



The Tower of Nothing Strange

A Full English translation is available.

晴空小侍郎

Author: Jay Yay **Illustrator:** Leo Tang **Publisher:** CommonWealth Education

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BFT 2.0 Translator: David Knight and Michelle Kuo

Long ago, in an enchanted dynasty lost to history, ghosts were so common that the court created a Ministry of Ghost Affairs to govern them.

On a stormy night, a young boy arrives at the Ministry searching for his missing sister—only to be unexpectedly appointed as a junior attendant. As he begins his new life among spirits, ghosts, demons, minor gods, and wandering souls, he discovers that ghosts aren't evil or scary. They simply long to be understood and cared for.

But a dangerous conspiracy is quietly unfolding, and the fate of both the living and the dead hangs in the balance. Carrying only a schoolbag and sheer resolve, this resourceful boy presses on—exhausted, yet willing to risk everything to find his sister.

A beloved middle-grade novel by one of Taiwan's most celebrated children's authors, this novel is a magical, heartfelt story of courage, compassion, and perseverance.



Author **Jay Yay**

Jay Yay believes music is essential and comedy is his calling. "Take it easy" is his motto. He loves seeing readers' eyes light up, and he has a soft spot for coffee, cola, and record stores. Among his honors is the Golden Tripod Award for Book of the Year. Always smiling and guided by a simple philosophy—do your best, and relax—he dreams of a bright, peaceful world and hopes, above all, to bring joy and excitement to others.



Photograph by Chien-Pin Huang

Illustrator **Leo Tang**

Leo Tang is a picture book creator who finds joy in returning to childhood through his work. Since 2003, he has published numerous titles, including *Short-Eared Bunny* and *Puppy Pupu Moves to a New Home*, as well as illustrated novels such as *The Tower of Nothing Strange*. Loved by readers of all ages, his works have been translated into multiple languages and have received honors including the Golden Butterfly Award and selection for the Catalonia Illustration Biennial.

You're Afraid of Ghosts... So Why Write Ghost Stories?—An Interview with the Author

by Shu Ting Chen

(originally published on OKAPI.BOOKS.COM.TW)

When Jay Yay writes about ghosts, his world has no dark corners or terrifying monsters. Instead, it feels whimsical and almost magical, often laced with humor. Perhaps that's because he was once a deeply fearful child. Even now, when he's home alone, he switches on every light, uneasy about what might be hiding under the bed or slipping through the narrow gaps between doors.

As Jay Yay tells it, he often dreams of an old Japanese house lined with sliding doors. Behind each one, ghosts and spirits wait in the shadows. The dream is frightening and thrilling at once—a quiet dare to open the next door and see what's there. So when a publisher invited him to write a long serialized story, he knew exactly what to do: turn that recurring dream into a world on the page, with a wandering exorcist leading the way.

“Most ghost stories are written

just to scare people, and that doesn't benefit the reader,” Jay Yay says. “Why would I write something to frighten children—especially when I'm scared of ghosts myself?” For him, writing this story became both an act of self-questioning and a personal challenge: “Why am I afraid of ghosts? Can I stop being afraid? Could I write a ghost story that makes people unafraid of ghosts?”

At the time, Jay Yay lived halfway up a mountain with his dog. Every night, he walked the dog through a dark forest with no streetlights. The dog loved to sniff around, lingering for minutes at a time. Standing in the darkness, his fear would spiral. He began reading Buddhist texts, which taught him: ghosts are far more pitiful than humans, and if you feel compassion for them, you will stop being afraid.

“Humans have family and friends,”

he says. “They can eat when they're hungry and have a home to return to. They can learn and grow. But ghosts—who may not even know they've died—can't eat, can't reach their loved ones, and remain unseen. They must be lonely and terrified, hiding in the dark because they fear the light. Humans fear ghosts to protect themselves, but if ghosts are the more helpless ones, perhaps we should care for them instead.” Thinking this way, Jay Yay felt his fear dissipate. He let go of his protective instincts and irrational terror, and, over the next five years, he wrote this empathetic and soulful ghost story.

In his book, Jay Yay imagines a fictional Pellucid Dynasty—an enchanted time when, as he writes lyrically, “the gods and spirits still appeared, the living were not blind to ghosts, spells and magical arts were not yet forbidden, and scientific thought had not yet developed.” During those days, he continues, “people still held laughter in their breast, and when pained were free to the joy of unburdening their grief. When they sang and danced, they did so without holding back.”

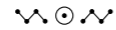
Unlike heroes armed with superpowers or magic, the protagonist is an ordinary boy who must draw on his own character to see his mission through. As Jay Yay explains, “Superpowers or magic can solve problems without logic—you can shoot lightning bolts and fireballs

at will—but I wanted these two books to be different from typical fantasy novels.” The boy's only “superpower” is his determination to save his sister. He's afraid, exhausted, and sometimes tempted to quit—but he keeps going, and he's willing to risk everything for the sake of others.

For these reasons, many readers compare Jay Yay's books to the animated film *Spirited Away*. The similarities lie not only in their enchanting worlds of spirits and mysterious buildings, but also in the quiet currents of empathy and love. Children protect their families as they forge unexpected bonds with the supernatural.

This essay has been edited for the purposes of this booklet.

*Shu Ting Chen is the Executive Supervisor of the Birth Empowerment Alliance of Taiwan. A former newspaper reporter, she is now a freelance writer with one dog, two children, and three cats. She is deeply committed to advocating for the rights of children and animals, as well as addressing concerns about future living environments. She is the author of *Towards a Gentle Path of Production* and the picture book *One Million Kisses*. She has also co-authored works such as *Real Food on the Table: Eating for Environmental Sustainability* and more.*



Chapter 2

Ghosts are Coming! Boom Boom Boom!

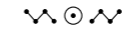
Long, long ago, there was a dynasty called the “Pellucid Dynasty.” In this dynasty, the ghosts were numerous, so numerous, in fact, that the court was forced to establish a special bureau because of them. This office was called the “Ministry of Ghosts.” Of course, in ancient times, there was a “Ministry of War” to manage military affairs, and a “Ministry of Works” whose responsibility was engineering and construction. A “Ministry of Ghosts,” needless to say, was responsible for managing ghosts.

Rather unlike the other ministries that were housed in grand imposing structures, the Ministry of Ghosts was simply a single tower. Nor was it, like the other ministries, within the thriving gates of the capital. Rather, the tower holding the Ministry of Ghosts was in the desolate hinterlands of the deep mountains. That, after all, is where ghosts went.

“Ghosts are coming! Boom, boom, boom!”

In the most remote corner of the highest mountains of the picturesque Great Pellucid Kingdom, leaning right against a steep and precipitous cliff, stood the tall, ancient, wooden tower. No one quite knew how tall the tower was, or even how many floors it had, for the top was forever occluded in a dense fog.

And this night, especially, with its incessant rains, cast a thick shroud of black atop its heights. Amid the pounding of the rain, the large



ghost drum hanging from the eaves split the night with its bellow, “Ghosts are coming!” Boom, boom, boom!

The drum had nearly gone hoarse when the old man sleeping in the tower was finally startled awake.

“It's enough to wake the dead!” The old man rubbed at his bleary eyes and started down the stairs. “Where is my young assistant minister?”

“He's off picking mountain herbs,” said the large drum. Boom, boom, boom!

“Isn't he back yet?” The old man pushed open the door and lit a lantern. “I barely grabbed a few winks, and here it is dark already? And such a heavy rain...huh?”

The old man raised his lantern. In the distance, a great horde of demons and ghosts, fangs bared and claws outstretched, ran through the heavy rain toward them.

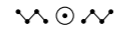
“Ghosts are coming!” said the drum tautly. Boom, boom, boom!

“Yes, I had observed.”

A young boy was at the head of the mob. How strange! So many monsters chasing one lone boy? No, wait a minute, from their terrified expressions it appeared that something even more horrible must be pursuing them?

The old man squinted. Ah! I'm too old and useless, he thought. My eyesight is not good enough. Well, there's no help for it. From his long sleeve, he drew forth a talisman. Upon it was inscribed the formula:

To highest skies fly, spread far and wide.



Transform a thousand-fold, multiply!

He turned it over and carefully read the instructions:

May be applied to any inanimate object.

Slap! The old man pasted it on top of his lantern. The lantern immediately floated upward, glowing red as it gained altitude. It flew higher and higher...until, bang! Like a fireworks display, it split into a thousand lanterns, suffusing the night sky with a brilliant crimson.

“Aha, that's much better.”

There was a monstrous black toad hopping behind the horde of scrambling demons and ghosts.

The old man tossed his beard to the side, hiked up his sleeves, turned toward the onrushing crowd and shouted, “Fear not!”

Each ghostly demon came straight on, howling and whimpering, and rushed to hide behind the old man.

“Help, save us!” they yelled, “It even eats monsters!”

Kaploop! The massive toad hopped to a standstill right in front of the old man. It looked like a small mountain had just been planted there.

The old man smiled and bowed slightly in greeting.

Floooooopp! A long red tongue, like a giant ceremonial ribbon, swept out toward the old man. The old man dodged to the left, then ducked to the right, each time, the tongue flicked by, flashing red. His movements were somewhat stiff, but the great tongue couldn't enfold him.



When the toad saw that it couldn't catch the man this way, it finally transformed back into a great mansion, glittering and shining with gold. It opened its cavernous mouth and the gates appeared. It unfurled its great red tongue and the carpet was again laid out, bidding guests welcome. In the windows of the mansion, there appeared the three little lizard demons.

The first one yelled, “Don't come in, it's a trap!”

The second one hollered, “We're being digested! Save us!”

The third one shouted to the first two, “Dumb bunnies! If they don't come in, how are they going to save us?”

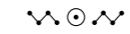
The old man scratched his head as he observed these three silly demons. Again he pulled a talisman from his long sleeve. This one was inscribed:

*This gate for you will open,
You may meet what is fierce but have no misfortune;
Enter through me a separate territory,
Yet then return, to home shall you be.*

The instructions on the back read:

May be applied to any door.

The old man moistened the talisman with a little saliva, and then, snap! He pasted it on the gate of the giant toad turned into a grand mansion, pushed the gate fully open, waved his hand to the throng of



demons and said, “Fear not, come right in!”

The demons all stood stock still.

The young boy walked to the front, and together with the old man, strode through the gates. The ghosts and demons slowly and nervously followed them.

Bang! The doors slammed shut.

Inside, they found that they were in very comfortable and well-appointed chamber. It was clean and dry, and appeared to be, in fact, inside the wooden tower in which the old man lived.

“Everyone, please, make yourselves at home, sit wherever you please. Shall I make us some tea?” The old man chuckled and raised up a teapot invitingly.

The ghosts and demons looked out the windows, and spying a great toad sitting outside, unblinking, in the pouring rain, began to believe that they were not inside a toad's belly after all.

“It's most unbelievable,” they said to each other. “It is too queer. We did clearly walk into a toad's belly. And yet, here we are.”

“Oh there's nothing strange about it,” said the old man as he ascended a small set of stairs. “Welcome to the Tower of Nothing Strange, home of the Ministry of Ghosts, of the Great Pellucid Kingdom!”

“This is the Tower of Nothing Strange?” The young boy's eyes opened wide. “At last, I've made it.”

There was a moment of hushed silence, and then the whole room, and especially the three little lizard demons, all broke into cheers.