

WHEN THE SUN PLUMMETED INTO MT. HAINSARAN 當太陽墜毀在哈因沙山

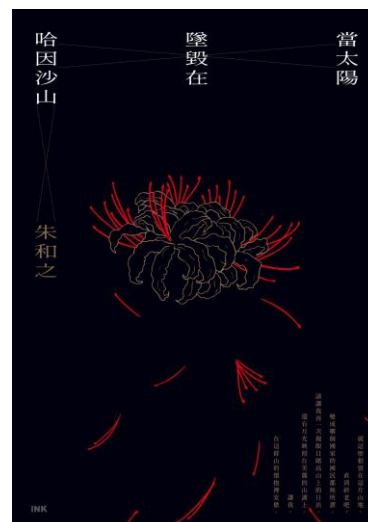
* 2025 Taipei Book Fair Award

Award-winning historical fiction author Chu He-Chih's latest effort interweaves the perspectives of different social and ethnic groups about the crash of a plane in the mountains above their town. The subsequent search and rescue effort spotlights the internecine fractures gripping Taiwan at the close of the Second World War.

After a US bomber carrying liberated POWs crashes in southeast Taiwan's Sancha (Hainsaran) Mountains eight days after the formal end of wartime hostilities in 1945, a search-and-rescue party organized by the Japanese police chief in a nearby village discovers all twenty-five aboard had perished. Informed the Americans want the bodies recovered and returned home, he assembles a motley team of seventy villagers to trek up again to the crash site. However, a typhoon arrives before they reach their objective, forcing them to turn back and killing twenty-six in the process. The task was finally completed in a second attempt by a new team several weeks later.

Chu He-Chih, building on the foundation of this historical event, creates a trio of protagonists of different social and ethnic backgrounds to explore what may have motivated these villagers to undertake such a daring and dangerous mission.

Officer Kido Yasohachi, one of the leaders on the search team, has lived in Taiwan over half of his life. Although long taken to deriding his adopted home as a "wild and savage waste", since his country's surrender, he finds himself unable to accept the idea of leaving. Another in the trio, local Chinese businessman Pan Ming-Kun, can't get



Category: Literary Fiction, Historical Fiction

Publisher: Ink

Date: 1/2024

Pages: 368

Length: 159,597 characters

(approx. 103,800 words in English)

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bft.fiction.nonfiction@moc.gov.tw

over that Kido, a long-time business acquaintance, has invited him on such an important mission. Haisul, an indigenous Bunun tribesman Kido had helped as a boy, serves as the team's guide. Having heard stories of the mountains from his grandfather all his life, he is now eager to experience the realm of his ancestors for himself.

This story of the travails endured by a team of Japanese, Chinese, and indigenous Taiwanese transforms a largely forgotten footnote in history into a window on Taiwan society in upheaval at the end of the Second World War. The author encapsulates this epochal time in history through the eyes of each ethnic group and, through literature, breathes life again into souls now long lost to the sands of time, giving voice to their internal struggles and everyday joys and sorrows.

Chu He-Chih 朱和之

Chu He-Chih has won multiple local literary awards for his works of Taiwan-centered historical fiction spanning the seventeenth through twentieth centuries. *Last Stand in Paradise, Taiwan 1661*, *Aura of the South*, and *When the Sun Plummeted into Mt. Hainsaran* rank among Chu's most critically acclaimed works. Chu is a 2022 alumnus of the International Writing Program (IWP), an Iowa-based writing residency.

WHEN THE SUN PLUMMETED INTO MT. HAINSARAN

By Chu He-Chih

Translated by Tony Hao

Prologue

When the aroma began silently wafting into Kanzan Village, at first, no one seemed to take notice. The scent could not have had its origins in the mundane world. Sublime, elegant, and too faint to be detected, it must be the light fragrance of deities from heaven, except that it was conspicuously laced with the smell of fire.

Everyone was now busily engaged in their various trades. The village had swiftly recovered from the slump near the end of the war, and every household had more work than they could manage. Villagers flooded into the Chamber of Commerce across the street from the train station like a bloated colony of ants rushing toward a broken bag of sugar – a controlled good during wartime. They eagerly fought for freshly arrived products, trying to wrestle away boxes even before the lashings were untied.

They were exhausted, yet uncontrollably feverish – two opposite forces clashing inside their bodies. They wanted to have a long sleep yet were unable to stop tossing and turning all night; they craved a big meal yet had not the patience to digest; they longed to sing and yet their larynxes had forgotten how to produce a pleasant melody.

Finally, they sensed something was strange. They turned and gazed like suspicious cats who nonetheless couldn't find anything wrong. However, once they returned to their work, they unmistakably perceived the peculiar atmosphere that had engulfed them all. The air had thickened, perhaps a harbinger of something that would soon befall them all.

They noticed they were sniffing – striving to gather information from the aromas wafting in the air. The smell slowly intensified until it became overwhelmingly sweet, carrying with it a suffocating, disquieting smoke. When they raised their heads again, people had already flooded into the streets.

Was it an air raid? The villagers had guessed the same. Under the blaring sun, they looked at each other in confusion, before shaking their heads – the war had ended days ago. No enemy aircraft had reappeared, and nobody had heard the air raid siren or the urgent bell summoning young members of the Seinendan to fight a fire. But who knew? After all, war was such a ludicrous concept, and some Japanese generals had allegedly refused to accept defeat, claiming that because their two hundred thousand Taiwanese troops were still in perfect shape, they would fight to the bitter end. So, could it be that the war had resumed?

The wind fiddled listlessly with the fallen leaves, making a sparse, dry scraping sound. Those who gave any attention to those restless leaves would be reminded that autumn had already arrived. The weather was still hot, but one glance at a calendar would inform that summer had ended. In fact, the next day was Ghost Festival, one of the village's busiest days of the year. A sudden gust of wind rattled the leaves on the ground. Roadside trees responded, waving their branches cheerfully. The smell in the air sharpened, but its complexity only further confused the villagers.

Hinoki! Someone shouted in Japanese.

Everyone pointed their nose skyward, sniffing the air arduously. It was indeed the smell of cypress wood, but how had it blanketed the entire village?

"It must be Matsu-Po!" An old granny cried ecstatically, putting her palms together, "Today is the day when She returns to our village in Her golden body. It must be that the Goddess's holy spirit has just arrived!"

But no, it smelt as if someone's house was on fire. A few young people emerged from the crowd and ran in the direction of the aroma. It didn't take them long to reach the end of the village, where they saw steam rising from Lilong Shrine by the mountain. They worked their way up a mild slope – at the end of the road, the shrine's honden was indeed ablaze, its wooden structure crackling in the fire, the fragrance of cypress wood billowing in every direction.

In front of the honden, a crowd of formally dressed Japanese people had amassed, led by the chief priest, followed by the county governor, the village head, three police chiefs, and every person of importance in the area. They were accompanied by dozens of Japanese women attired in ornate kimonos, standing solemnly and sorrowfully as if attending a funeral. It was a remarkable sight: since the first American air raid, all of the governors and officers, fearing being targeted from the sky, had eschewed traditional formalwear, which had always been of great importance to the Japanese, for plain, casual clothes. It had been a long time since the village last saw such a grand occasion.

The Han villagers watched the gathering from far away and discussed enthusiastically, unconcerned about being overheard by the Japanese. After the Japs lost, one of them said, they were afraid their gods might be destroyed by us Taiwanese out of revenge or profaned by the Chinese who would soon arrive, so they figured it'd be best to take the shrine down themselves. They've just sent their gods back to heaven, and now they're burning down their honden.

"Fuck them!" Another one said, "We Taiwanese would never be so presumptuous. How dare they set their own gods on fire!"

The crowd was reminded of what had happened only a few years ago, when over two hundred deity statues sacred to Taiwanese had been confiscated and thrown into the flames in Hai-Shan Temple in Taitung Township. The Japanese cops said they wanted to send Matsu, Shangti-kung, and Yuanshuai-yeh all back to the heavens. They doused the pile of statues with kerosene and reduced it to ashes. But now they're allowed to send their gods off in a dignified ceremony – how can they simply get away with everything they've done?

Some villagers watched the rising smoke with vindictiveness. “Karma!” cried another villager, elation welling up in his eyes. Others lamented the funereal mood of the ceremony, even though they had always hated the Japanese. Someone let out an unrestrained sneer and said, “When they sent their gods off, the chief priest cried in such a high pitch, ‘O—’ I really thought it was the air raid siren!”

O— O—

He parodied the cry in a deliberately loud voice.

The fire intensified and the cypress wood aroma and dark smoke became increasingly dense, the billowing waves of heat contorting the mountains in the distance. Along with the rising fumes, the Japanese Shinto gods of Ōkunitama, Ōnamuchi, and Sukunabikona – the so-called Three Pioneer Kami that nobody fully understood – ascended into the clouds, taking leave of the island forever. Even though the figures of those hastily departing deities could not be seen, the villagers all felt a huge weight lifted off their shoulders and carried away in the hot air.

The shrine was completely consumed by flames, its contours no longer discernable. Unable to bear the sight, the county governor took a deep bow and turned away, followed by the rest of the crowd attending the ceremony.

Suddenly, a rapid series of loud bangs like machine gun fire broke out. Everyone was startled and crouched down out of habit. But they realized immediately that those bangs could not have been gunshots – the sound was too hollow and too blithe. What they had heard was the bursting of firecrackers, which had been banned by the Japanese Government-General and thus had not been heard in the village for ages.

Along the narrow lane next to the shrine, a shrill melody of the suona pierced the air, the tune from the brass trumpet so brazenly sonorous. The synchronized beat of drums and gongs followed – tīn-thâu performers were parading in high spirits, leading the way for the Holy Empress Matsu. Her golden statue sat in the majestic palanquin. Although the Japanese police had ordered the statue “straightened out” and destroyed, the villagers had secretly stowed it until today, when Her almighty made Her glorious return behind the statues of Chi Yeh and Ba Yeh, two deities who had dauntlessly cleared the way for Her.

The Japanese crowd watched the procession in stunned shock, completely oblivious of plans the Han villagers had made in secret, incredulous as to how a full set of tīn-thâu props could have been assembled in such little time.

She is back! The Han villagers dispersed before the shrine and flocked into the procession. Roll after roll of firecrackers were set off along the parade route, exorcising evil spirits with sparks, fume, the noise of explosions, and the stink of sulfur, bringing peace and luck to every corner of Kanzan Village.

The villagers brought out their altar tables, lit incense sticks and joss paper, and offered up all the food stored in their houses for worship – large chunks of pork, stacks of bagged rice, poultry and fish, bottles of alcohol, piles of fruits.... Even half a liang of pork would have been a luxury during the war, and the village had seen a shortage of rice for years. But now, the streets were flooded with the people’s best food.

Meanwhile, the Japanese returning from their ceremony were dumbfounded, as if they had stumbled onto what they called Shina Machi, “China Street”. How did they manage to hide everything and evade the daily, highly thorough police searches? Forget about the small items – where did they keep pigs and sheep? They are so big, and they needed to be fed!

But what astonished them most was how the villagers “glowed”. They had discarded the drab kokumin-fuku that always seemed dusty and donned their brightly-colored Taiwanese clothes. They prayed to the golden statue devoutly, before turning to each other and laughing exuberantly. The code of conduct for Japanized Taiwanese Kōmin – the so-called doctrines of Kinshin-Hōkō and Kennin-Jikyū, “unwavering devotion to His Almighty with resoluteness and veneration” – had vanished without a trace. The laziness and docility that seemed to have been engrained in villagers’ souls were now nowhere to be seen.

The dense smoke of gunpowder violently stung the nerves of the Japanese. The odor of firecrackers, which they had always deemed filthy and barbaric and had thus strictly banned, had nevertheless found its way into every pore of their skin, solemnly declaring that they, the Japanese, were the true monsters here and must be expelled.

Kanzan Temple, previously integrated into the Hongan-ji sect of Buddhism, was promptly restored as a Matsu temple. The place had shed its stately and aloof airs, and life had already returned, with people coming and going as they pleased. A glove puppetry stage had been set up on the plaza in front of the temple. Musicians in the Beiguan ensemble beat their drums and gongs with full force and showed off their finest skills with their pipes and cords. The crowd watched the play with mouths wide open, cheering and clapping as the action on the stage intensified.

The burnt smell in the air had disappeared – such was what people remembered. The entire village was intoxicated by the crisp aroma of cypress wood as Matsu slowly traversed the streets and returned to Her sacred throng, riding an auspicious aura, restoring Her glory back to the village.

Night had fallen. Household after household lit stack after stack of golden joss paper in the fire buckets before their houses and hung beneath their eaves lanterns painted with the blessing “May the light guide your way through the darkness”. New worship offerings had been placed on their altar tables, waiting to be feasted upon by forlorn ghosts and spirits that had been neglected for ages. The streets were adorned with belts of flames. Orange apparitions danced and wriggled, welcoming the village out of its long night under wartime blackout.

Had everything hitherto documented truly happened? Over the next three or four years, people discussed those days endlessly, boasting about and debating every detail of their recollections. One claimed Matsu had returned not on a palanquin but a freshly built bamboo sedan; another argued he had personally carried Her golden statue back to the village. Some questioned whether the giant figures of Chi Yeh and Ba Yeh had been part of the parade, and others added that the Japanese must have set their shrine on fire on a completely different day.... Nevertheless, the village’s collective memory of that day resembled a dreamland in which everyone had fallen together. Everyone cleaved to the remains of their own remembrance, which nobody else could verify or dispute.

Chapter One: Pan Ming-Kun

Under the curtain of night, Pan Ming-Kun snuck into the air raid shelter in the backyard of the Lilong Chamber of Commerce, the place he had chosen to bury his family's ancestral tablets.

He did not realize this during the day, but under the black of night, the air raid shelter resembled a tomb. The Japanese had done tests, finding arched shelter roofs to offer the best protection against explosions. Hidden beneath dirt and grass, the arched roof donned the appearance of a burial site, with the concrete blast wall before the shelter gate acting like the gravestone.

When the Pacific War broke out, the need for new air raid shelters skyrocketed, allowing excavation specialists to demand astronomical prices. Even so, it was quite common that none were available. Lilong Chamber of Commerce head Lin Chin-Tang needed to use his connections to secure a specialist to build this standard 4.5-meter-deep shelter. The layer of dirt above its roof was particularly thick and sturdy. Nobody expected this shelter to one day be where Ming-Kun hid his family's ancestral tablets.

Holding a candle, Ming-Kun descended the stairs, slowing his steps as if entering the underworld. He was startled by a sudden noise outside the shelter and blew out his candle nervously, plunging the shelter into darkness. He did not know where he should take his next step: the dark cave was filled with suspicious air currents that moved like specters, the cold echoes of their hiss giving him goosebumps; but it was not safe outside either – he could be apprehended by the Japanese police and have the tablets confiscated and burnt, a responsibility beyond his comprehension.

Hearing his own heavy breaths, he confirmed that no one was outside the cave and relit his candle with a new match. *Whoosh*. The striking sound was crisp, and the sulfurous smell was strong enough to wake the entire village. But ghosts hated the odor of sulfur – remembering this, Ming-Kun immediately felt the threat of darkness evaporate.

In the dim candlelight, the gaps between the bricks seemed unusually deep and shaky. In the same dim light, Ming-Kun scrutinized the inside of the shelter for the first time, as if studying where he would rest a century later.

He moved in light steps and began digging in the dirt, exerting himself to avoid making any noise. When his shovel hit a rock, he used his fingers to pry it loose. Before long, his head was covered in sweat. As he knelt on the ground and attentively dug at the mud, his earliest memory somehow found its way into his mind—

He was four, kneeling before the family shrine in Mom's house with three incense sticks in his hands. Grandpa was praying next to him, reporting to the deities and the Pan family's ancestors that from now on, little Ming-Kun would no longer carry the family name Chang and instead become the eldest grandson of the Pans and carry the family lineage. "Dear God and our forefathers," Grandpa said, "I pray you keep Ming-Kun safe and well, and that he grows up strong under your protection."

Pray to your forefathers, said Mom. Four-year-old Ming-Kun followed the adults, making an effort to swing the incense sticks up and down and bend his body. He let the sticks be taken from his hands and planted in the deep ash of the incense burner. He did not understand the significance of his actions – all he could do was curiously observe the ashen smoke waft slowly toward the ceiling, brimming so fast from the reddened tips of the incense sticks and then suddenly stopping its ascent and swirling into nothingness. Like an ephemeral creature, it came to life and perished in a heartbeat.

“From now on, you’re Pan Ming-Kun, not Chang Ming-Kun, do you understand?” Grandpa asked him sternly. Ming-Kun nodded with diffidence. “And now I have someone who’ll eventually carry my tablet,” Grandpa said in relief at the end of the ceremony, as if having unloaded a huge burden from his shoulders.

What was peculiar, Ming-Kun remembered, was that whenever Grandpa presented offerings to their ancestors on the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month, asking if they enjoyed the food on the altar table by casting the two wooden poe blocks for divination, he would always end up with both curved sides facing up, as if the ancestors were shaking their heads, telling him they weren’t finished eating. But it seemed whenever Ming-Kun tested his luck, at least one of those blocks always had the flat side facing up. Grandpa would then smile and exclaim, “Our forefathers really do love my grandson! You see, all a blessed family needs is a young lad.”

It took Ming-Kun a few more years to understand that Mom had moved back in with Grandpa after divorcing Tō-san. Ming-Kun’s uncle Kui had died, and Grandpa came to visit Tō-san, asking if he would be willing to let Ming-Kun be adopted into Kui’s family and carry on the Pan lineage. Tō-san refused, and the conversation between his father and grandfather ended acrimoniously. His parents were already on bad terms, and this unpleasant event resulted in a series of big fights between them, culminating in Mom’s return to Grandpa’s house with him and his sister, as well as his transformation into Pan Ming-Kun.

He had almost no recollection of his early years living with Tō-san, but he could still recognize his father when he ran into him. He never liked Tō-san, as this man’s arrival at his new home, in the uniform of the lowest-ranked assistant Junsaho officer, always occasioned another heated but pointless argument. Tō-san usually came to the Pan household under police orders: sometimes for hygiene examinations, sometimes to campaign for Kokumin Seishin Sōdōin – “the National Spiritual Mobilization Movement”, and other times to conduct highly intrusive searches for black market contraband. Even Ming-Kun understood his father’s “official” orders were merely excuses to meddle with his family. All he wanted was to remind them that he was Ming-Kun’s father and to vent his rage for being pushed into divorce by his ex-wife.

“You don’t say hi to your Tō-san? How the hell is your mom raising you?” Chang A-Tu, which was Tō-san’s name, always scolded Ming-Kun.

“Our family doesn’t have anything to do with you. You better keep yourself well away from this house,” Mom responded, showing her impatience and irritation.

“He’s still my boy, and I’m still his father. Even though my boy has changed his family name, he still needs to call me Tō-san!” Chang A-Tu roared. It was the same statement he hurled during

every feud with Mom. “We’re all getting a Japanese name at the end of the day. Chang or Pan or whatever, it doesn’t matter!” he added.

“Well, if that’s the case, then why did you put up such a big fuss when we wanted to change Ming-Kun’s family name?”

“That’s a different matter! My son will of course use my family name, and my name is Chang A-Tu. When I pick a Japanese surname, my son will use that as well!”

“And that’s how little it takes for you to abandon your ancestors? Look at how rotten you are!” Mom shouted at Chang A-Tu’s back as he disappeared at the end of the street, “If you want to be on all fours in front of them, you go right ahead. But never count us in.”

Mom remarried soon after, bringing Stepdad Kuo Tzai, whom Ming-Kun called “Uncle,” into the Pan household. Uncle resembled a cat more than a man, sleeping in the sun during the day, oblivious to the scorns and curses of the outside world – particularly those spat from Chang A-Tu’s mouth. At night, Uncle always magically regained his spirit and took out a small flask of liquor – even during the height of the war, when everything was scarce. After finishing the last drop of the liquid, he would begin laughing heartily and pull Mom toward him, his desire for her on full display.

After Ming-Kun grew a little older, he once asked Mom why she had married such a useless man.

“Well, a woman needs to settle down with a man or her name will not be inscribed on a spirit tablet after she dies. She’ll become a listless ghost,” Mom responded matter-of-factly.

“But Uncle came to live with our family.”

“Which is why he’s become one of us Pans, and I have a man to settle down with.”

What Ming-Kun did not understand was that even though Mom’s family name was Pan, she could never be a formal member of the Pan lineage. She needed a husband – even one with not single drop of Pan blood in his veins – to be included in the ancestral tablets of her own family. He quickly learned that only men could carry the family lineage, even though Mom was the most hardworking person in the world and kept her entire family from falling apart. No matter how irresponsible Uncle was, he was whom Mom had to depend in order to “settle down”.

“And there are things Uncle is good at, after all,” Mom said, “He’s always smiling, and he never talks back at you. It’s easy to be around him, unlike your dearest Tō-san. Oh my, thinking about him is enough to make me mad...”

Mom was always full of energy. She was a tough woman who would never admit defeat, which allowed her to survive even the roughest of days. But she loved to gamble and play four-color cards, always losing more than she won, and her family’s circumstances never improved. Later, after having too many children, more than she could raise by herself, she withdrew Ming-Kun from his Japanese elementary school in the third grade and sent him to herd cattle and goats and graze ducks by the pond for others. When Ming-Kun grew a little older, he took work as a porter as well as other menial jobs to earn extra cash for his family while helping raise his younger siblings alongside Mom.

A few years later, Grandpa fell ill, so terribly ill that he could no longer get out of bed. He murmured to himself over and over again how wise it had been of him to have taken Ming-Kun into his family, reminding himself he was no longer in search of a grandson to carry his spirit tablet. During his final moments, he asked Ming-Kun to come to his bed and gasped his last words. Ming-Kun, he said, should get married soon, have many sons, and continue the Pan family's long lineage. Ming-Kun struggled to hear Grandpa's voice and needed to lean in closer to Grandpa's mouth. Mom stood by the side and answered repeatedly, "Yes, Dad, he will do as you say. Rest assured, Dad."

When Ming-Kun turned nineteen, his family discussed marrying him to his older sister's sister-in-law – in other words, his brother-in-law's youngest sister, Liu Man. As the saying went, a sister-in-law for a sister-in-law, a knot over a knot. But Ming-Kun thought himself to be too poor and uneducated to be able to hold his head high in his in-laws' house. Because of that, he put off giving his response again and again.

One day, Ming-Kun ran into Tō-san on the street. He wanted to evade him, but it was too late. He saw Chang A-Tu waving in his direction, and had no choice but to go over to him.