

THE MEMORY KEEPERS IN ASHES

拾香紀・焚香紀

This finely crafted epic novel centering on a large well-to-do family in Hong Kong works both as a gripping tale of generational fortunes and as a microcosm of Hong Kong's fate from the mid-twentieth century through the 2010s.

The Memory Keepers in Ashes is the second published work by Hong Kong-born author Chan Wai since her move to Taiwan. Volume I was first published in 1998, with Volume II first released as an online serial publication under the name *Tale of an Outsider* from 2015 to 2017. Taken together, these two volumes work as one novel spanning seven decades of time.

Volume I opens on the story of Lin Ten Fragrances' parents journeying out of China to build a new life and business in Hong Kong. Ten Fragrances, a young woman in her twenties and the first-person narrator, reveals from the start her status as the youngest of ten children and that she knows she has not long to live. However, despite her sharing the least amount of time with the Lin family, she confides she is privy to more inside gossip than most. Ten Fragrances wants nothing more than to spend her final time on earth detailing memories of her other siblings and sharing how major events such as the leftist riots of 1967, the 1973 death of Bruce Lee, the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, and the deadly Garley Building fire of 1996 touched her family. More than just a part of Hong Kong, the Lin family is woven deeply into this city's modern DNA.

The narrative in Volume II adopts a magical realism approach, switching to and fro amongst various protagonist perspectives. Despite her death, Ten Fragrances very much lives on the memories of her loved ones, while the story picks up nearly a decade and a half later, after the SARS epidemic in 2003 and through the Umbrella Revolution of 2014. The emotions and conditions facing the characters



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in this volume empathically capture the turmoil felt by most in Hong Kong through the first decades of the twenty-first century.

Chan's keen sense of observation and refined writing skill capture brilliantly the vagaries of life experienced by Ten Fragrances and her loved ones, laying down for posterity an emotive picture of a Hong Kong now lost to the mists of time and the love and relationships that held an entire era together.

Chan Wai 陳慧

Chan Wai was already an accomplished scriptwriter and novelist when she relocated to Taiwan in 2018. In addition to writing, she currently teaches scriptwriting at the Taipei National University of the Arts. Her recent works include *A Sense of Violence*, *The Memory Keepers in Ashes*, and the 2023 Taiwan Literature Award for Books winner *Brother*.

THE MEMORY KEEPERS IN ASHES

By Chan Wai

Translated by Fion Tse

Volume One: 1974~1996

I,
Lin Ten Fragrances,
was born on June 5, 1974,
and died on November 25, 1996.

Events

My father Lin Shing and my mother Song Wan had ten children. In order, they were Big Harvest, Chance Encounters, Three Manifold, Four Seas, Five Elegances, Six Unities, Seven Up, Eight Treasures, Nine Excellences (later renamed “Nine Health”), and me, Ten Fragrances.

Out of ten siblings, I was the tenth.

Beginning with Four Seas, our names became intertwined with Lin Shing’s various business ventures: Four Seas International Market, Five Elegances Fashion, Six Unities Department Store, Seven Up Store, Eight Treasures Garment Manufacturing Company, Nine Excellences Logistics – and Ten Fragrances was a restaurant.

It all began with olives.

In the winter of 1947, Lin Shing and Song Wan exchanged vows in Guangzhou. Lin Shing was twenty-two and Song Wan twenty-four. She was his older cousin and the most educated in the family; he was the only person in the family who had studied in Hong Kong. They moved back to Hong Kong together in January 1948 for Lin Shing to finish his secondary schooling at Queen’s College, where he had studied all the way up to Form Six before the Japanese occupation. If he finished school, he could attend the University of Hong Kong. Before they left, Lin Shing had agreed to help deliver tens of thousands of olives, but after they arrived, he couldn’t locate the owner of the olives. So he employed four workers, and together they labored day and night to ferment the olives. Lin Shing announced to the workers his product would be named “Atomic Olives”, and in just three days, he and the four workers had sold every last Atomic Olive. The four workers were Gwai, Hou, Shun Fat, and Sheung. All of them, except for Hou, stayed with us from then on. Eventually Gwai and Shun Fat got married, after which they continued to live with us. Lin Shing never did attend Queen’s College. Instead, he went into business. Whatever could be sold – whether edible, useful, or purely aesthetic – he bought. Whatever he bought he resold, and the money began to roll in. The next year, when the People’s Liberation Army took Guangzhou, Song

Wan realized they would never go back there. She bought a houseful of the finest furniture, and also became pregnant with my eldest brother, Big.

Big was born on October 5th, 1950. At the time Song Wan had labor complications, and an anxious, fretting Lin Shing made such a fuss that the midwife at the maternity hospital kicked him out onto the streets. As he wandered past a newspaper stand, he found what turned out to be the first edition of the *New Evening Post* and bought a copy. Squatting by the road, he perused every page, character by character. Finally, having read through even the ads, he returned to the hospital. Big Harvest had been born, and mother and son were safe and well. From then on, Lin Shing made a point of reading the *New Evening Post* every night.

There were security checkpoints at the borders by then. People from the mainland couldn't enter freely, and those who had already entered wouldn't leave without good reason, either. So Lin Shing and Song Wan named their son, born January 1st, 1952, Chance Encounters.

When Lin Shing and Song Wan moved back to Hong Kong in 1948, they first lived in Kennedy Town, close to the temporary campus of Queen's College, in what used to be teachers' quarters. Afterwards, when they learned a new campus would be built at Queen's Playground in Causeway Bay, Lin Shing rented a small unit on Causeway Road. Except, he never returned to his classes at Queen's College, and the unit wasn't quite big enough to house their goods and workers, so the family moved to a large apartment on the Causeway Bay waterfront that had a view of the sea. According to Lin Shing, that bit of ocean later became Victoria Park, but that was after they had already moved. That move was because Chance, then a month old, had developed asthma, and no doctor, Chinese or Western, was able to cure it. Desperately worried, Song Wan visited the temples of Kwun Yum, Lü Dongbin, Manjusri, and Erlang Shen. On a friend's recommendation, she prayed to the deity Wong Tai Sin and received the answer that Chance would only recover if he lived in Kowloon. It so happened that Lin Shing had just spent a hundred Hong Kong dollars to get Shun Fat a driver's license. Shun Fat drove all of them – Lin Shing, Song Wan, Big Harvest, Chance Encounters, Gwai, Hou, Sheung, and two assistants – in a loaf-shaped Volkswagen van, crossing the sea on a ro-ro ship to land at the Jordan Road Ferry Pier. Chance's asthma never returned. The family settled near the intersection of Jordan Road and Nathan Road, where Three Manifold and Five Elegances were both born.

Three Manifold was born on June 3rd, 1953. Queen Elizabeth II's coronation had taken place the day before, and there were celebratory parades on Nathan Road all day on the third. People swarmed the streets and traffic ground to a halt. Lin Shing couldn't get Song Wan to a maternity hospital, so Song Wan had no choice but to give birth at home on her bed, making Three her most painful birth. Nothing as awkward or difficult ever happened again. When Three reached her first month, there was a water shortage that, combined with the scorching weather, meant her skin was never the same. Five had the same problem, because the water shortage of 1954 was even worse. They even shut off the water supply. Initially, Lin Shing felt conflicted: he had previously bought a large number of zinc sheets, and when the water shortage hit, practically every family was using the metal buckets he produced. But he eventually figured that he would

invest his efforts into turning a profit, so he could buy Three and Five the best beauty products money could buy.

Three was born in 1953, and Five was born in 1954. But Four Seas, who numbered between them, was born around 1951 or 1952.

Big and Chance both had jade pendants, prepared and delivered to Lin Shing and Song Wan by their family in Guangzhou. But when it came to Three, Lin Shing and Song Wan felt something was different. Their family, saying something about a “Three Antis and Five Antis” campaign, barely gave Three the time of day. At night, even with the newborn Three between them, Song Wan knew Lin Shing wasn’t sleeping well. He would wake in the morning, dizzy and dazed, thinking he had spent the night on a floating piece of plywood. Song Wan was at a loss. All she could do was boil turmeric for him every day. After a while someone came from Guangzhou and told Lin Shing his parents had died, both of them, in a struggle session. The news rattled Lin Shing. He spent the next few days sleepless and in shock, though his dizziness had vanished. Then he went to negotiate with the landlord to buy the apartment they lived in. Song Wan pawned all her gold jewelry to scrape together two thousand dollars, and they bought the entirety of the fifth floor plus the rooftop.

Every night without fail, Lin Shing would go onto the rooftop to gaze at the moon: rain or storm, summer through winter. On December 24th, Lin Shing noticed something a little different in the view from his roof. Realizing there was a fire in Sham Shui Po, he sent Shun Fat out to ask around and see what was going on. Shun Fat walked as he asked around, and eventually he walked all the way to Shek Kip Mei. He was out all night, just looking at the flames. Sometime in the middle of the night, Lin Shing returned to the rooftop, worried that the fire, if it kept going, would burn down all of Kowloon. When daylight finally arrived, Lin Shing went looking for Shun Fat. At home, no one spoke a word all morning. Afternoon came, and with it came three people: Shun Fat, dirty and ragged and complaining about his empty stomach; and Lin Shing, smiling bright and wide and carrying a boy who looked to be about two years old. The boy was dressed simply from the waist up and naked from the waist down – this was Four.

At the time, Big had just turned three and hadn’t learned to speak yet. Song Wan cradled him every day and taught him word by word: Ba, Ma, Hou, Gwai, Sheung, Harvest...Four sat and listened next to them and, when the day came, he was the first of all the children to call Song Wan “Ma”.

On March 3rd, 1954, Four Seas International Market opened for business on Johnston Road.

It was through this market that Lin Shing and Song Wan met a few Americans preparing to join the war in Asia. They were passing through Hong Kong and were keeping themselves entertained in Wan Chai. They were young, well-educated, and preferred doing business over fighting, and agreed to help Song Wan out by sourcing and supplying trendy women’s goods from the US. Fortunately, they all survived the war in Korea and quickly returned to the US. On September 30th of that same year, Five was born. On Christmas Day, “Five Elegances Fashion” – with goods supplied by the Americans – staged its grand opening. They even managed to invite

the famous actress Tsi Law-lin to cut the ribbon. A group photo of everyone blowing out the candles on a huge shortcake, with Tsi holding Four in her arms, was a permanent fixture on the walls of Five Elegances Fashion afterward. From then on, the day Four Seas was brought into the family was celebrated as his official birthday.

Between the winter of 1954 and the summer of 1963, Song Wan bore no children.

It was also during this period that Song Wan kicked Hou out.

After she kicked Hou out, Song Wan moved into a youth organization hostel on Waterloo Road Hill with nothing but a small leather suitcase. After three days, Lin Shing still hadn't come for her. Gwai and Sheung visited her often, though, bringing a different child with them each time. And each time, the child – be it Big, Chance, Three, Four, or Five – would inevitably kick up a fuss and refuse to leave. Song Wan was left with little choice. By chance, a new apartment building had just been constructed on Chatham Road in Tsim Sha Tsui. It was a little different from previous apartment buildings; the ceilings were only nine feet high, but Song Wan figured that way, it'd be easier to change the lightbulbs even without the help of a man.

So she bought an apartment and moved in with all five children. Sheung was their primary caretaker, so she moved in too. As for Gwai, well, she had always been Song Wan's assistant because she was literate, and that meant she had learned a bit of English and later even typing and accounting. So of course she went with Song Wan, too.

Song Wan had bought the apartment using part of the profits from the Four Seas International Market and Five Elegances Fashion. The rest went into stocks and shares. As it turns out, the stock market was incredibly active at the time, and the dollar volumes were often record-breaking, reaching over four million dollars in a day. During this time, Song Wan was making even more than Lin Shing.

One day, Lin Shing collapsed, drunk, outside Song Wan's apartment door. Finally, Lin Shing, along with Shun Fat, moved into the apartment.

Only later did it come out that this was Shun Fat's idea. The reason he had been so anxious was because he was secretly in love with Gwai. But no one knew a thing; that was, until Song Wan decided to play matchmaker and marry Gwai off as a second wife to some rich man. Shun Fat screamed and cried and accused Song Wan of human trafficking, and only then did Gwai realize Shun Fat liked her. Lin Shing and Song Wan immediately set about arranging their marriage, though Song Wan still refused to speak to Lin Shing, choosing instead to pass notes or verbal messages through Gwai and Sheung. And like that Shun Fat and Gwai were married, with the tight-lipped Lin Shing and Song Wan as their witnesses.

Since Song Wan refused to speak to Lin Shing, he could only resort to nitpicking about the apartment, complaining that the ceilings were too low. The next day, Song Wan found an apartment on Granville Road with twelve-foot ceilings. Lin Shing said the unit was too small, especially with Gwai already pregnant. Wordlessly, Song Wan bought two neighboring units and told no one until the move-in date was settled. From then on, Song Wan and Lin Shing lived in two separate apartments, with Song Wan, Big, Chance, Three, Five, and Sheung in unit A and Lin Shing, Shun Fat, Gwai, and Four in unit B. Unit B also housed a newly employed helper. At first Lin Shing

had hired a hardworking young woman, but he ended up sticking with Yuet, who was a recently widowed and reticent older woman. Yuet was an early riser, so Unit B became responsible for breakfast. But everyone squeezed into Unit A for dinner, as Sheung's cooking was better.

December 31st, 1957: Governor Grantham had completed his term and was leaving Hong Kong. Lin Shing went out to see what all the fuss was about, but when he returned to unit B, he heard Song Wan screaming and crying in unit A, drunk out of her mind. Only then did he remember – it was their tenth wedding anniversary that day.

Song Wan had always loved flowers. So, with Shun Fat in tow, Lin Shing wandered around the watercress and flower fields of Tsuen Wan. At long last, he bought a flower field somewhere called Chuen Lung and hired someone who lived nearby to tend to it. From that day on, the living room in unit A was never without the fresh fragrance of ginger lilies.

But, at the end of the month, Song Wan transferred a small amount to Lin Shing from her own savings as payment for the flowers.

After that, Lin Shing moved into the attic of the Four Seas International Market and stayed there for four years.

January 30th, 1958: It was the eve of Chinese New Year, and Song Wan was busy making the rounds when Shun Fat and Gwai's daughter was born. Unfortunately, the girl only survived five years.

One by one, Big, Chance, Three, Four, and Five started school, and Song Wan did everything in her power to enroll them in historic church schools. But by the time Three was in Primary Three, Chance still hadn't entered Primary Two. Song Wan brought him along to ask for advice from the deity Wong Tai Sin, who said, Chance has the best life ahead of him, no need to worry about anything else. Song Wan never beat Chance with the duster over matters like homework again.

The first day of school on September 1st, 1962, was cancelled due to a typhoon. The five children were bouncing excitedly on Song Wan's spring mattress when, all of a sudden, the window shattered into shards of glass that would leave a permanent scar on Four's face. The typhoon was so severe that they couldn't even stand up in the apartment.

The radio said people had died. A lot of people.

Song Wan phoned the Four Seas International Market, but the signal wouldn't go through. Lin Shing had said he was going to Yau Ma Tei in one of those "walla-walla" boats to collect a delivery.

Not even the combined forces of Sheung and Gwai could stop Song Wan – she was going to find Lin Shing. But he returned the moment Song Wan left, cuts all over his body. Apparently signboards had been flying through the streets, and he had even seen a tree flung through the air – Lin Shing had figured he was done for, but somehow he still managed to get home. But where was Song Wan? Shun Fat wanted to drive around and look for her, but, when they went outside, the Volkswagen was nowhere to be seen. It had been toppled by the wind and rolled down the hill, joining a pile of upturned vehicles at the end of Observatory Road. The typhoon raged for a full day and night; a day and night during which no news came of Song Wan. All they knew was

that over a hundred and seventy people had died in the storm, and any of them could have been called Song Wan. If Song Wan's dead, Lin Shing said, I can't go on living either. The money we have should be enough for you to live off of – Shun Fat, Gwai, you've got to look after the kids... At that moment, an employee from the Tong Yik Center came by and said Song Wan was at the Center.

The Tong Yik Center was on the Yau Ma Tei waterfront. Song Wan had walked there in the storm, but the center's signboard had been knocked down by the wind, trapping her underneath. Lin Shing carried her home. Song Wan awoke the next day, and Lin Shing held her tightly the whole time.

This typhoon had a name: Wanda. After Wanda left, Lin Shing moved back into unit A.

Lin Shing became friends with the owner of the Tong Yik Center, Mr. Ma whose daughters, Ma Yuk-yee and Ma Yuk-fung, would later marry Big and Chance.

In the summer of 1963, while Song Wan was pregnant with Six Unities, the earth grew dry and parched once more. This time, it was even more severe than when Three and Five were born, with water being supplied just four hours at a time, and only every other day. Lin Shing had long since stopped manufacturing metal buckets, but he put in an order for plastic ones – tall, wide and clean. A single one of these buckets could hold all the water a family needed, and they ended up bringing in even more money than the metal buckets. On May 26th, three hundred Buddhist monks gathered in Happy Valley to conduct a rain-summoning ritual. Thousands of people joined, lips dry and cracked, as did Lin Shing, Song Wan, Shun Fat, and Gwai. It was Yuet who found Shun Fat and Gwai's daughter floating in one of those tall, wide and clean plastic buckets, filled to the brim with water for unit B.

When Six was born, water was being provided once only every four days.

Song Wan gave Six to Gwai, just as she had promised on May 26th. When Six Unities reached his first month they brought him to unit B, and he slept by Gwai's side. Six called Gwai "Ma" and Song Wan "Auntie".

The Six Unities Department Store opened for business on October 17th, 1963, which was also the day the Chinese University of Hong Kong was inaugurated. This was intentional: the kind of store Lin Shing most wanted to own was a bookstore, but he didn't want to turn a loss.

Seven Up was premature. Song Wan had always liked the actress Lin Dai, and when she heard Lin Dai was dead, the shock to her fetal qi caused her to go into labor. Lin Dai died by suicide in the evening of July 17th, 1964; Seven was born at noon on July 18th, two and a half months earlier than estimated.

At the time, there was a brand of soda called Seven Up that was selling well. So Lin Shing and Song Wan used the name for their daughter, born that year, as well as for their store, which also opened that year.

That same September, Big Harvest passed the entrance exams for Queen's College.

Between the winter of 1964 and the summer of 1970, Song Wan bore no children. But Lin Shing wasn't sleeping with anyone else – they had other things to worry about.

In 1965, Lin Shing and Song Wan met with something they had never encountered before, something called a "bank run". When it started, they paid it no heed; it was just long lines at the

bank, after all. Ten days later, they waited three days and three nights outside the bank. They returned dirty, haggard, and with only a hundred and sixty-six dollars, exact, in hand. The effects were far-reaching: Four Seas International Market, Five Elegances Fashion, Six Unities Department Store, and Seven Up Store all closed within a night. Song Wan gritted her teeth in rage whenever the Canton Trust and Commercial Bank was mentioned.

Seven years later, these businesses reopened as three supermarkets and a store specializing in perfumes and makeup. Lin Shing and Song Wan kept all the original names.

The ripples of this “bank run” lasted almost a year. Lin Shing did some inventory: all they had left was the two thousand-square foot apartments, the stocks and shares under Song Wan’s name, and their thirteen-strong family. None of those could be sold, but he did have four dollars in his pocket. So he sent Chance out to place two bets at the horse track.