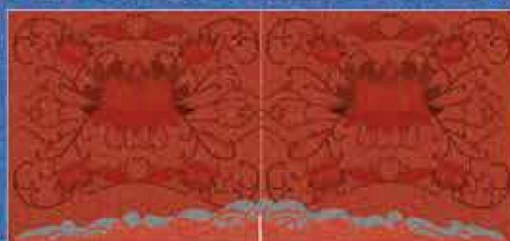
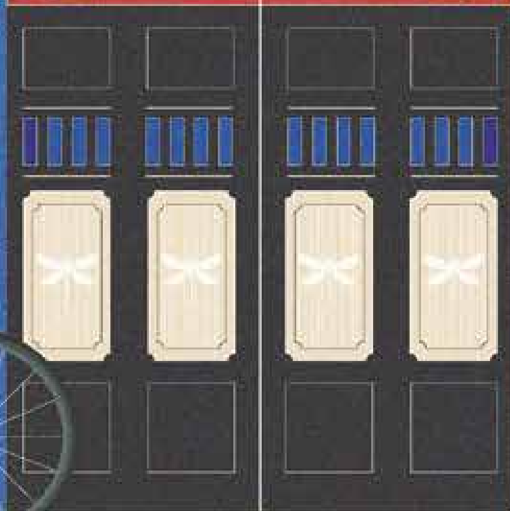
"Epic in scope and uncannily relevant."
—GARETH RICHARDS, founder of Gerakbudaya Bookshop

BLUE SKY MANSION





H. Y. YEANG

"Epic in scope and sweep, *Blue Sky Mansion* powerfully evokes the chaotic historical events that shape the life of a remarkable young woman. Yeang transports the reader to a world that is often cruel and unjust, while, at the same time, animating his main character's emotional courage and pragmatic adaptability. It's a story that is uncannily relevant."

—**GARETH RICHARDS, founder of Gerakbudaya Bookshop**

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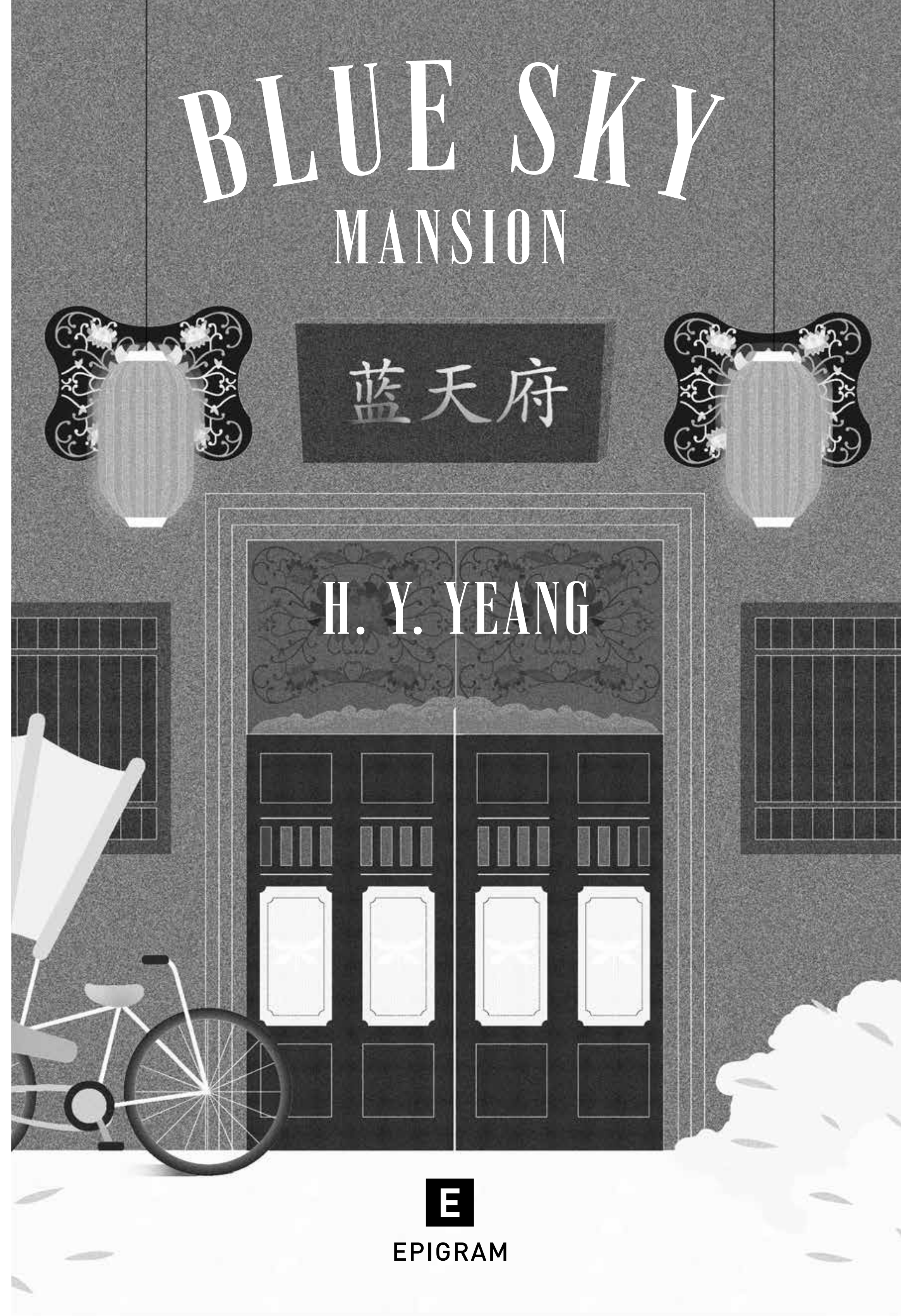

To my wife, Helen

PART 1

CHINA 1910

1
THE HONOUREE

THE CHILDREN WERE mesmerised. In the cavernous crypt below ground, Mei Choon and Wan Li were drawn to the images of horses chasing each other.

A cylinder of silk slowly twirled in front of them, driven by rising hot air from the oil burner of the lantern. On the translucent silk were painted images of running horses. The steeds, splendid with their flying manes and tails, were white, red, brown and black. Their legs were poised in full gallop.

Wan Li had caught a glimpse of the lantern earlier on, but in its unlit state, the contraption had been unremarkable. However, when lit, the images of the horses appeared in sharp contrast to the surface of the lantern. What's more, the horses were running!

Enraptured, the children were hardly aware that the ceremonies going on above ground were drawing to a close. It was the sharp shrill of Teochew trumpets that abruptly broke their attention. Startled, the children froze and looked at each other.

"What's that?" Mei Choon asked. Both Mei Choon and Wan Li's heads turned towards the direction where a shaft of light was

pouring through the doorway at the top of the steps some thirty feet away. As their eyes adjusted to the glare from the entrance, a few seconds passed before they came to a realisation. Was it their imagination, or was the shaft of light radiating from the entrance slowly getting narrower?

Mei Choon gasped. “I think they’re closing the doors. Quick, we have to get out now!”

Even before Wan Li could react, Mei Choon was already dragging the boy by his arm. They raced across the hall towards the bottom of the stairs. Looking up the twenty-four stone steps, there was no longer any doubt about what was happening—the shaft of light beaming down the stairway was narrowing to a slit.

“Run!”

Just five hours earlier, Tang Mei Choon had been playing for most of the morning with Wan Li, a boy of her age who had arrived at the P’an mansion for the same reason that she had.

Holding a half-eaten pork dumpling in her hand, Mei Choon ran, laughing, to her mother, Chin Si, who was seated beside their neighbour, Third Auntie Chang.

Third Auntie Chang, who was Chin Si’s confidante, had accompanied mother and daughter to the P’an house. She smiled at Chin Si, who shook her head resignedly at the mess on Mei Choon’s face and wiped away the dumpling gravy from the corner of her daughter’s lips with a handkerchief.

“Such fun!” Mei Choon exclaimed, looking up at her mother before running off to chase Wan Li, who was darting between the chairs and tables set up for the grand reception.

It was by far the largest celebration that the city of Chungking

had seen in years. For the little girl, it was the most exciting thing in the world. There was so much to eat, and of course, there was also the beautiful new red dress she was wearing, which had a high mandarin collar, knotted buttons and elaborate embroidery. Mei Choon had seen this very same dress in a shop window two months back when her mother, seeking better prices in the city, had taken Mei Choon with her to sell the vegetables and eggs from their farm.

Chin Si had seen how Mei Choon had adoringly looked at the dress in the shop. Yet, putting food on the table was already an onerous challenge; new clothing would have to wait. Even at her tender age, Mei Choon knew there were people who were rich and others who were like themselves. Rich people lived in big houses; they dressed well, ate meat and fish everyday and travelled in horse-drawn carriages.

For Mei Choon and her kind, they could only watch, envy and talk about these people who were from another station of society.

Life had been hard for Chin Si since her husband’s death over a year ago. It had been worse in the last three months of his life when he needed to be cared for on his sickbed, too ill to work. No sooner had her husband passed away than two moneylenders turned up at her door. Unbeknownst to Chin Si, her husband had incurred huge gambling debts.

The moneylenders expressed their deepest sympathies and professed that it broke their hearts to have to seek repayment from the grieving widow. But they also made it clear that they expected the debts to be settled together with the accumulated interest.

Chin Si had no choice but to sell off half her farm for the money.

The tiny plot that remained could barely produce enough to sustain her family.

Mei Choon took her forefingers out of her ears as the last tube in the long string of firecrackers detonated with a resounding bang.

"Is it New Year?" asked Wan Li, who was also splendidly attired.

"I don't know. I'm not sure," Mei Choon replied as she twiddled the ribbons in her pigtails.

There was certainly the feeling of New Year in the air, with all those lanterns and red banners, and with so many people gathered at a feast. It did seem that the last New Year was a long time ago. Was it New Year again now? Mei Choon did not dwell on these questions—a sense of time did not occupy a place of high priority in the thoughts of a five-year-old. What she was certain of was Wan Li and she were in the midst of a celebration, and that was all that mattered.

Not many people lived to a hundred. When a renowned man of letters who just happened to be one of the richest people in Chungking turned a hundred, it was certainly an event that would not pass unnoticed.

From his humble beginnings as an apprentice goldsmith in Sunwui in the province of Kwangtung, P'an Ta Yeh—Great Master P'an—had built up a formidable portfolio of properties, industries and farmland through hard work and, perhaps to some extent, sheer luck. The P'an family's Greater China Construction Company was the region's foremost builder of transportation infrastructure that included roads, bridges and railroads.

P'an Ta Yeh was a poet, a patron of the arts, a philanthropist and a scholar known to everyone in town and to many outside of Chungking. Salutary banners—measuring six feet by four, and extolling the old man's virtues—were hung all over the place. These had been presented by the associations and guilds that P'an Ta Yeh had been a trustee of, and the many schools, charity organisations, hospitals and orphanages that he, as patron, had contributed generously to. P'an Ta Yeh had helped many in need. He had earned their admiration, gratitude and respect, and for that, they came from far and wide to honour him on this day.

The P'an mansion was an enormous two-storey structure. The main reception hall, secondary halls, study, dining room, kitchen and courtyard occupied the ground floor, while the bedrooms and the recreational atria were situated on the first floor.

The enormous front doors of the main building stood behind an extended marble portico. A small orchard spread across a rolling expanse at the back of the house, where a rock garden and decorative fish pond were located. In front of the mansion was the formal Western-style garden with a central oval swathe of lawn.

A path led from the main doorway, encircling the lawn towards the massive wrought-iron gate. Members of the P'an family would be picked up at the portico and conveyed along this pathway to the gate and onwards to the public thoroughfare. The ornate horse carriage once used by P'an Ta Yeh as his transport had since been supplanted by the Darracq Flying Fifteen open tourer, an item of awe and wonder in a country where few had ever laid eyes on a motor vehicle.

The main guest tables were set up in front of the portico. More

were arranged on the lawn further away from the house. Chin Si and Third Auntie Chang were seated at a table near the back, witnessing the proceedings of the morning from afar. The Teochew orchestra, dominated by its distinctive raucous trumpets, had completed its piece, and after a brief interval, it was followed by the performance of a Western marching brass band.

The brass band, arranged by the old man's electric wire factory in Shanghai, was a novelty in 1910 Chungking, and a real crowd pleaser. A small number among the rich families present were acquainted with Western music played on phonographs. But with the first radio station in China still more than a decade away, such music was completely alien to practically everyone else. Even for those who had had the privilege of delighting in Western music, few had actually seen the strange brass instruments from which these sounds emanated. There were appreciative nods and animated discussions all round as the band completed the three pieces in its repertoire.

"When you've done so much for the community as P'an Ta Yeh has, you earn the people's appreciation and respect. Just look at how many are queueing up to pay tribute to him," Third Auntie Chang observed.

She turned towards an empty chair at the table. "Where has Mrs Loong gone?" The long-time friend of Chin Si, who had been sitting at the same table, was nowhere to be seen. Jovial by nature, Mrs Loong, with her incessant chatter and easy laughter, was quickly missed.

At that moment, Mrs Loong appeared, making her way back to the table with a tall, slim man, business-like and commanding in his demeanour. He had a relaxed, easy gait; the short and rather rotund Mrs Loong had to break into a trot every few steps just to keep pace.

"Tell your tai-tai—your wife—I will drop by this evening to say goodbye," she said to him before rejoining her companions. He turned around, smiled and gave a quick nod before checking his stride to give way to a little girl in a red dress charging across his path, a little boy in tow.

"That is Chen Tong, tou shou—chief supervisor—at the P'an's construction company," Mrs Loong explained. "He's my neighbour, a really kind and helpful man. But he won't be my neighbour for much longer. His wife has been ill for some time now, so they are moving south to Hainan tomorrow, where the warmer climate might help Mrs Chen convalesce. The poor woman.

"The doctors can't tell for sure what the matter is with her. Chen Tong has spent a fortune on so many different treatments for her illness, but none have succeeded so far. A change of environment is the final resort. Even so, I'll miss the Chens." She sniffed.

"Your tea is getting cold," Chin Si reminded her. "We have kept aside some sweetmeats for you. Where have you been?"

"I went right up to the front to have a better view of the display by the Western band. My boy, Sze Hai, is performing today, you know? That instrument he plays is called a trombone. Doesn't he look smart and dashing in that uniform—white gloves, shiny black boots and all? And just look at the gold braids and the epaulettes!"

"I'm impressed! I didn't know your son could play a Western musical instrument," Third Auntie Chang said. "Where did he learn Western music?"

"Oh, he doesn't actually play the trombone. He only pretends to."

"I don't understand…" Chin Si said.

"You see, a twenty-four-man marching band was what the family asked for, so that's what they get. The thing is, only sixteen members in the band actually play anything. They make all the music that you hear, whereas my Sze Hai is there to make up the numbers."

"You mean he doesn't actually blow the trombone?" Chin Si asked.

“Well, he does blow a toot or two from time to time. But he has been warned not to overdo things that might upset the actual music. And of course, he has to keep in step when marching.”

“There are eight band members who pretend to play musical instruments, and no one notices this?” Third Auntie Chang asked incredulously.

“Of course, if people looked really hard, they might be able to tell. But who is looking so hard?” Mrs Loong chuckled.

Peals of laughter from the two children filled the air.

“Just look at Mei Choon and Wan Li,” Third Auntie Chang said fondly. “You’d think that they had known each other all their lives when, in fact, they only met this morning.”

“Yes, my Mei Choon is not a shy girl. She mixes well,” Chin Si said. She managed a weak smile, which quickly evaporated.

Third Auntie Chang noticed this and patted Chin Si’s hand. “Don’t worry, Mei Choon will be fine. She’s tough and can take care of herself. She will adapt.”

“Have all the arrangements been finalised?” Mrs Loong asked.

“I have yet to catch Mrs Tu, the chief housekeeper,” Chin Si said. “She has been so busy running all over the place.”

Third Auntie Chang caught sight of someone and announced softly to the group, “Speak of Cao Cao, and Cao Cao arrives.” *Speak of the devil*.

“I’m so sorry I have not been able to meet with you until now,” a harried Mrs Tu said as she approached them. “I’ve been on my feet the whole morning, with so many things going on at the same time. Is everything all right here? Have you all eaten? There’s more, help yourself and don’t stand on ceremony.”

“I suppose there will be changes in view of recent events,” Chin Si said.

“There will, of course, be adjustments, but basically things will go on as planned. Your Mei Choon will join the P’an household as we have agreed.” With that, Mrs Tu pulled out a red packet from her pocket. Handing the hung pau to Chin Si, she said, “This is the second half of the agreed payment. Please count the money. Everything should be in order.”

Chin Si opened the hung pau. The money was in large denomination notes, and it took her no more than a moment to check.

So that was it, she thought, a cloud of sadness descending upon her. She had just sold her daughter. Was it the right thing to do? Was there no other way?

Looking at the forlorn Chin Si, Mrs Tu sat down and said earnestly, “Mrs Tang, I assure you once again that Mei Choon will be well-treated in the P’an household. But it’s very important that you remember what has been agreed upon: Under no circumstances are you to contact your daughter after today. We need a clean and final break between the child and her family. Any contact between the two of you will only make the separation more difficult. Henceforth, she is a member of the P’an household.”

By that, Chin Si understood it was the last time she would see her daughter.

At that moment, Mei Choon and Wan Li sped to the table to sip their drinks.

“Aren’t Wan Li’s parents here?” Third Auntie Chang asked.

“No,” Mrs Tu replied. “An uncle brought the boy over yesterday.”

Chin Si drew Mei Choon to her side. “Pay your respects to Mrs Tu. Do you remember her? She came over to our house before.”

Mei Choon grinned at Mrs Tu, who smiled and pinched the little

girl's cheek. The older woman looked Mei Choon over. "You won't be needing this," Mrs Tu said as she undid a red silk thread, on which hung a small jade disc, from around Mei Choon's neck. Mei Choon had worn the pendant since birth.

Mrs Tu handed Chin Si the necklace. The chief housekeeper was wiping the slate clean for Mei Choon to start anew.

Chin Si held Mei Choon's slender arms and looked into her daughter's eyes.

"Now, listen carefully. Do you remember all the things I told you about your stay at this big house for the next few days? Wan Li will be here together with you. I know you'll find it all very exciting, but you are not here just to play. There is also work to be done.

"There will be many things that you are unfamiliar with. Mrs Tu will take care of you. It is very important that you do everything she says. She will tell you which parts of the house you can go to and which parts you can't. She will tell you when to sleep, when to rise, when to eat and what you can eat. She will have a few tasks for you. Do as you are told to the best of your ability. Always address everyone you meet with respect. And, at all times, do as Mrs Tu says. Do you understand?"

"Oh yes, I remember what you have told me before," Mei Choon said cheerfully, although slightly puzzled by the strain in her mother's voice. "I'll be on my best behaviour always. And when I meet P'an Ta Yeh for the first time, I must be very respectful so that he knows I am a good girl. I shall serve him a cup of tea with both hands. I shall not spill any."

Chin Si summoned up a feeble smile upon hearing this.

"Don't forget to feed Siao Pai while I am away," Mei Choon reminded her mother in turn. Siao Pai was Mei Choon's pet rabbit. "Her favourite food is sweet potato leaves. Oh, I will miss Siao Pai. I know she will miss me too. Tell Siao Pai I will be back in a few days."

Mrs Tu took Mei Choon's hand in her left and reached out for Wan Li's with her right. Turning to Chin Si, she spoke softly and slowly. "I am taking Mei Choon with me now." The chief housekeeper's measured words carried a tone of finality.

It was a signal to Chin Si to say any parting words she might have for her child. This was the moment Chin Si had dreaded; it had weighed heavily on her mind the night before. What does one say to a not-quite-six-year-old whose only family in the entire world is her mother? Words of encouragement, or a wise exhortation that would reside in the recesses of Mei Choon's memory—timeless advice from a mother she would never see again?

Now that the moment had arrived, Chin Si was too distraught—her mind blanked out under a fog of despair. All that she could muster herself to say was, "Be careful now not to lose that hair clip you are wearing. There is also a spare clip in your pocket."

Mei Choon felt her pocket for the hair clip. Yes, the trinket was safely there.

"We need to get going," Mrs Tu said. "Say farewell to your mother now."

Mei Choon said her goodbyes. As she walked away with Wan Li and Mrs Tu, she turned around with a slight smile on her face, and waved briefly.

Chin Si waved back, tears welling into a small stream.

Third Auntie Chang pulled Chin Si away. “Please excuse us, but we need to take our leave,” she told Mrs Loong. “We have to get to the jetty to take the boat upstream back to our village.”

Outside the big house, Third Auntie Chang hailed a rickshaw. Chin Si did not speak during the entire ride to the jetty, and Third Auntie Chang left her to her thoughts.

In Chin Si’s mind, she traced the recent happenings that had led her to the P’an house that morning. Mrs Tu had turned up at her farm unexpectedly a month and a half ago. She had explained the purpose of her visit. Her employer, P’an Ta Yeh, of the well-known P’an family, loved children, and had greatly enjoyed the company of his two young granddaughters. Now that the girls were older and were much occupied with school, the old man wanted two young attendants, a boy and a girl, to be by his side.

His personal geomancer, Pao Chai Yuen Shifu, had consulted the *Thung Sheng*, the Chinese almanac, to determine children suitable for this role based on whether their year, date and time of birth would be compatible with P’an Ta Yeh’s. In the course of his search, he had discovered from provincial birth records that Mei Choon was a suitable pick. Might Chin Si be willing to part with her daughter?

Chin Si’s first reaction had been one of outrage and revulsion. She might be poor, but she was not about to sell her daughter. Yet, looking at her son, who was ill and sickly—in large part from poor nutrition—she realised that she badly needed money to make ends meet. The proposition from Mrs Tu, abhorrent as it seemed, was worthy of some thought.

Mrs Tu had explained that Chin Si would receive a sizeable hung pau for her daughter. Half of the total would be paid upfront, and the remaining half when Mei Choon was received at the P’an household.

Chin Si thought about her two children. Her son, Wen Liang, was delicate, whereas Mei Choon was the tough one who would probably fare better at taking care of herself. Moreover, as the son, Wen Liang would be the one to carry on the family name.

In any case, it was not up to her to choose which child to give up to the big house—it was the date and time of Mei Choon’s birth that qualified her as the chosen candidate.

Mui tsai were female domestic servants brought at a young age into affluent Southern Chinese households. They received food and shelter from the host family, but no pay. The mui tsai were granted their release when they came of age, and the host family would then be obliged to marry them off. The mui tsai practice was common in Sunwui, where P’an Ta Yeh came from, and he continued with the custom in his Chungking household.

The chief housekeeper had made it clear that when Mei Choon joined the P’an household as a mui tsai, there would be no turning back. Mei Choon would have a new name to go with her new identity.

Chin Si was wary, having heard many horror stories about how mui tsai were ill-treated or abused.

Mrs Tu had been reassuring; she had been with the P’ans for over twenty-five years. “As you are aware, Mrs Tang, the P’an family is among the most respected in Chungking. I can assure you that Mei Choon will be well-fed and well-treated when she is with us. If you agree to this arrangement, we shall fix a date for her to come over.”

The chief housekeeper continued, “She takes nothing with her—not even an item of clothing—because she will be starting anew at the P’an household. She comes to us only with the clothes she will be wearing, and they have to be new clothes—you will be given money

to buy her these. She should have nothing with her that could tie her to her previous family. The severance has to be absolute."

Adults carry with them long-term memories of various significant events that might have taken place decades ago. Young children, on the other hand, appear to have a different mechanism by which memories are imprinted, stored and retrieved.

A child of six or seven might recall certain events that happened a couple of years back. However, these memories quickly fade over the years so that upon reaching adulthood, they can hardly remember anything that occurred before the age of four.

Other young girls had come under Mrs Tu's stewardship before. She knew that in time to come, Mei Choon would know and have an attachment to only one family—the P'an family.

"Mei Choon is not quite six. What work would she be performing in the big house?" Chin Si had wanted to know.

"Don't worry, Mrs Tang. The P'an house is not short of servants and attendants. When she gets older, she will be assigned work around the house. But right now, she will spend time with Ta Yeh doing only very light work—perhaps serving tea or fetching his slippers or the newspaper. Ta Yeh wants to have children around him for company more than anything else. Rest assured, Ta Yeh is a gentleman, mindful of the precepts of Confucianism—there is not an unkind bone in his body."

When Chin Si had asked around about P'an Ta Yeh after Mrs Tu had left, she had discovered that it was true: the old man was

indeed a kind gentleman of high principles.

But all this didn't matter anymore. After all, old man P'an was already dead.

The rickshaw arrived at the jetty, and the two women alighted.

P'an Ta Yeh was not really a hundred years old; he was ninety-eight. Since the Chinese have a custom of adding three years to the age of the deceased, the age written on the lantern at the entrance to the mansion read hundred and one.

The Chinese bereavement lantern is normally white with blue lettering. In the case of P'an Ta Yeh, the lantern was red and the lettering in black because in that part of China where the old man had come from, death after the age of a hundred was a milestone for which the life of one so blessed was to be celebrated. This was not a time to mourn the departed. This was to be a celebration of the life of the deceased so richly lived.

That was the reason red banners were festooned all around. The family of the deceased was clothed not in the usual black—or for the immediate family, in sackcloth—but predominantly in cheerful red, pink or orange. Flower garlands were not made of white chrysanthemums, but of pink late-autumn plum blossoms. Indeed, it was not an atmosphere of sadness in the P'an mansion that day, but one of gaiety. Mei Choon had been right all along—it *was* a celebration.

One morning twelve months before the day, P'an Ta Yeh was sitting with his son Kuok Lai, Engineer Chu and fengshui master

Pao Chai Yuen Shifu around the large table in his study. The three younger men were waiting for the senior P'an to announce his verdict.

P'an Ta Yeh's shaven head moved in a slow, rhythmic bob as he, engaged in deep concentration, examined the plans laid out before him. His eyes were clear, although deep wrinkles lined his forehead and above and below his high cheekbones. A sparse white beard, somewhat unruly, further underlined his age.

No one who knew him ever doubted that even as his body aged, his mind was not in geriatric decline. P'an Ta Yeh, though he walked with a cane, was sturdy in his carriage. His movements were slow, but they were always purposeful and deliberate, as if the old man was determined to conserve every ounce of energy that he could.

"I am quite satisfied with the layout. Please proceed according to these plans," P'an Ta Yeh said at last to Engineer Chu, who had drawn up the architectural blueprints. These were for the construction of a splendid mausoleum. It was to be the old man's final resting place.

P'an Ta Yeh first met Chu, who was from Shanghai, on one of his business visits to Peking three years ago. Chu, who had studied civil engineering in Scotland's Glasgow University, had been the engineer in charge of building a new pier at the port of Tientsin, eighty miles from the capital city. P'an Ta Yeh's business portfolio included construction and engineering, and he was especially impressed by Chu's adoption of Western technology in the pier's construction.

P'an Ta Yeh continued, "The measurements shown in these plans and drawings are only nominal for the time being. Pao Shifu will determine the exact dimensions based on his calculations, and he will advise you accordingly. He might also have to make small

alterations, such as the number of steps on the stairs or whether a corner somewhere needs to be rounded off. Pao Shifu will sort all those things out," he said, turning to the fengshui master.

Pao Shifu bowed slightly, pleased at being so honoured. He was a highly respected fengshui consultant in Chungking, and the student of Grandmaster Shen Ju Ren, the de facto custodian of the Flying Star discipline of fengshui. Pao Shifu had his own loyal following, popularly known as the Pao Chai Yuen sect, that practised his esoteric variant of Flying Star fengshui.

"Of particular importance would, of course, be the exact direction the tomb faces," P'an Ta Yeh observed. "Shifu would need to resurvey the landscape and recalibrate before coming to a final decision. After that, an auspicious time has to be selected to commence the project."

There was a pause as everyone sipped the forty-year-old pu-erh tea from the old man's personal reserve.

"What happens after death?" P'an Ta Yeh asked no one in particular. "The physical body decays, but should the spirit linger, I would value a familiar retreat surrounded with things that have given me pleasure and enjoyment in my lifetime. For me, that means my favourite paintings and calligraphy works. And a selection of books and manuscripts too. I am in the midst of preparing a list."

"And your many favourite carvings and statuettes," Kuok Lai chimed in. "Oh, don't forget your Shang dynasty bowl and goblet collection." The younger P'an gestured to the bronze ware arranged within a display cabinet.

"The Shang artisans were truly the masters of bronze work," Engineer Chu said, marvelling at the collection. "We have to thank them for taking bronze technology to its peak all those centuries ago, practically to the level that is still practised to this day."

P'an Ta Yeh stood up, his cane propping up his gaunt frame. He looked around him and reflected, "Yes, those would be on my list too." He paused. "But of course, if there is in fact nothingness after death, then material things are meaningless. All these preparations would be for nothing. Yet, when faced with the unknown, I suppose such arrangements do provide a measure of security and peace of mind."

"The worry with conspicuous tombs is that they attract the attention of tomb raiders," P'an Ta Yeh continued. "I would not want my tomb to be disturbed in any way, but modern raiders are very resourceful these days."

Pao Shifu agreed. "This is not just a matter of the body of the deceased being defiled, but a violation of the tomb would adversely affect the descendants in generations to come. Remedies would be difficult to come by in that event, since any major repair to the tomb could itself affect the chi unfavourably."

P'an Ta Yeh turned to Engineer Chu. "But you will be taking care of that, isn't that so?"

The engineer straightened himself in his chair. Unaccustomed to modesty, he was not about to have his expertise and role in the construction overlooked and underappreciated. He had no intention of playing second fiddle to Pao Shifu.

"Rest assured when it comes to the security of the tomb. The stone walls will be four feet thick—five and a half feet in some places—and locked in place with concrete prepared with imported Western cement. When the cement sets, there will be a contiguous wall of stone as secure as any fortress."

Almost as an afterthought, the engineer added, "Realistically, though, tomb raiders would normally go after gold, silver and precious stones. Would they even bother with the tomb of a scholar? Would all the trouble be worthwhile for robbers just to lay their hands on paintings, carvings and manuscripts?"

"I think many people know P'an Ta Yeh better as a business magnate than as a scholar," the fengshui master said. "There would be thieves who don't know or won't believe there are no valuables in the tomb, but we are getting the word out that this is a scholar's tomb, and not some treasure trove."

P'an Ta Yeh thought aloud, "Indeed, of what use to thieves are my books and paintings? Or even the stone Tang horses, which would be too heavy to cart away in any case?"

The discussion moved on to the occasion when the mausoleum would eventually be put to use. Pao Shifu said, "I'd just like to confirm that when the time comes, the funeral rituals and proceedings will be according to the Three Teachings?"

Polytheistic Chinese turn to many traditional and cultural folk beliefs for blessings and protection. There are the mainstream religions, of which three stand out. The Chinese are not compelled to choose among the three, but are free to incorporate all three in religious observances.

This gave rise to the concept of the Three Teachings, which refer to a loose coalescence of the intuitions of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism—the first two native to China and the third introduced from India. The Chinese refer to them as teachings, with the founder of each recognised as a great and revered teacher, but not a messenger or spokesperson acting on the behest of a god or supreme being. Confucianism and Taoism make references to a celestial force—*heaven*—that oversees order in the universe, but is otherwise not the personal God embraced in many religions.

"Yes," P'an Ta Yeh said, turning to his son, "just like your late mother's funeral back in the home province—you were but a newborn then."

The younger P'an, himself fifty-six years of age, was the only son of P'an Ta Yeh's second wife; his first wife had died childless. Kuok Lai grew up with an elder sister and only knew his mother from an oil portrait and old photographs. He had long been the Shao Yeh—Young Master—of the P'an household, while the senior P'an was Lao Yeh, the Old Master. When Kuok Lai's son married, it was customary for a daughter-in-law to address the father-in-law as "Lao Yeh". Since two Lao Yeh under the same roof would cause confusion, the senior P'an was elevated to Ta Yeh.

"Follow the traditional customs of the home province, the Cantonese style," P'an Ta Yeh continued, "and abide by the Three Teachings."

After the guests had taken their leave, Kuok Lai turned to his father. "All this discussion on death and tombs is so morbid when here you are in perfect health. Is all this talk really necessary?"

P'an Ta Yeh smiled. "There is no such thing as a never-ending banquet," he said, drawing upon a well-known Chinese saying. "All good things must come to an end. I did not ask to live this long, but in the end, death is inevitable. I am hardly in perfect health. I have had three bouts of illnesses in the past year alone—the last fairly serious, as you are aware. I feel my old heart giving out. It's just a matter of time."

"Doesn't the thought of death bother you at all?" Kuok Lai asked.

"Imagine you have just completed a long, tiring day of hard work," P'an Ta Yeh said with a sigh. "Or maybe you have revelled

in a long, joyous day of festivities, and you feel really worn out and sleepy. Do you fight sleep that is creeping upon you? Do you force your eyes open just to stay awake? For what purpose? Indeed, you look forward to a long sleep. You yearn for a well-earned rest to wake up refreshed the next day."

"Only that in death, one does not awaken."

"Perhaps so. Or perhaps I shall awake in another spiritual realm. Like I was saying earlier, I might not have any earthly needs after death. All the preparations for my tomb would then be for nothing. I don't know, my son."

"Father, do you think there's life after death?" Kuok Lai asked. He was suddenly feeling his own mortality, being well past middle age.

P'an Ta Yeh stroked his wispy white beard and pondered for a moment. "The only thing that is indisputable, my son, is death after life."

Kuok Lai nodded. "I guess that's true. Nobody knows for certain what happens after that."

"Well, there are those who know where they would be after they die. At least, they believe they know. Our brethren, the Muslim Hui in Sinchiang and Ningsia, have paradise waiting after death. The same can be said for the Christians who expect to be in heaven with their God."

"Is paradise or heaven what nirvana is to the Buddhists?" Kuok Lai asked, not being as worldly as his father.

"They are all ultimate destinations, but nirvana is more of a state of consciousness rather than a promised land. But then, perhaps they are all states of mind. Nobody has experienced nirvana or the Islamic paradise or the Christian heaven and come back to relate a first-hand account.

"Yet, that does not stop the followers of every religion from insisting that their understanding of the afterlife, and theirs alone,

is correct, and everyone else's is wrong."

P'an Ta Yeh smiled as he noted, "Since no one religion has followers that command an absolute majority among the world's faiths, we can safely assume that the majority of those who believe in the afterlife have got their versions wrong."

P'an Ta Yeh died a year almost to the day after the meeting. His death was not due to the failure of his heart as he had anticipated, nor to any ailment related to old age.

For the past ten or twelve years, as age caught up, the old man no longer made routine inspections of his farms, factories or construction sites. The day-to-day running of the P'an business conglomerate had been delegated to Kuok Lai. From time to time, though, P'an Ta Yeh would make the rare site visit to check on the progress of a favourite project.

It was on one such occasion when the old man was returning from a factory visit on the outskirts of Chungking with his son that they stopped by a teahouse for lunch. As they stood on the roadside after exiting the teahouse, a horse pulling a cart laden with farm produce spooked, bolted and charged along the road. The animal careened into father and son.

Kuok Lai walked away with superficial wounds. The injury on P'an Ta Yeh, had it been inflicted when he was younger, would have been shrugged off as an annoyance, too. But at his advanced age, the trauma proved fatal.

The fact that P'an Ta Yeh died outside of his house posed a problem for the customary rites that were to follow. By Chinese tradition, a dead body left a house for burial, but a corpse could not be brought into a house. This was not an edict of the Three

Teachings, but simply a cultural taboo.

The family considered laying the body on the portico in front of the main door of the house. The general consensus, though, was that the old man should not be disallowed entry to his own home, which he had built and in which he had lived for so many years.

The resourceful funeral directors came up with a solution. They propped the body of P'an Ta Yeh on a chair and carried him across the threshold as if he were a living person. Once indoors, he was laid to rest in the main hall of the big house. That was when the deceased was declared officially dead.

In most instances where such a solution was resorted to, this was when the mourning would begin. But in the case of P'an Ta Yeh, having reached his nominal centennial in life, it was the signal for the festivities to start.

The funeral cortège that wound through the main streets of Chungking was over a third of a mile long. Onlookers thronged the roadsides to witness the grandest funeral procession anyone could remember.

At the head of the procession was P'an Ta Yeh's son-in-law, with an attendant holding aloft a red banner—as was the custom in P'an's home province. Following behind were two men bearing poles on which huge paper lanterns were mounted; the old man's name and age were written on the red lanterns. Then there was the Chinese percussion, with two men shouldering a huge gong suspended on a pole. A third member of the ensemble struck the gong at intervals, while a fourth sounded the cymbals.

Tapestry bearers and the bearers of salutary banners followed. Some of these pieces were hung vertically on bamboo poles, each

borne by one carrier; others were strung horizontally on a pole and carried by two men on their shoulders.

Then there were the representatives from the various guilds, associations and charitable organisations. The town council sent a contingent of police cadets. Troupes of musicians were spaced out so that the music from one would not clash with that of the other. The traditional Teochew and Sichuan musicians were there, but it was the novelty of the Western marching band that drew the most attention. Loong Sze Hai was among the proud marchers in the Western band, blowing the occasional toot on his trombone.

Numerous floral garlands and arrangements, in place of funeral wreaths, were displayed in three horse-drawn carriages. The coffin was covered with a pall embroidered with depictions representative of the Three Teachings. It was borne on a hearse, a white carriage trimmed in silver and drawn by four white horses with white ostrich plumes on the headpieces of their bridles.

P'an Ta Yeh's portrait was displayed at the front of the carriage, while red buntings were fastened around to convey a celebratory air to the occasion—a reminder that this was not the normal display of grief, but one of joy and celebration.

The immediate family members walked behind the hearse, followed by members of the extended family. Further behind were friends, neighbours, business associates and the staff of the big house. Mei Choon and Wan Li, ogling at the sights and sounds—finally aware that it was a funeral, but whose?—were too young to walk far, and were placed in a hand-drawn carriage.

The procession officially disbanded after just over a mile. The lantern and banner bearers, their jobs completed, transferred the procession paraphernalia onto waiting carts as the musicians packed up their instruments. The guests dispersed while family members and the servants continued on their way to the tomb.

The burial site, located on a gentle slope, was accessed through a gate of three arches supported by four marble pillars. Twenty-five yards further stood the hexagonal Cool Breeze Pavilion, a place to rest before proceeding to the mausoleum another fifty yards away.

Two-fifths of the concrete mausoleum stood above ground and was painted white. Viewed from the front, it was in the shape of a dome. The architecture allowed for an unobstructed expanse of floor space under the ceiling, with supporting structures only at the sides.

A large lacquer screen stood in front of the entrance to ward off undesired chi while the tomb was still open. In front of the screen was an altar upon which a huge urn for joss sticks was placed. The coffin was positioned in front of the altar, in line with the entrance to the tomb.

While the convolution of rituals meandering in the early afternoon was presided over by a Taoist priest, Pao Shifu was the de facto director of operations. With rites shaped over generations by custom and culture melding with the sacraments of religion, it was not always clear where heritage and etiquette ended and where observances of faith began.

When it came to the servants' turn to pay their respects, Mrs Tu handed joss sticks to Mei Choon and Wan Li, and directed them to bow. When these ceremonies were completed, the coffin of P'an Ta Yeh was carried into the mausoleum, where it was lowered into a stone sarcophagus.

Kuok Lai went with Pao Shifu to inspect and supervise the final placement and arrangement of the tomb's contents. It was still early in the afternoon, but with the winter solstice four days away, it would be dark before long. There remained only one final ritual for the day—the ceremonial sealing of the tomb.

In the meantime, Mrs Tu took the two children to the Cool Breeze Pavilion and instructed: "I have things to attend to. Just sit here and I will be back as soon as I can. Don't move away from here."

After Mrs Tu left, Mei Choon, having wondered about it, asked Wan Li, "How long will you be staying in the big house? When will you be going home?"

Wan Li was a little puzzled by the question. "I won't be going home. My mama told me that the big house will be my new home. What about you? Will you be moving to the big house too?"

"Oh no," Mei Choon replied, "I shall only be staying here for a while, but I am not sure for how long. Mama said it would be for several days. But I need to get back to my home. I have a pet rabbit Mama is looking after for me while I am away. And Mama will need me to help out in the vegetable garden. She has so much to do now that my papa is no longer with us."

"Does your brother help out too?" Wan Li asked. Mei Choon had told him she had a younger brother when they were playing in the mansion. Wan Li knew, from his own family, that all children had to pull their weight around the house.

"Yes, but when he gets a little older, he won't have time as he will be going to school."

"Will you also be going to school?" Wan Li asked, fascinated by the concept of learning.

"I don't know. I'd love to, but Mama says it is expensive for me. She says it's more important for boys to learn how to read and write."

Mei Choon frowned. "Why are you not going home? Won't you miss your family?"

Wan Li, who had until then been cheerful, suddenly looked downcast. "I don't know. I suppose I'd miss my parents and my four

brothers and five sisters. But Mama said that there are too many of us to feed."

He paused. "My mama has always been around to care for me. From now on, there will be no one to look after me in the big house."

"I will care for you," Mei Choon said. "I'm older than you, so I shall be your chieh-chieh. I will be your elder sister!"

"Would you?" Wan Li looked up, an expression of relief spreading across his face.

Mei Choon nodded. "I promise. Let us pledge to be good friends forever, and we will always look out for each other. How does that sound to you?"

Mei Choon dipped into her pocket and drew out two gumdrops wrapped in coloured paper. She was given the sweets by Third Auntie Chang earlier at the big house. "Here. As my good friend, you can have one of these sweets."

Wan Li kept the sweet in the pocket of his jacket, and from a pouch attached to his belt, he withdrew three coloured stones and held them out to Mei Choon. "I have three smooth stones I found by the riverside. Choose one!"

At the beginning, the children took great interest in the activities surrounding them. But after a while, they grew restless, as children would. Mrs Tu did not return as promptly as she had promised. Moreover, as the latest additions to the P'an household, they were attracting considerable attention from the household staff. Eyes were cast in their direction and fingers were pointing. The children began to feel self-conscious and uncomfortable.

"Let's go for a stroll," Wan Li proposed.

"But Mrs Tu says we are to stay here," Mei Choon argued.

"Oh, we won't go far. We won't stray far from this pavilion. That way, any time that Mrs Tu returns, we can quickly run back here."

The wind had been blowing hard all day. Mei Choon, who was wearing a hat Mrs Tu had given her before the procession, had had to hold on to it, but a sudden strong gust blew it off.

The hat rolled on its brim for a distance, with its owner and new friend in chase, laughing as they ran. As soon as Mei Choon caught up with the hat, another gust sent it tumbling further away. The chase continued. Mei Choon lunged twice in an attempt to pick up the straying hat, and each time another gust blew it just out of reach.

"Step on it! Step on the hat!" Wan Li shouted. Mei Choon tried to, but she wasn't quick enough.

The hat flew towards the entrance of the tomb, with the two children in tow. At that moment, two workmen were carrying into the mausoleum the lacquer screen that had earlier stood in front of its entrance. Shielded from sight by the screen, the children ran down twenty-four steps after the hat—unnoticed by anyone—to the main hall of the tomb.

A panting Mei Choon clutched her hat at last. She paused to catch her breath.

When she looked up, she was astounded at the sight before her. She found herself in a great hall, the floor of which was sixteen feet below the threshold of the entrance from which she and Wan Li had entered. The ceiling loomed almost thirty feet above.

Mei Choon turned round and round to take in the scene before her. The late afternoon sun was streaming in through the entrance, illuminating all the stone steps save the bottom-most two. The

areas untouched by sunlight were bathed in a warm glow from the numerous small oil lamps.

At the centre of the hall, close to the wall and away from the entrance, a stone sarcophagus stood on a marble pedestal. In front of the pedestal was the lacquer screen. A large gold-leaf-and-lacquer writing table—with mulberry paper, brush, ink stick and ink stone at the ready—was placed in front of it. P'an Ta Yeh's personal seal, which he had carved himself, occupied a place of prominence on the writing table. A short distance away stood a kwei fei rosewood daybed with carved motifs inlaid with mother-of-pearl.

The walls of the hall to the left were adorned with paintings and works of calligraphy. On the shelves against the walls and on small items of wooden furniture were statuettes, carvings and various objects of art.

On the right-hand side of the hall, reaching ten feet up, was a classical Chinese labyrinthine grotto constructed of Taihu porous rock in the Suchou style. The walls on that side of the hall were otherwise bare and painted blue, resembling what one might see when looking towards the horizon.

On the floor was a circular stone table surrounded by four drum-shaped porcelain garden stools decorated with birds, butterflies and flowers in cobalt blue. Stone horses that were half the size of real horses were placed a distance away. The entire layout was a re-creation of a scholar's study, opening into an adjoining courtyard and garden.

Looking upwards, Mei Choon gazed at the vaulted ceiling, which depicted a blue sky painted with motifs of white clouds. The customary dragons were missing as P'an Ta Yeh thought dragons were too ostentatious.

The two children were stock-still in amazement. It was Mei Choon who recovered first. "We need to get out of here," she

whispered hoarsely. “We shouldn’t be down here! Mrs Tu would be angry if she found out. Let’s go!”

Just then, voices were heard as Kuok Lai and Pao Shifu made their way to the stairs to leave the tomb. Kuok Lai had just completed his duty as the filial son by lighting all the remaining oil lamps so that the tomb would be in maximum illumination at the time of its closure.

Mei Choon and Wan Li crouched behind a chest of drawers until the two men had climbed up the steps. “We can’t leave just yet,” Wan Li said. “We have to wait awhile until they’re all the way out before we can slip away without being seen.”

They waited. After a minute, Mei Choon started to leave. “There’s no one else here now. It’s safe to go.” She tugged at Wan Li’s elbow, but the boy was engrossed in a huge painting on the wall.

“Just look at this. Here’s a farm with pigs and chickens. And a water buffalo, too! That must be the farmer over there. This is the market…”

Mei Choon’s eyes widened, captivated by the scene as well. “Look, there are boats on the water. Aren’t those nets? They must be fishing boats.”

She caught herself. “We can’t be staying here. We really need to get back to the pavilion now.”

Wan Li’s attention was drawn elsewhere. “What’s that over there? They look like huge buffalo horns. Let’s take a look!”

Mei Choon reluctantly followed. Various scenes of daily village life, similar to what was depicted in the painting, were skilfully rendered in three-dimensional carvings.

“It’s really beautiful,” Wan Li said. “I’ve never seen anything like this before.” Turning around, he caught sight of yet another item of wonder. “Just look at those stone horses!” he exclaimed. Three horses, individually placed on onyx plinths, were each

standing, trotting and galloping. Only scraps of colour remained here and there, their original bright paint having faded over time.

Mei Choon pleaded with Wan Li to leave. “We don’t have much time to spare. Mrs Tu might already be looking for us! This is our first day here—we don’t want to get into any trouble.”

“All right, all right. We’ll go,” Wan Li said resignedly. “You are too anxious, chieh-chieh!”

They were just making their way to the flight of steps when Wan Li turned over his shoulder to take a last look. He paused, then pointed. “The horses! They’re running!”

“They are not!”

“Not *those* stone horses. Look over there—the ones over there!”

P’an Kuok Lai dabbed the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief, breathing heavily from the effort of climbing up the twenty-four steps to reach the entrance of the tomb. Pao Shifu, who emerged from the tomb with Kuok Lai, remained by the doorway to prepare for the final act of the funerary ceremonies.

Kuok Lai quickly picked out the tall Chen Tong from the crowd of people getting ready to complete the proceedings of the day and headed towards him. Apart from his height, Chen Tong easily stood out because of his short hair. He was without a queue, which was imposed on men by the conquering Manchus in the seventeenth century. Cutting one’s queue was regarded by many as an overt show of rebellion. In Chen Tong’s case, no one was quite sure how he had come to that decision.

“Good job, Tou Shou,” Kuok Lai said to the chief supervisor of the P’an family’s Greater China Construction Company. “You know, I was really worried when Engineer Chu died so suddenly before the

construction of the tomb could be finished. You've done a wonderful job of completing the work."

When the Shanghai-based Engineer Chu was recruited to undertake the building of the mausoleum, he had asked for a local tou shou to assist him in the task. Chen Tong was temporarily relieved of his regular duties at the P'an construction site and assigned to Engineer Chu.

Chen Tong smiled. "That's the least I can do, P'an Lao Yeh. After all, I have known Ta Yeh all these years, ever since I was an apprentice builder. My father, too, had served the P'an clan all his life up till his retirement. The Chens have always been well-treated by P'an Lao Yeh's family, and we are grateful and indebted to the P'an family," he said.

The two men looked wistfully at the lone white dome. "I can't really take the credit for this," Chen Tong said. "Engineer Chu had already planned everything, and all I did was to follow and implement what he had explained to me in detail. The real credit goes to Engineer Chu, although it is unfortunate that he is not here to see the final fruits of his vision and labour."

"You are far too modest, Tou Shou. You know you are like family to us. Moreover, I am especially appreciative of the fact that you delayed your move to Hainan just to make sure that the construction is completed satisfactorily and on schedule. I understand you are leaving because of your wife's chronic ailment. I'm sure she will benefit from the warm weather in Hainan. But we shall miss you."

Chen Tong followed Kuok Lai's gaze towards the entrance of the tomb, where Pao Shifu stood. "So, what are we waiting for now? Why isn't Shifu proceeding with the ceremony?" Kuok Lai asked.

"Shifu is waiting for the auspicious moment to close the tomb," Chen Tong replied. He knew the fengshui master had made detailed calculations based on the almanac, and then refined the timing

using additional calculations after studying the positions of the celestial bodies.

Pao Shifu glanced at his Patek Philippe pocket watch before stowing it away. Above him, on the roof of the tomb, were two workers who were assigned the duty of hoisting a white banner—decorated in red on its left and right borders—mounted on a bamboo pole which still had sprigs of leaves at the top. The banner was laid horizontally on the roof, with the handlers awaiting the shifu's signal.

Two trumpeters from the Teochew orchestra band had taken their positions to the left of the tomb entrance, with another two trumpeters on the right. Pao Shifu had arranged for the trumpeters to remain behind at the end of the funeral procession; he had no use for the other members of the orchestra. Behind the trumpeters stood two attendants, one on each side, who had been tasked with closing the massive wooden doors at Pao Shifu's bidding.

"The doors look really solid," Kuok Lai said approvingly.

"Indeed, Lao Yeh. Yet in reality, the doors are merely symbolic. What will make this structure truly impregnable will be those pre-cast concrete blocks we will use to seal the entrance of the tomb." Chen Tong pointed to two rows of angular concrete blocks neatly arranged in front and to the left of the tomb entrance. Each block had a number painted on it to indicate its location in walling off the tomb entrance.

He explained, "The tongues and grooves on each block will interlock with another on its left and on its right. There will be four rows of such blocks. The blocks in each row will interlock with those in the row behind it. Think of it as assembling a giant three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle, Lao Yeh. You can see that the doors are recessed four and a half feet from the outer surface of the wall. When the tomb is sealed with all the concrete blocks cemented

in place, the surface of the outermost blocks will be flushed with the wall."

Kuok Lai studied the rows of concrete blocks and turned his gaze to the entrance of the tomb.

"I am impressed," he remarked. "Excellent!"

Pao Shifu retrieved his pocket watch and stole another quick glance. This time, the watch remained in his left hand. He waited another minute and a half, his eyes returning to the watch every few seconds. And then, he raised his right hand.

At that signal, the trumpeters lifted their instruments to their lips. The banner handlers on the roof held on to the base of the bamboo pole, awaiting the next instruction. The two attendants grasped the huge brass rings of the door. All eyes were on the fengshui master, his eyes fixed on his pocket watch.

The moment arrived as the shaft of sunlight streaming from the tomb entrance reached the twenty-fourth step—the bottom-most step of the stone stairway—and touched the floor of the mausoleum. When Pao Chai Yuen Shifu dropped his hand, he simultaneously set in motion three protocols: the trumpeters sounded a salutary fanfare, the white banner was raised and secured on the roof, and at the same time, the door attendants strained at the brass rings to close the massive wooden doors. The P'an family members and household staff looked on solemnly as the proceedings of the day wound to a conclusion. The patriarch had been laid to rest.

Chen Tong turned to his benefactor and said, "P'an Ta Yeh can now rest in peace in this abode. Once the tomb is sealed, absolutely nobody will be able to get in from the outside."

Left unsaid—and why would there be any need to say it?—nobody from the inside will be able to get out.

2
THE TOP HAND

"DID I MENTION that my son Sze Hai was in the marching band at the funeral?" a proud Mrs Loong asked as she watched Ming Lan refill her teacup. Ming Lan, Chen Tong's wife, smiled, too polite to point out that it was the third time Mrs Loong had brought it up.

"You missed a really magnificent procession," Mrs Loong said. "Imagine—a grandiose funeral and celebration rolled into one! I really don't expect to see anything like that again in my lifetime."

"Well, you know my condition," Ming Lan said, breaking into a cough. "I feel so weak and unwell that I try to keep unnecessary running around to the minimum."

From her frequent short fits of coughing and the pallor of her face, there was no mistaking the truth in her words—she was wasting away. Ming Lan shook her head wistfully. "This, despite all the money spent on the expensive medical treatments. Nothing seems to work. I'm not even sure what this ailment is! Different physicians I have consulted tell me different things. The last physician thought it might be tuberculosis, but I don't know…"

"Well, your move to Hainan might do the trick this time. The

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

H. Y. YEANG was born and raised in Penang, Malaysia. A third-generation ethnic Chinese, he is familiar with the customs, mannerisms and beliefs among the Chinese, and the idiosyncrasies of those who set root in Malaya. He is a former research biotechnologist with the Rubber Research Institute of Malaysia. Despite his background in science, he takes an interest in history, and is especially drawn to topics where past events in Asia have impacted world affairs. *Blue Sky Mansion* is his first novel.

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China.

At the turn of the twentieth century, when young children from impoverished families were sold into servitude, Tang Mei Choon forged her own path, fleeing from the plague-ridden wastelands of Harbin to Penang, Malaya, where a fate even more harrowing awaited her.

FICTION

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