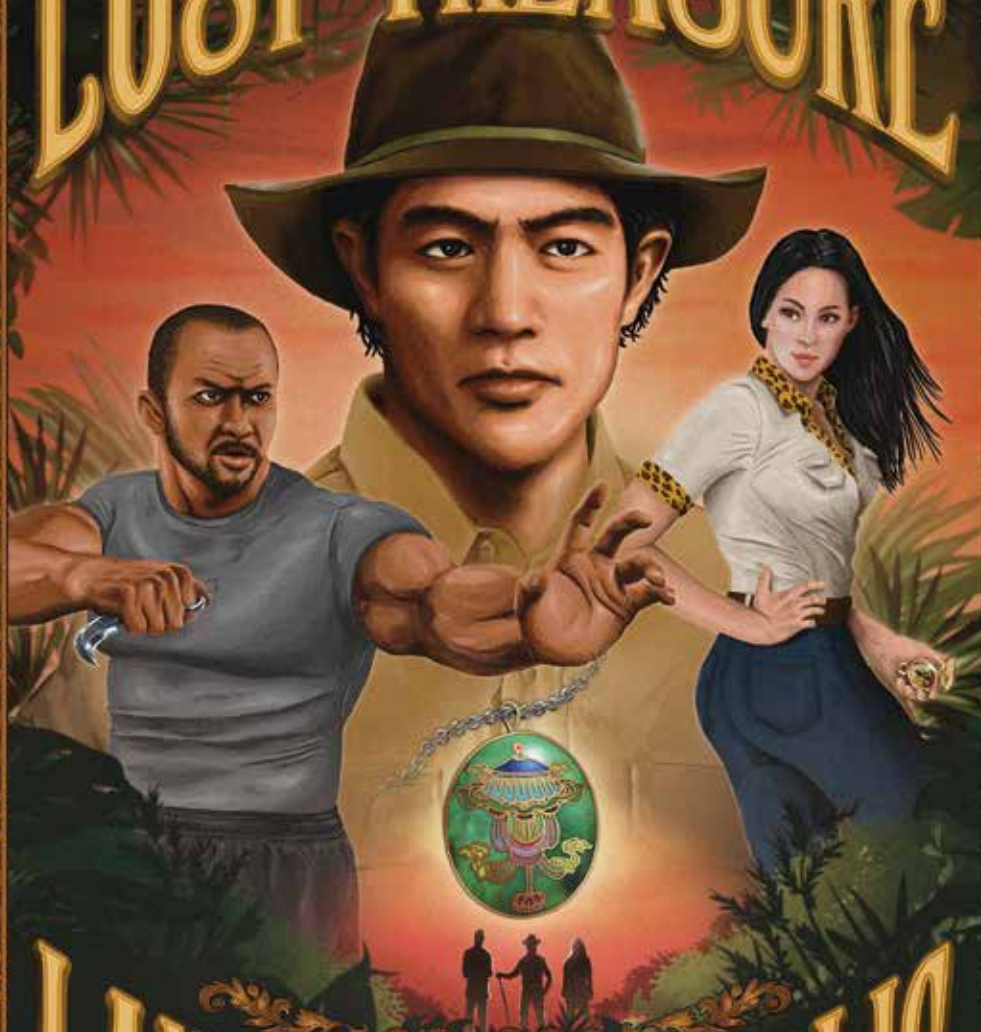


FINALIST FOR THE 2022 EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE

LOST TREASURE



OF THE LANFANG REPUBLIC

TAN LIP HONG

LOST TREASURE
OF THE
LANFANG REPUBLIC

Copyright © 2023 by Tan Lip Hong
Cover design by Nikki Rosales
Cover illustration by Yamaguchi Yohei

Published in Singapore by Epigram Books
www.epigram.sg

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise without the prior written permission of the publisher.

National Library Board, Singapore
Cataloguing in Publication Data

Name(s): Tan, Lip Hong.
Title: Lost treasure of the Lanfang Republic / Tan Lip Hong.
Description: First edition. | Singapore : Epigram Books, 2023.
Identifier: ISBN 978-981-49-8473-7 (paperback)
ISBN 978-981-49-8474-4 (ebook)
Subject(s): LCSH: Treasure hunting—Fiction. | Borneo—Fiction.
Classification: DDC S823—dc23

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

First edition, January 2023.

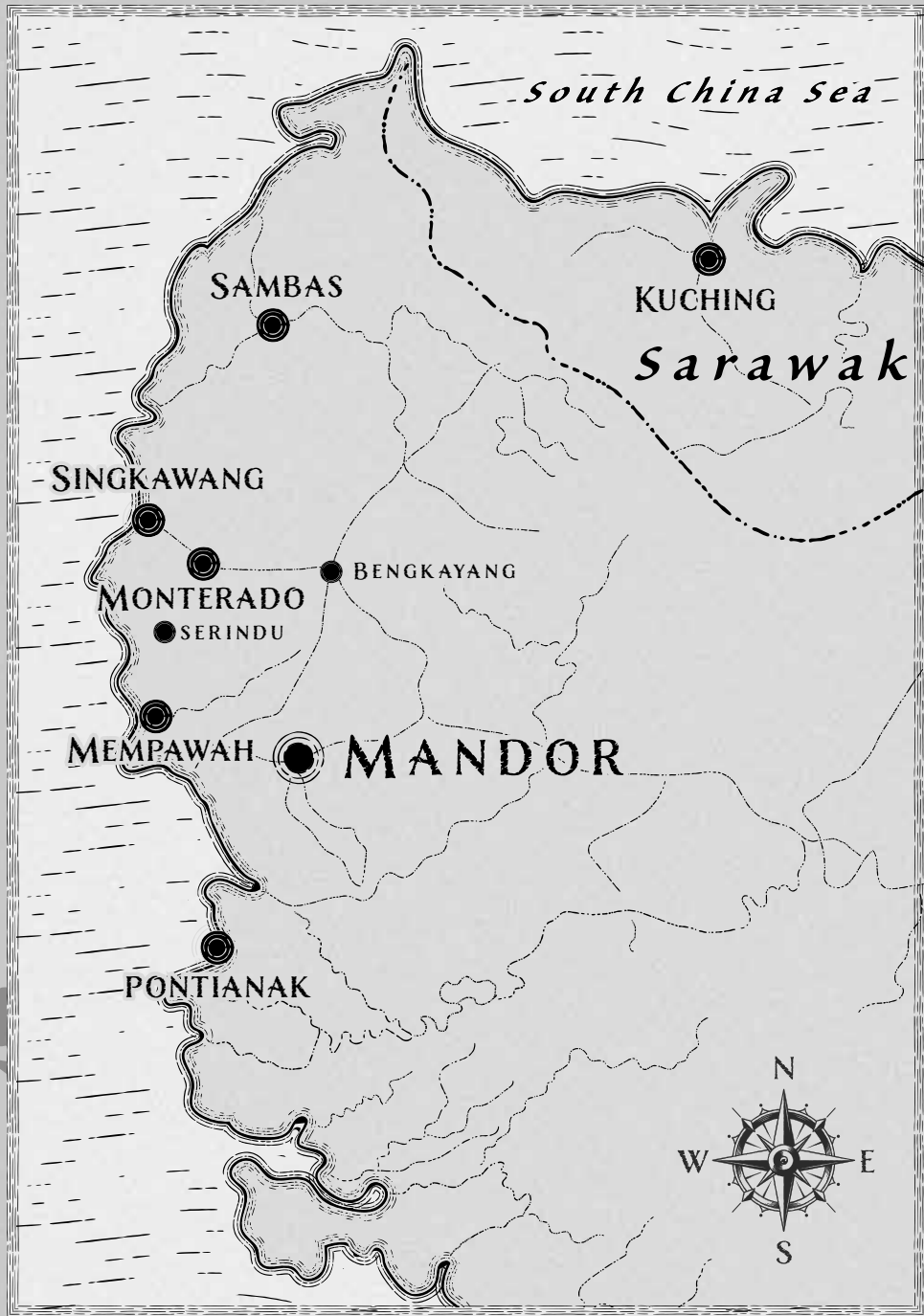
TAN LIP HONG



LOST TREASURE
OF THE
LANFANG REPUBLIC
E
EPIGRAM

For my wife

THE LANFANG REPUBLIC



PROLOGUE

She came rushing in in her fussy old way, smelling of libraries and old books.

“Why are you still here?” she asked, squinting impatiently at Hector, her reading glasses swinging on a thin chain at her chest.

“Waiting for you,” Hector said testily.

“Waiting? What for? I’ll make my own way there when I’m done here. Get going now, or the committee’s going to be on my back again.”

She wasn’t as young as she used to be, and was prone to periods of haziness when she would dream of hill stations in India or the windy Malabar Coast, where she’d once spent her youth. She was wearing her summer sundress of flowery thin cloth, well suited to the recent hot days—it seemed that the days were always hot now. Her hair was pure white, tied up in a small bun at the back of her head, unruly strands escaping here and there, making her seem like some patient in her sickbed. There was nothing wrong with her; she just didn’t like to spend time with trifles.

“Okay, I’m going, I’m going,” Hector smiled. “See you later.”

He kissed his aunt on the left cheek, then skipped down the stairs and was gone through the door before she turned around to face the room again.

Putting on her reading glasses, she scanned the unruly room in front of her: books and magazines piled high on the old, heavy teak desk, more books and journals and files on old wooden shelves, bookcases that ran from floor to rafter, old papers strewn here and there on the worn sofa. She shook her head. Impossible to catalogue, all this stuff. Why even try?

When her husband Hean was still alive, they had tried, but failed. And when he had died, she had tried again and failed. There was just too much here, collected over decades, a lot of them antiques centuries old. The oldest bound volumes were of the first-known woodblock-printed sheets, containing Buddhist mantras—fragile when they were first produced, impossible to handle now. There were invaluable items here, but one had to sort through thousands of other old books, Qing-dynasty instruction manuals, ancient edicts, obscure original manuscripts, communist-era publications, forgotten journals, first-draft research papers, first-edition volumes, geographical and natural history periodicals, a ton of termite-eaten *Life* magazines, and newspaper clippings, before one might come to the important stuff.

She sighed. When she was gone, who would be able to do this? The lot would be dumped, for sure. Because to really, properly catalogue everything and do these books and documents justice, there would have to be enough history, geography and language experts at hand. A lot of them would be donated to the National Library, some kept, and the rest thrown out.

Finding what she was looking for in this mess would be like looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack, but she had no choice; there really wasn't much time left. Where was it that she had last laid eyes on it, that thin, unbound sheaf of papers? Two-and-a-half dozen pages of notes handwritten in beautiful Chinese calligraphy, with an accompanying translation in English. It had been so long ago, when Hean was still alive. That had been one of his endless passions, and he had spent years tracking it down, then translating it and doing more research in libraries and universities across the region, talking to experts on the subject. He had spent so many years on this—his years in the wilderness, he liked to call them. He was still on the quest when he died. His life's quest. And it was always the same: so near and yet so far.

Thinking about him made her eyes misty. She remembered the way

he had been, the places they had been to, swimming off the pristine Malabar coast where the water was warm, walking the ancient streets of India, or standing on the shores of the Ganges watching thin old men with long white beards bathe themselves in the holy river.

She willed herself to stop thinking about him and concentrate on the task at hand. She had to find it. It was here somewhere. There was not much time now. With a tremor in her hands, she searched through the stacks of books and papers. Her hands tremored often now, even when she was not the least bit excited. Her knuckles were swollen and pained her much. She had stiffness in her fingers in the mornings, and sometimes, her left ring finger triggered badly.

But she had fire in her still, and a single-mindedness that age had not dulled. Through the piles she searched. On the high shelves, in the drawers and behind them, standing unsteadily on the wooden stepladder. The whole place was filled with dust, and many of the old manuscripts had to be handled carefully. When the sun dipped low on the horizon and the shadows grew long and the light too dim, she turned on the electric light and continued searching.

It had to be here somewhere. In the final weeks of his life, Hean had spent many hours in this room, turning things upside down, desperate to find whatever it was he was searching for. Whatever order there used to be in the place had been completely destroyed by his desperate sifting.

"I'm not far," he kept saying. "Not far now. Almost there..."

And no one knew if he was really serious in those days, if he was really lucid or had fallen into some form of dementia. He scribbled endlessly in those days, sheaves of notes in his near illegible handwriting, made worse by his final weakness. He spoke as if he were still in the Sarawak Museum on the banks of the Sarawak River in leafy Kuching, or back in Bangladesh during the excavation of Vasu Vihara.

“My life’s work,” he mumbled. “For posterity...all this...almost there...”

She teared up again, thinking of all this, her fingers still sifting through the articles and books. She was bone thin, but seldom cold, although now, as a sudden breeze blew through the room from the open window, bringing with it a hint of coldness as if a storm was near, she shivered in spite of herself, the cloisonné-on-brass locket on her chest knocking against her breastbone. She could feel its weight now, its physical weight; she tried not to think of the weight of what was hidden in it. Best to let sleeping dogs lie.

Continuing to sift through the papers on the study desk, she came upon something mixed in with Hean’s other writings.

Wait. Was this it? What she had been searching for?

The sheaf of papers was folded in half, but it felt right. There was a familiarity to it. With trembling hands, she unfolded the pile and looked at the first page, yellowed with age. She scanned and quickly flipped through the other pages.

Yes, this was it. She clenched her fists and punched the air excitedly. She had finally found it! She took a deep breath. She couldn’t wait to tell Hector, to finally let him know about these papers. It was a legacy of sorts, now passed down to him.

But there was no time to think about that now. She needed to keep the papers safe. There had been danger before, and there would be danger again. Quickly, she looked around for a folder or a bag, something to put the papers in.

The wind came again, and she put her hands down on the papers to prevent them from flying around.

Someone had opened the door.

She looked up and saw a large, muscular man.

Suspicious immediately, she tried to think quickly. What should she do now?

“Yes?” she asked, trying to sound irritated and impatient. “What do you want?”

Her hands were still on the table, frantically pushing the papers under the other mess on the desk.

The man was eyeing her face intently, and her heart stopped when something made him look down, at her nervous hands on the desk.

He crossed the room right up to her, and stood in front of the heavy desk. He was wearing a light jacket and his hair was cropped short, fully exposing his thick neck and deeply tanned skin. She wasn’t sure if he was Chinese or Malay or some other Southeast Asian.

“Mrs Kee,” the man said. “I knew your husband.”

His voice was a deep growl, and he had an accent she couldn’t quite place. Not local. She squinted, trying to place him.

“You knew Kay Hean?” she asked, hoping that someone, Trixie, or Jane or one of the other assistants would come by.

“Yes,” the man said. “I knew him. I knew him well. A long time ago. He was a fool and a traitor. I would say this to his face, but he is no longer with us.”

His tone was harsh, but his eyes were glazed, as if remembering an old friend. He reached out and took her chin in his hand, turning it from left to right as he studied her face.

“You have something that I want,” he said, his voice low.

“Let go of me,” she said, but just as she tried to shake off his grip on her chin, his hand moved quickly to her chest, and in one swift motion, yanked at the locket resting on her chest. The thin chain snapped, and the man gathered everything up, locket and chain, in his large palm.

“You don’t know how long I’ve been waiting to have this in my hand,” he said, baring his teeth.

She put her hand up to the place on her throat where the chain had snapped, and tried to remember if she had seen him before.

He put down his large hand and his actions were brisk.

“Come,” he motioned for her to follow him as he backed slowly towards the door he had come through.

Her eyes flashed, but her arms were extended stiffly by her sides.

“I don’t know what you are up to,” she said, “but you better leave now.”

“I said come,” he said darkly.

Reluctantly, she went around the desk towards him, hiding the papers from his view with her body. She could sense that he was dangerous, but maybe he had got what he wanted with the locket and would now leave.

Please leave, she prayed.

He pointed to the middle of the room where a messy pile of papers still lay on the ground: “Here.”

She moved hesitantly, stealing a glance at the door behind the man and hoping against hope that someone would come through it and stop all this.

“Now,” he said, and he always liked the next part, which he said clearly to her:

“Get down on your knees—”

She looked at him angrily. “What in the world are you talking about?”

“I said”—he went behind her, moving fast for a big man, and kicked her roughly in the back of both of her frail knees—“get down on your knees...”—and she fell unsteadily onto her knees.

“And pray...”

She felt something cold against her left temple.

Steadying herself carefully, she started to pray, and thought again of Hean, and wistfully, of India.

You look beautiful, Sook Lian, Hean was saying in the waning light along the golden coast. I love you—

And when the shot came, she didn’t even hear it.

PART ONE

SHAKE-HEAD PILL

1

Banyan Tree Resort, Bintan Island, Bintan Regency, Indonesia

Hector awoke with a start. For a long moment, he didn't know where he was. His body ached all over, but the sheets were smooth and clean, the bed big and properly firm. The room was dark, quiet: only the soft hiss of the air conditioner could be heard.

It was strangely pleasant, this moment of amnesia, but at the back of his mind he knew that everything would soon come flooding back and he would become overwhelmed.

He turned over in the bed and dozed for a while longer, and when he awoke again, the light in the room was different, brighter. A faint mustiness hung in the air, like mould on old wood or damp folded clothes. It reminded him of the sea and old boats with dirty bilges.

He lay with his arms spread out on the spacious hardwood four-poster bed, facing the ceiling, and the events of the past few weeks slowly came back to him. He remembered the wake, the throngs of relatives and people he'd never met offering their condolences, the white tent, the wreaths of flowers, the endless rites, his own deep grief and overwhelming exhaustion. He remembered the leathery-skinned monks in saffron robes and the unkempt youths of the funeral band. He remembered the sound of the chanting, the music

of the marching band, the endless drone of conversation among relatives and friends meeting for the first time in many years. He remembered the smell of the joss sticks mixed with that of the flowers from the wreaths.

It had been a closed casket, because what remained of his aunt after the fire hadn't been pleasant. The old house, the grand old house, along with everything in it, had been burnt to the ground.

And his aunt, frail yet feisty, headstrong and independent, was gone forever. She had been this way to him for as long as he could remember, it seemed: hair pure white, and delicate but full of strength. In this sense, she had been there for him for as long a time, ever since his parents had died. He had been her only living relative after his uncle's death, and she had been his. There were days when he imagined that she would outlive him even, but now, suddenly, urgently and without reason, she was gone.

And it did seem urgent—the final few weeks. There seemed to be so much going on, his aunt unusually restless. The National Library Board had been interested in a large part of his uncle's collection, and his aunt was keen to donate the most valuable books and documents to them. She hired three assistants to help out at her own expense. They were undergraduate and graduate students, and they came in the afternoons and on weekends, cataloguing books and papers, organising the mess into neat piles. There was much to be done, and the work was painstakingly slow. They worked in white cotton gloves to separate the oldest papers and books with plain white acid-free paper, matted and framed the most fragile of volumes under conservation glass. Over the weeks, it became clear that there was a lot that was valuable here, and the chief librarian who came over to help with the cataloguing and databasing never failed to admonish Hector's aunt to increase security around the house.

"These are priceless!" the chief librarian would say as she walked around his uncle's library. White-gloved herself, she would carefully

examine the volumes, sighing at the sight of their disintegration under attack by mould and silverfish and booklice. The bound volumes from after the 1840s were brittle and yellow due to the lignin and acids present in the paper.

“Mrs Kee, please, *please*, keep these volumes safe. Remember to lock up the library at night! If anyone knew about this collection...”

But his aunt had brushed off her concern. She had been living with these books in this house for decades, and nobody had tried to steal anything.

In days long past, when she had been younger, her husband used to entertain earnest researchers and graduate and post-graduate students in his library. Those were the days when his private collection of books on South and Southeast Asia was known to be the most extensive in the country, and his knowledge and scholarship on the subject even more so, garnering him great respect. He had published many papers of repute, and he had travelled widely, sourcing for old books and papers in antiquarian bookstores, libraries and private collections. His published works on overseas Chinese in South and Southeast Asia were exemplary. His esteem, coupled with his approachable nature, his keenness to teach and share his knowledge, even if a discourse ran late into the night, ensured a steady stream of visitors to the old house and library.

Of course, in those days, the library was much neater, even if he never had a very coherent system of cataloguing his volumes. He just knew where everything was. *A Hundred Years of Chinese in South East Asia?* Third shelf, second row, first cupboard on the right. *Admiral Cheng Ho and the Spread of Islam in the Malay Archipelago?* Two shelves below that. *Suvarnabhumi & Suvarnadvipa: The Golden Land & Peninsula?* Three shelves up and two rows to the right. These and ten thousand other volumes he had filed neatly and logically in his head.

Yet, even then, there was already the one thing that gnawed at

his reputation among his closest peers, even if it was not widely known, and that was his conviction of the validity of his long and lonely quest: the hours he spent chasing cold clues, poring over old papers, visiting old smoke-blackened temples and ancient shrines, photographing and pencil-tracing bas-relief calligraphy. It was his obsession, this quest, and no one really understood it. From the beginning, he spent many evenings trying to convince his closest friends of the existence of the site and the trail to it, and they had long arguments into the night.

“You’re talking about some Holy Grail or Yamashita’s gold—it *doesn’t* exist,” they would say and shake their heads.

He ignored them and persisted. And over the years, as his own conviction grew stronger, his friends’ in him grew weaker. Their eyes would glaze over whenever he began another long tirade, until, in the end, he withdrew, and never spoke of his quest to any of them again, not to anyone except Sook Lian, but even she was only half-listening to him most of the time.



Hector lay in bed in the unfamiliar room thinking of all this, half-awake, coming in and out of strange dreams, dreams of the happy days of his past, of his uncle’s strange and lonely quest, his aunt’s quiet strength, and then it hit him again. The pang, strong and sudden, a stab at his heart, and he felt the overwhelming grief, the regret, the crippling fear of death and finality—

His aunt was gone, forever.

If only he hadn’t left early that day. If only he had waited at the old house for his aunt. Let the committee wait, so what... *If only...*

He sighed and slowly and painfully sat up, his legs hanging over the side of the high bed, his head hung. His whole body ached all over, and he didn’t even know why. He felt old and useless.

It's my fault, he thought. If I had been there, I could have at least done something...

He got up slowly, pulling aside the sheer curtains hanging around the bedframe, and in the half-light, walked to the bathroom, where it was brighter, the light coming in from a large window next to the shower, through which he could see an expansive view of the sea from up high. He took his time showering, letting the lather and the water wake him up, stretching his muscles as he soaped his back, breathing slowly.

At about 1.75 metres, Hector was not particularly tall. He had a lean build, his muscles still firm from occasional trips to the gym, cycling and swimming, although he had let his regime slide in recent months. His dark hair was neat, though in need of a trim. He had a non-distinct face, a flat nose, small eyes, slight brows and a well-defined jaw.

By the time he'd finished brushing his teeth and shaving, he felt better, more ready to face the world. He changed into a fresh set of tee-shirt and shorts and ordered breakfast from the room service menu. The price was exorbitant, but he didn't feel like going all the way down to the restaurant. He pulled up all the Roman and rattan blinds covering the large windows facing the sea, and opened the sliding door leading to the outdoor jacuzzi, so that the lingering dankness might clear.

The smell of the sea and the humidity hit him together, along with the constant tinnitus-like buzzing of the cicadas lurking in the green vegetation on the hillside surrounding his villa. He walked out onto the private hardwood deck, feeling the fresh morning breeze on his face, and sat down at the outdoor table in the shade of the roof eaves.

The view before him was magnificent—the high hilly coast, the greenery, the sparkling sea way down below with a few jelutongs dotting its surface. A white crane soared among the treetops on the

steep slopes, and an eagle glided on the thermal currents already forming at this time of day.

As Hector looked out at the sea, his mind wandered, remembering other times, times when life was not this heavy. But he could not deny his situation now, sitting here in this self-imposed exile. He had left the country while the investigation was ongoing, even when the police had told him not to.

He remembered the day in the white interview room at the Criminal Investigation Department Headquarters on North Bridge Road, a stark, new, high-tech building, as all government buildings were these days—all business, without subtlety or grace.

“Do you know of any reason why anyone would want to hurt your aunt?” the lead detective on the case, Inspector Kwok, had asked him.

Hurt her? Deliberately murder her, to be more accurate—an execution.

He couldn't think about it. It was not possible, it did not feel real, and it did not make sense. He didn't know why anyone would want to hurt her. For the rare books? His uncle's research? What? But they had burnt everything down. Everything. Every priceless volume. Everything his uncle had painstakingly collected in his lifetime—all gone.

Why?

The inspector shifted in his seat, taking Hector in in his intense gaze. He opened a beige folder in front of him, and looking through it, told Hector what he needed to know “at this point in time”.

The damage from the fire had been extensive by the time the first fire engine arrived. There was no way of saving anything—or anyone. The old one-storey bungalow had concrete foundations and reinforced concrete beams and columns, but the floorboards, walls, doors, windows and roof beams were all made of hardwood, and then there were the flammable books in the library. The fire had started in the library and then spread quickly from there,

consuming the whole house in less than two hours, despite the best efforts of the firefighters.

The fire department had suspected arson, and two bodies had been found in the house, both burnt beyond recognition. Hector's aunt had been identified by her dental records, but the other person had not been identified, although useful DNA samples had been obtained. The forensic pathologist had established the cause of death of his aunt as "death from gunshot wound to the left temple", likely execution style, with the muzzle of the gun placed against her temple. There had been no smoke in her lungs. The other person was an adult male with previous surgery done to the left leg and right arm for fractures. The condition of his bones and internal organs placed his age somewhere between forty to fifty, but such estimates are inaccurate and limited by the badly burnt state of the body.

Hector's aunt's body had been found in the library, and the other body near the back of the house, outside the kitchen. It was not known what the other person was doing in the house, nor the motive for his aunt's murder. It was not known what, if anything, had been stolen.

Hector looked out to sea, thinking. *Did the murderer burn down the house to cover their tracks? Or so that no one might know what had been stolen? Or to disguise the other person's identity?*

He had nothing to go on. Neither had the police. They had interviewed his uncle's old friends and colleagues, his aunt's friends, as well as the chief librarian and the assistants helping with the cataloguing of the books. They had spoken to the neighbours. No one had seen or heard anything until thick black smoke had engulfed the house. The smell of rain had been in the air, even though it had not rained. The neighbours ran out of their houses. Two of them called the fire brigade. They all thought it was a waste that the old house had gone up in smoke. They didn't know why,

and they didn't know that anyone had been inside the house.

The national newspapers reported on the incident, a small story tucked away on the inside pages. It stated plainly that the old house had recently been gazetted for conservation, and that two people had been in the house at the time of the fire. They looked up his uncle's past and there was a short write-up on that, but nothing more than two paragraphs. They mentioned the donation of his priceless books to the National Library, that his wife had been one of the two people who had perished in the fire, and that the police had suspected arson. It wasn't big news, and it was soon forgotten.

There was a knock on the courtyard door. His breakfast had arrived. Hector got up and opened the door for the waiter, who brought his breakfast on a large tray. He set everything out on the table: a basket of warm toast and buns; little dishes of preserves, marmalade, chilled butter and margarine; a bowl of muesli with fresh milk; a plate of frankfurter sausages, poached tomatoes and two eggs cooked sunny-side up; a platter of fresh fruit; a glass of tomato juice; and a pot of Darjeeling tea. Everything was served in white china plates, bowls and cups, with matching utensils and starched white napkins, folded neatly beside a copy of the morning's paper.

Hector tipped the waiter, then sat down and poured himself a cup of tea, stirring in the sugar absently. On any other day, this might be a pleasant experience. It was one of his favourite parts of being on holiday and spending time in a hotel: luxuriating over a big breakfast.

He picked up the paper and flipped through it aimlessly. The second war in Iraq was dragging on; in America, President Bush's approval rating was taking a beating. There was something about the war in Darfur, about Muslim anger in Europe, and at home, there was news about the SARS epidemic and the continuing controversy over the impending hanging of a Malaysian drug trafficker.

Then, in the World Briefs section, something caught his eye. There had been a commotion in Central London, at first thought to be a terrorist-related attack. Witnesses described how an antique dealer had been shot in the head after being made to kneel in his antique shop. His shop had then been torched. A huge team of police officers arrived at the scene and blocked the streets off, but the perpetrator had escaped. Witnesses described him as a muscular, dark-skinned man. The police were currently sifting through the London public surveillance CCTV system to identify him.

Hector sat up in his chair. *Antique dealer. Execution style. Shop torched.*

His heart racing, he read through the article again. There were no names and no other details.

He had to find out more. He got up from his chair and went into the bedroom. Where had he left his laptop? He searched through his travel bag and the pile of clothes and magazines that he had brought with him until he finally found the laptop in a drawer of the bedside table and its adaptor in a pocket of his travel bag. There were power sockets but no LAN socket. He called up the front desk of the hotel, and the concierge told him that there was no internet connection available in guest villas.

“We do have internet facilities available in our conference centre,” the concierge said in an Indonesian lilt. “However, the centre is currently fully booked for the next two days.”

Hector put the phone down and cursed.

Six hundred bucks a night and no internet connection.

He thought about it and decided it was best to head home. He was wasting his time here. He called the front desk again and asked them to prepare his bill immediately, then started stuffing his laptop, adaptors, novels, magazines and clothes (clean and dirty) into his bag. As usual, the bag seemed smaller on the way back than on the way here. Just as he was straining to zip his bag up, the in-room phone rang.

He hadn't told anyone where he would be. Maybe it was the front desk. He reached over and picked up the phone.

“Hello?” he said.

“Hello,” said the voice at the other end, “is this Mr Hector Yan?”

“Yes,” Hector answered. The voice was familiar, but he couldn't place it. It was someone he had spoken to before.

“This is Inspector Kwok from the special investigation section of the CID.”

Inspector Kwok. Hector remembered the tanned, squat man in his forties who had interviewed him after his aunt's death had been discovered.

“Yes, Inspector? Is there something wrong?”

“What are you doing on Bintan Island, Mr Yan? We clearly told you not to leave the country while the investigation is still ongoing.”

Hector sighed. He wasn't in the mood to justify his actions to the inspector. Why did he decide to pack up and leave? Perhaps it was because he was tired of his phone ringing incessantly. Perhaps he was tired of having to put up with all his well-meaning friends and relatives asking him how he was doing, tired of the mess at work that accumulated when he was away at the wake, and the police nuisance, on top of all that. He just needed some peace and quiet, to get away from all that. Time to work things through, to deal with his private and very real grief.

“I just needed to get away,” he told the inspector. “From everything and everyone. I needed time to think.”

“I know you're going through a difficult time, Mr Yan, but please don't do this again. If you need to go anywhere, at least let us know. It would be a waste of time for us to investigate if you have absconded because of guilt or if you have fallen to your aunt's fate. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Hector said. “I'm sorry. It won't happen again.”

“As long as we are clear on this.”

“We’re clear on this.”

“Good,” Inspector Kwok said. “The reason I’m calling is that we need you to come in for another interview.”

“Another interview? Why?”

“I am unable to discuss this over the phone. When can you come in?”

“Actually, I just finished packing for home. There is something I would also like to discuss with you. I’ll be on the 2.30pm ferry back, if I can get a ticket.”

“All right. Call me when you get back. You have my card, or do I have to give you my number again?”

“No, I’ve got your number.”

“Good,” the Inspector said, and hung up.

Hector grabbed his bag, surveyed the villa one last time to make sure he hadn’t left anything behind, and walked out the sliding door.

2

*Criminal Investigation Department Headquarters,
Major Crime Division, Cantonment Complex, Singapore*

Inspector Kwok Hiok Meng hung up the phone and cursed silently. There were always people who went out of their way to make one’s job tougher. He shifted his huge bulk in the wobbly, black swivel chair, turned to face his computer terminal, and started checking through his emails.

A single man of forty-three, Inspector Kwok had been in the force for twenty-five years, working his long way up from constable to inspector, unlike the young recruits nowadays, always hurrying to go someplace else. He sported a crew cut that accentuated his wide face and stern eyes, and he had long ago developed a double chin and was putting on weight around the middle. Age had not softened his rough edges; his people skills were not on par with some of his younger colleagues, and he never put much stock in his personal appearance. Even at official functions, at annual dinners or when he received his Long Service Award on National Day the year before, he still managed to look the way he always did—scruffy and untidy, as if what he had on didn’t fit him at all, like he didn’t really fit in this new world of SOPs, paperwork, politics and protocol.

He was inspector now, and that was a dead end in terms of advancement. Not that it mattered much to him in terms of the work. He, like a lot of old officers he knew, enjoyed investigative work best. And he was good at it too, having been at it for such a long time. He had an old-timer's instinct and doggedness, and didn't waste his time on staff duties or liaison work. Around here, he was known as the resident bulldog: he never let go until he got his man.

His one major flaw, as far as his superiors were concerned, was that he was less than thorough in his paperwork and quite often was not able to officially explain how his leads got him to his answers. He was a poor follower of operating procedure and protocol, as well as a bad witness at inquests, where he never sounded convincing, and in court, where he was liable to get himself entangled in legal knots. These were the things that got him flustered, and he had more than once entertained the thought of leaving the force before his pension was due, to start out on his own: "Kwok Security and Detective Agency", or even "H. M. Kwok, Private Investigator".

But things were not really that much better on the outside, where the bigger, established agencies dominated the market, and what work was there outside anyway? Divorce cases and security jobs.

No, he was too old and settled to really rouse himself now. Better to hang around, continue doing what he did best, collect his monthly paycheque and his Long Service Awards. Then, when he had the time, kick back with his favourite Tiger Beer in front of the TV to catch a good football match, or better yet, on his free weekends, make that long drive up to Punggol Point with his rods, tackle and fishing gear, take the boat out, and spend the day fishing at the quiet coves along the north shore.

Even now, trawling through his emails, he could smell the sting of the half-combusted fumes from the two-stroke outboards at the boatel where he and a few of his friends kept their battered seventeen-footer. He could hear the sound of the outboard coming

to life, feel the way the petrol tank always rubbed against the outside of his calf when he carried it.

The inspector loved the sea—the smell of it, the sea spray in his face, the sea salt drying on his skin. And he liked the way he could spend peaceful time away from the world anchored at quiet coves, content in his own musings with a cold beer from the cooler, simply waiting for a fish to bite, waiting for that next whopper.

"Inspector Kwok," John, his partner, called from the other end of the open-plan office, snapping him out of his reverie.

"Yah?" Kwok answered gruffly.

"I've got the latest from the London Metropolitan Police regarding the shooting in central London."

Kwok heaved himself out of his chair and walked across the office to John's terminal.

John, a bespectacled and well-groomed young man, was bent over his computer, turning his head now and then to speak to Inspector Johari, another one of his mentors. When Kwok came to his side, John scrolled down the computer screen so that Kwok could see the long report and its attachments. John had obviously been keeping up to date.

"What's new?" Kwok asked, figuring that since John had probably been through the whole report, he might as well get the skinny from him.

"The deceased has been identified as a Lee Chiow Sieu, age fifty-four, British citizen since 1983. Grew up in Pontianak in West Kalimantan, Indonesia, but his family moved to Sarawak in East Malaysia when he was a boy. Got his primary, secondary and pre-university education in Kuching, and did well enough to earn a BMT scholarship to the UK in '68—"

"BMT?"

"British-Malayan Tobacco."

"Ah."

“He majored in history at the University of London and graduated at the top of his class,” John continued. “Then went back to Kuching and got a desk job at the BMT branch there. Apparently, he travelled quite a bit around the region over the next few years. In ’74, he broke his bond with BMT, returned to the UK and found a job at Christie’s, a low-level one. He was posted to Hong Kong in ’77 for a short stint and again travelled around the Southeast Asian region quite extensively. In 1980, he became the sub-head of the Chinese ceramics department, but then had a falling out with some people in Christie’s and left to start out on his own.

“Within six months of leaving, he made the news by acquiring and selling a Ming vase for a price of four hundred fifty thousand pounds, a record at the time. Over the years, although he was based in London, he continued to travel widely in the East. He’d been acquiring, by not entirely legal means, antiques from the region, from Chinese porcelain to Buddhist relics and Hindu artefacts, including numerous lingas from sites in Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries. Many of the pieces came from dubious sources, hacked or chiselled from heritage sites without permission and illegally exported, most with fabricated export permits and provenances.

“The antique shop was saved from being burnt down, and the Met Police has carted off most of what was salvaged for their scene-of-crime work. Apparently, there’s also a large warehouse somewhere. They are also still combing through their public surveillance footage for a good image of their man. We’ve got the ballistics report, though. The murderer used a .40 calibre gun, same as our case.”

“Did Lee have any enemies?” Kwok asked.

“A long list,” said John. “None of whom we can exclude as a suspect explicitly at this time. After years of shady dealings in valuable objects, who knows?”

“Any link to anyone in Singapore? To the Kee family?”

“None that we are aware of at the moment. He did transit through the country a few times, and he probably has contacts with a few dealers here, but Singapore is not really a hotspot for high-value antiques. Anyway, I would guess that whoever has had contact with him would be tight-lipped for obvious reasons.”

Kwok sighed. “Anything else to connect the London shooting to our case here? Besides the MO and ballistics?”

“We are cooperating with the Met Police at the moment,” Inspector Johari chipped in. “We have sent our ballistics images over to them for matching and are awaiting their reply.”

“Good. And the suspect?”

“Witnesses describe him as squat, well-built and tanned,” John said. “That’s all we have at the moment. I think the Met Police has a photofit from some of the witnesses, but we haven’t received it yet, and we’re still awaiting results from the surveillance cameras.”

“Any useful DNA or prints?”

“There are some, but unfortunately more than one set. From the customers to the shop, firemen and some from the Armed Response Vehicle officers and the Special Arms Officers.”

“What about our own scene-of-crime guys? Have we got anything else from them?”

John shook his head. “No.”

“We’ll have to do this the hard way then.” Kwok straightened up and started pacing the room. “Re-interview Mr and Mrs Kee’s acquaintances. Look up antique dealers in Singapore and ask them about Lee and the Kees, see if there’s any connection between the motives and the timing of these two murders. Another murder to do with Southeast Asian antiques, with the same MO. Is it really just a coincidence? And why specifically a gun to the left temple, execution style? Is he trying to tell us something?”

Inspector Kwok felt the adrenaline course through him. There was movement in the case at last.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This work was inspired by my grandfather, scholar and historian, once owner of the Sambas Treasure and translator of the Guangdong Inscription.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the judges of the Epigram Book Fiction Prize 2022, Professor Shirley Chew, Amir Muhammad, T. Sasitharan, Margaret Thomas and especially Edmund Wee, who initiated the prize, without which I think this book would not have seen the light of day.

I would also like to thank my editor Wu Xueting for her hard work in literally tearing the story apart. She has been amazingly meticulous in correcting my prose and grammar, and in researching and fact-checking every tiny detail in the book, resulting in an overall better and more authentic read. My thanks as well to Jason Erik Lundberg for sharing his invaluable experience and advice.

Nikki Rosales deserves a shout-out for a beautiful layout and a very well-executed cover design.

I am grateful to my parents for starting me on this long journey many years ago by getting my first novel published. In addition, I appreciate all the invaluable help and opinions given to me by family and friends who have read through the original manuscript, especially Leong Yan Hoi, who took pains to critique everything from my language and research to pointing out factual inaccuracies.

Last but not least, my gratitude goes to my wife for her steadfast support and advice, and for always being there—my rock.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tan Lip Hong is a general practitioner in private practice in the heartlands of Singapore. He spent five years in Leicester, England, studying for his medical degree, and while there produced his first novel, *The Russian Pigeon*, which won the Commendation Award at the 1988 NBDCS Book Awards. He is also the author of several published non-fiction works, contributing chapters in *A Nation Awakes: Frontline Reflections* and *Teacher Thinker Rebel Why: Portraits of Chee Soon Juan*.



The annual Epigram Books Fiction Prize promotes contemporary creative writing and rewards excellence in Southeast Asian literature. It is awarded to the best manuscript of a full-length, original and unpublished novel. Originally restricted to Singaporean citizens, permanent residents and Singapore-born writers, the EBFP is now open to all of Southeast Asia for novels written in or translated into the English language.

For more information, go to **EBFP.EPIGRAMBOOKS.SG**

What if the first modern republic in the world was not America or France but a gold-rich state founded in 1777 in the middle of West Kalimantan?



Hector's quiet life is rocked when his aunt is brutally murdered. He throws himself into investigating her death, and discovers a connection to the expeditions undertaken decades ago by his late uncle, a famous archaeologist obsessed with searching for lost treasure from a former republic in the thick jungles of Kalimantan.

Hector sets off on a perilous journey, travelling from Singapore to Shanghai, Kuala Lumpur and West Kalimantan, in a desperate race against time to uncover the treasure that could change the world as we know it.

FICTION

ISBN 978-981-49-8473-7



www.epigram.sg