight home after school, the police did not rule out a kidnapping, otherwise why would the boy turn up two hundred kilometers away up in the mountains in Alishan? But turning that around, why would kidnappers bring the boy to Alishan? Were they concerned for the healthy development of the lungs of a Taipei boy breathing that bad air every day and desperate for him to benefit from some phytoncides?

Lin Min-chiu's father worked at an electronics company; not TSMC or Quanta Computer, a little unlisted manufacturer that made heatsinks and other cooling parts for notebooks. His grandfather didn't live in a mansion and his grandmother owned no shares in the Formosa Plastics Group. Min-chiu's mother managed the Tianmu branch of PX Mart. The parents were a happy couple; if mother called out, "Assistance to the checkout, please!", father would drag a body wearied from overtime off the sofa and into the kitchen to help with the washing up. Considering all the possibilities that might make Lin Min-Chiu a target worth kidnapping, the only one that stood out was that he was an only child. The Lins loved their boy very much, but there was no way they could ever scrape together more than a million Taiwan dollars in cash.

The Lins had not received any phone call asking for a ransom; the house didn't even have a landline installed.

Entotsu was now talking with the boy's parents, still in Taipei. Yes, Lin Min-chiu was fine, no external injuries, the doctor said there seemed nothing major amiss; the boy was sleeping, they

would bring him down off the mountain as soon as he woke up. Ho Jo-fen took the phone from Entotsu, "I'm Doctor He, a child psychotherapist; would you mind telling me what name you usually use with Lin Min-chiu? Min-chiu? Son? Oh, the *chiu* in the word for basketball; B-Ball? Because he likes playing basketball? Don't a lot of parents call their son 'babes'?"

Entotsu rolled his eyes. He had a sixteen-year-old daughter; two years ago, she had strictly forbidden her father to use any such names. Call me babes again and see what happens. Teenage daughters, never easy.

Lin Min-chiu was curled up on the bench with his knees pulled up to his chest. His eyes were moving constantly behind closed lids. The soles of his shoes were covered in mud, and there was mud splattered on his socks too, one pulled up and one slipped down low. Jo-fen squatted down beside the boy and stroked his sweat-soaked hair.

The boy's parents had already been taken to Songshan Airport by police car where they would board one of the aviation division's helicopters, arriving in an estimated two hours. Entotsu instructed officers from the Alishan station to go and meet them, as he was busy with more important matters. He hollered into his phone, "You can't find a wise man who treats children in shock near Alishan? Go and find one in Chiayi city district. What if he won't come? Arrest him on suspicion of obstruction of official business, stick him in a squad car and get him up here right away."

Jo-fen had one hand resting on Lin Min-chiu's brow and the other holding his tightly-clenched little fist. She said softly, "B-Ball, we're back home."

At the sound of the name B-Ball, a curious thing happened. Like a deflating ball, Lin Min-chiu's arms and legs at once untensed and went limp, his fists opened and his body gave off a cloud of thin smoke.

The boy's mouth opened and he let out a long breath.

"B-Ball, my name is Doctor He. I'm going to take you down the mountain."

Lin Min-chiu opened his eyes and, helped by Jo-fen, sat up straight.

"Am I going home?"

"Your parents will be here very soon."

"Where is here?"

"Do you not remember how you got here?"

Expressions of delight showed on the faces of the men in uniform, and the men without. Entotsu came over; his tone was one of respect, "Thank you, Doctor He. Would you and Lin Min-chiu get on the push cart? These Forestry Bureau men will take you back to Zhaoping to start with."

He turned to Lin Min-chiu, "Hello, B-Ball, I'm Uncle Yen, a police detective. The police chief at the station has made you pig's trotter noodles. His noodles are the best in all Chiayi; if you don't like them, you can call him names and we won't arrest you for insulting a public servant!"

Entotsu laughed at his own joke.

Two men pushed the cart forward a few meters, and then one of them leaped up behind and grabbed the long brake lever. He Jo-fen and Lin Min-chiu held on tight to the front crossbar.

Their faces were bathed in near-noon sunlight shining through the forest canopy. Some species of bird came swooping low over the cart then disappeared into the thicket up ahead.

“A brown wood-owl!” B-Ball cried out.

“What?”

“That was a brown wood-owl, we have videos of them at school; it led me out of the forest.”

Jo-fen could see no sign of the owl. She knew a little bit about owls from watching the National Geographic channel; they were active at night and not usually about by day.

“A brown wood-owl with the black rings around its eyes, like it’s wearing glasses?”

“That’s the one; vampire eyes.”

It really had been a brown wood-owl, then. And it had led him out of the forest? What exactly had happened to this child over the past three days?