THE GENIUS OF ASIA: A NOVEL AND EXEGESIS

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EXEGESIS:

Investigation of estrangement in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*

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Summary

The creative component of this thesis, *The Genius of Asia*, is a novel set in Hong Kong soon after the SARS pandemic in 2003. The story is about Yu, a local, desperate, young male graduate, who takes a job in a funeral parlour. He has grown up in Wong Tai Sin, a working class district that houses a large portion of Hong Kong’s aged population, new immigrants from Mainland China, and some who become psychotic because they cannot handle the stress of modern living. The socio-economical conditions in the area compel him to be resourceful in seeking employment. However, he belongs to the younger and more cosmopolitan generation of Hong Kongers, and working in a funeral parlour forces him to encounter many traditional Chinese practices. He feels quite alienated and estranged when he departs his customary post-colonial British world, where materialism and modern technology prevail, to work in the strange world of the funeral business, where death, beliefs, ghosts, traditions and pragmatism intermingle. So begins an adventure.

My exegesis explores the literary concept of estrangement and the estrangement effect in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston’s autobiographical narrative depicts her childhood as a Chinese American. I suggest that the work achieves estrangement in two ways. First, Kingston translates and adapts Chinese linguistic and cultural elements – myths and talk stories, in particular – into her English writing. Her translation creates a literary fusion of Chinese culture and American ideology, thus creating a hybridity that estranges culture-oriented readings. Second, Kingston’s narrative employs the form of Chinese talk story which, as a performance art, estranges the audience in the same way Chinese operas do. Thus,
Kingston’s style resembles Bertolt Brecht’s estrangement theory of theatre performance.

In the final section of the thesis, I reflect on the estrangement effects in my novel. I also consider how various estrangement effects influence reader response. Insofar as English is a *lingua franca*, English literary works – regardless of the cultures being portrayed – reach a heterogeneous readership. As an aspiring writer, what have I learnt from my predecessors about narratively assimilating materials from non-English cultures? What is the role of a writer who addresses a culturally diverse audience in a globalised age?
Statement of Authorship

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma.

No other person’s work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

Signed:

Date: 29 October 2012
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The Genius of Asia
PART I

The Dragon Runway
As Yu waited next to the Dragon Runway where hundreds of double-deckers flew past the front door of Wong Tai Sin Temple every day, he believed he had found a means to break out of the doldrums. A smile floated on his face even though he was standing under the noon sun and sweat was streaking down his back. Vehicles flashed past and kicked up clouds of dust particles which gently landed on his hard-gelled hair. Layer upon layer of dust gathered and subsided. Yu began to dance. At the bus stop listening to Pop Radio 997, his knees bent and straightened to the rhythms of the latest hits. He mouthed the Mandarin lyrics and missed ninety per cent of the words. His shiny blue basketball vest soon stuck to his back. He didn’t mind sweating. He turned up the music and thrust his chest in and out, his hips left and right, his shoulders up and down. That was his celebratory dance on the last day of August, as he was confident his unemployed status would end soon.

‘Have you got the post?’ asked the Genius of Asia.
'I have *The Classified Post* in my backpack,’ Yu answered. He tapped his bag and switched to a waving body movement.

The Genius nodded and stared ahead. He stood next to Yu under the same turquoise plastic roof of the bus stop. Sunlight filtered by the roof shone on the Genius’s face and gave him a purple shade as if he was suffocating. Yu was sure that was how his own face looked too. The Genius fixed his gaze at the point where buses swerved and descended into Wong Tai Sin from the neighbouring district on the hill. His empty hands hung loosely at his sides. His red-and-white-striped T-shirt stretched over his bulging stomach and his beige shorts were too tight for his adolescent physique. The Genius appeared to be a wax figure until a lorry thundered by and blew a strand of his greasy hair into his eye, making him blink. The stillness of the Genius contrasted with Yu’s popping, breaking and waving dance.

For the first time, Yu felt at home in Wong Tai Sin, a district named after the temple. He believed this district housed the biggest portion of Hong Kong’s aged population and new immigrants from Mainland China. He had long considered cases of senile dementia, autism, schizophrenia, impulse control disorder or simply delirium to be the district’s general trait. He was not the only person who viewed Wong Tai Sin this way. His ‘brother’ Daniel agreed. As Yu was hip-hop dancing next to the main road that linked the outcast district with its adjoining more decent and even posh neighbours, it occurred to him the denizens of Wong Tai Sin could be congenial company after all.

‘Have you got the post?’ the Genius of Asia asked again.

Yu chose to ignore the Genius this time and continued with his moves. The Genius nodded and stared ahead with the same nonchalance. The Genius waited at the bus stop every day for a post car that he imagined would pass by one day and hand
him a letter. He did no harm to anybody, unlike the vicious grandpa who used to patrol around Morse Park clapping a butcher’s knife under his arm before being institutionalised. The Genius of Asia was a local tragedy.

Four old ladies in violet floral-print sleeveless shirts and matching pants were ‘chilling out’ on the doorstep of the shopping centre behind Yu. They were enjoying the zephyr that flowed from the air-conditioned mall of the district, Dragon Runway Shopping Arcade, named after the main road. The old ladies didn’t mind blocking half of the entrance; it was their territory, even though that meant crowds of shoppers had to squeeze through the remaining one-metre-wide door. Three women with broad-brimmed straw hats who looked like farmers’ wives joined the four old ladies for a chat. The three were holding armfuls of incense sticks, wish candles and coloured-paper gifts for Wong Tai Sin, the Taoist master for whom the temple was built. A bus had stopped in front of Yu to discharge passengers. The three farmers’ wives rushed forwards brandishing their goods despite the heat the bus was radiating. They approached trendy young couples, wealthy-looking families, people with sunglasses and cameras dangling on their chests, foreigners, and all those who didn’t display the eccentricities of Wong Tai Sin residents.

That was how things started. That sweltering day when Yu was waiting for the bus with the Genius of Asia who was waiting for his post, he saw that the only way to get employed when faced with thousands of desperate competitors was to look where normal people didn’t look. It was certainly not the time to worry about being ridiculous, but to tap into areas normal people saw as unappealing. Yu would expect to face his father’s Big Word Slogans soon if he put his plan into practice. But he was determined. The day before, he had been flipping through The Classified Post looking for a job. He had come across an advertisement placed by Kowloon Funeral Parlour
for one full-time assistant responsible for general funeral preparations and procedures. He had dismissed it at the time. But now, the advertisement came back to him in a new light.

‘Have you got …’ said the Genius of Asia.

‘Look, it’s you,’ Yu interrupted, pointing to a double-decker coming towards them.

‘The post?’

‘No.’

It was a bus with an outdated advertisement featuring a teenage boy in a tight red-and-white-striped T-shirt. His arms were crossed in front of his chest. He stared at the camera but didn’t smile. His beady eyes looked like two punctures on a ball of rising dough. It was impossible to guess the train of thought behind the blank face. Four luminous characters on the right of the boy’s portrait appeared in square brackets: ‘The Genius of Asia’. The boy standing next to Yu didn’t even recognise himself. He seemed to have forgotten that once upon a time he had been a potential star in the music industry. About half a year earlier, the boy’s mother believed that she had discovered great voice talent in her twelve-year-old son. She had pushed him to take part in a singing contest on the Mainland. Despite the boy’s terrible singing, he had won first prize because his mother had given the judges a red envelope each. An insignificant government official had presented the prize. He had praised the boy as ‘The Genius of Asia’. And that had ruined a young man’s life.

The boy’s mother hadn’t realised the label was a disadvantage; instead, she had taken it as the springboard to kick-start the boy’s rise to stardom. After they had migrated to Hong Kong, the boy (with support from his mother) had self-produced two songs with complementary music videos featuring himself singing of the beauty of Hong Kong. The effects were terrifying. They had been waiting for a contract from
a recording company when the boy had disappeared from the industry. Very few
people knew that the Genius of Asia had lost his mind. Under the shelter of Kowloon
Metro Bus Company, his personal tragedy had been assimilated into the general
phenomenon that was Wong Tai Sin.

Yu jumped onto the bus that prompted the reminiscence. He was eager to tell
Daniel about his mental breakthrough – his new plan to apply for the funeral parlour
position. He was sure Daniel would be surprised, shocked, despite ten years of
friendship in a basketball team that had trained them to be almost telepathic. But who
wouldn’t? Boldness was the essence of Yu’s new survival strategy. He climbed to the
upper level of the bus and slipped into the seat at the front as was his habit. Strong
wind pushed through the front and side windows as the bus continued along the
Dragon Runway. Yu loosened his sticky vest. He opened his bag to make sure he had
brought along the watch for Daniel. Yu had bought his best friend a data-bank Casio
watch with telememo and calculator functions as a departure gift – Daniel was leaving
for Taiwan the next day. Daniel had been unemployed, like Yu, until a week ago. But
Daniel’s uncle’s former boss, who was an executive in a large corporation in Taiwan,
had agreed to hire Daniel as a stock market teller. The executive had agreed to give
the Hong Kong boy a try. Everyone was elated.

Yu had been assessing the possible outbreak of envy during the last three months
while they were both unemployed. Unless both of us find a job at the same time, the
one who remains unoccupied will very likely feel envious. He had promised himself
not to behave like a bitter housewife in case it was him. Yet now he suffered a
negative emotion he hadn’t anticipated – he would miss Daniel’s company. What a
tormenting week it has been! The mixed emotions: anxiety, inferiority, anger, have
been a lot to feel. But as a self-styled cool computer guy he had somehow managed to
shake off those streaks of emotion and had awakened to the breakthrough. He’d worked out a plan that would surprise many, including himself.

‘Are you sure you are not having a nervous breakdown or something?’ asked Daniel loudly to make himself audible in the karaoke room. ‘Don’t get me wrong. But to work in a funeral parlour is not what people normally want to do.’

‘Not unless they are desperate,’ said Yu.

‘Come on, Yu. You’re not desperate,’ said Daniel.

Yu didn’t answer. Daniel also stopped talking. For the moment they let the awful singing of the three other guys in the room overtake the space. This was the basketball team’s farewell party to Daniel. Daniel and Yu had met the three guys, Ivan, Man and Keith, on the basketball court in Morse Park, the park of Wong Tai Sin named after an Englishman. Yu could look over the park from his bedroom window. He enjoyed the bird’s-eye view from the twenty-fifth floor. Not all apartments in Lower Wong Tai Sin Estate were blessed with beautiful views. He was lucky in this sense. The five of them seemed to get along so well that they had played as a team every Saturday morning.

Here in the small soundproof room, Ivan and Keith each monopolised a microphone and sang, while Man, yelling with his rough voice, achieved the same volume as the other two. Daniel must have also been experiencing a similar emotional tumult over the last week. Yu stared at the lyrics at the bottom of the TV screen. He watched the words slowly turn purple like Ribena filling up word-shaped straws. The line of lyrics vanished and the next line appeared. Then the filling process started all over again.

‘It’s only temporary. You think I really feel like touching dead bodies? I’m not crazy,’ said Yu.
‘You’re not *that* crazy, I guess,’ Daniel laughed. ‘You’re from Wong Tai Sin after all.’

‘You’re just lucky. Your block is on the other side of Morse Park and that makes you a Lok Fu resident,’ Yu retorted.

‘But I’m not “happy and rich” as promised by the name “Lok Fu”,’ said Daniel.

‘No, you’re not. Worse still, you’re hanging out with a bunch of broke guys from Wong Tai Sin,’ said Yu.

‘That’s fate,’ Daniel raised his glass of coke to clink Yu’s iced tea. The crystal clear tinkle was audible to the three singing guys, who threw down their microphones to join the toast.

‘To Daniel!’ Man yelled in his rough voice.

‘To our ridiculous team!’ Ivan jumped up from the couch and almost hit his head on the fake ceiling.

‘What do you mean?’ Keith disagreed with Ivan.

‘To Yu and his job!’ Daniel yelled.

Five glasses joined in the middle of the room lit by the flashing screen. Yu could see it was fate that had united them as a team. Ridiculous or not, it would be a while before they would be reunited in Morse Park. Then Keith, who was the most sensible one among the three, asked, ‘I didn’t know Yu has found a job too.’

‘Not yet, actually. Just planning to apply,’ Yu replied.

‘What kind of job?’ Ivan asked.

‘Funeral parlour assistant,’ Yu said.

‘Cool,’ Keith and Ivan said together with a nod and turned to snatch the microphones from Man. They were from Wong Tai Sin. The three of them were in their early twenties. None of them had studied at university. Instead, they had taken
some low-paid jobs. Ivan was a waiter in a Chinese restaurant, Keith was a salesman at a home electrical appliances store, and Man was a lorry driver. Yu had no clue how the three of them had become friends. Yu and Daniel looked at each other and cackled. Then Yu remembered something.

‘Hey, Daniel. Can you do me a favour?’ asked Yu.

‘Sure. What do you want me to do?’ said Daniel.

‘Do you think you can copy out my application letter by hand?’ asked Yu.

‘What? You’re joking!’ said Daniel.

It was not a joke. The parlour wanted hand-written applications. Yu’s earlier attempt to write out the letter had proved to be a failure, for his handwriting was awful. He brought out a letter pad and envelopes from his backpack and pushed aside the plates and glasses. He wiped down the low table with some dirty serviettes and laid out the stationery.

‘Well, Yu, I’m not refusing but my handwriting is no better than yours,’ said Daniel.

Ivan, Man and Keith offered to help even though none of them had touched a pen in the last three months, at least. Daniel, urged on by the others’ enthusiasm, agreed to Yu’s request. So the next moment, the karaoke room turned into a study. The sound system was silenced, the light was turned up, the table was cleared and the four boys sat on the floor copying Yu’s typed letter. For fifteen minutes there was only the sound of pens scratching sheets of foolscap. The effort by the bunch of Wong Tai Sin lads, plus one from Lok Fu, touched Yu’s heart. Still, it wasn’t a surprise that the result was unsatisfactory. All their written characters were crooked and tilted as if a typhoon had just swept past. And Yu, while thanking the ridiculous team, knew there
was only one person left he could ask for help. He wouldn’t think of asking her if he wasn’t desperate. He had to ask Mina, his little sister.

‘Didn’t I tell you?’ said Daniel giving Yu a sympathetic look.

‘Look, the Genius of Asia!’ howled Man.

‘Oh, no! Who ordered this song?’ said Ivan, shielding his eyes with his spindly chimpanzee-like fingers.

No one answered. But as the lyrics started to turn purple, the three guys driven by conditioned reflex after two hours of singing, all turned to get ready. The Genius of Asia in his heyday appeared in front of the golden bauhinia statue, the gift from Beijing upon Hong Kong’s return to the motherland, at the side of Victoria Harbour. The Genius hadn’t changed much. At the pinnacle of his career he was wearing the same striped T-shirt and tight shorts. He strolled around the golden bauhinia and made stiff gestures, expressionless. His mouth formed shapes of the words that seemed half a second behind time. Ivan, Man and Keith sang along. Yu and Daniel watched, engrossed by the four geniuses of Wong Tai Sin. Yu felt he had to pull his eyes away. He took the watch from his bag and slipped it to Daniel. Daniel looked at him and punched him on the arm. Taiwan was not a faraway place, and like Yu’s potential job, Daniel’s job could be just temporary. *We will see each other again, maybe not soon, but it won’t be long either.* Man shouted as the terrible chorus was repeated one last time; Ivan and Keith competed with their microphones. The mechanical fault that had brought up the song was typical. But as Yu and Daniel also joined in to yell at the screen praising the beauty of Hong Kong, they were all reminded of the Genius of Asia and his bizarre life story.
Yu had foreseen that Mina’s handwritten letter would work a marvel. Three days after the letter had been sent, he received a phone call from Kowloon Funeral Parlour – the first phone call he had ever received from a funeral parlour. It invited him to an interview – an interview quite different from the previous ones he had attended, though there hadn’t been many. His only two interviews – both unsuccessful – had been with computer programming companies since he had graduated with a mediocre degree from a mediocre university and encountered the aftermath of an economic crisis that had swept across Asia. The prompt phone call from the funeral parlour proved to him the accuracy of his intuition on that sweltering day at the bus stop when he stood with the Genius of Asia.

‘Miss Wong Yu, please,’ said a resonant male voice.

‘Yes, this is Wong Yu. But not Miss,’ answered Yu and closed the door of his room. He instinctively lowered his voice because the two walls of his room were flimsy plywood boards. They sectioned out a corner of the otherwise rectangular
sitting room. The hollow partitions were not soundproof. Besides, there was a 30-centimetre-wide gap between the ‘walls’ of his ‘room’ and the ceiling, which was for ventilation when Yu’s father switched on the air-conditioner in the sitting room once in a while. Yu’s room was in fact a cubicle, and he knew that in terms of sound there was no difference between having the door closed or open. Privacy didn’t exist. When his mother came out from the kitchen, she could hear everything.

‘Oh, we thought you were a girl. That’s peculiar. Anyway, this is Kowloon Funeral Parlour. We’d like to invite you over to talk about the job. Will you be able to make it tomorrow at seven o’clock in the evening?’ asked the resonant voice.

‘Tomorrow. Seven o’clock,’ Yu fished out a dusty stack of yellow Post-it notes from his makeshift desk and scribbled down the details. He was wondering why they assumed him to be female, but something else odd struck him. ‘In the evening?’

‘In the evening,’ confirmed the voice. ‘Bring with you a thermos flask of hot tea, a thick jacket and dress warmly but comfortably.’

‘Why?’ asked Yu. It was early autumn, the hottest time of the year.

‘I haven’t finished.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Because we have to put you in a room with a dead body for twelve hours, which means until seven the next morning. Any questions?’

The only question Yu wanted to ask was: ‘Is this for real?’ The resonant voice had just invited him to join an interview with a corpse for a whole night? Images flooded into his mind as if the voice had cast a spell that played a scary movie in his head. He could see zombies, hopping corpses, little girls with hollow eye sockets, twins who moved like a pair of mirror images and sweeping shadows that strangled. I’m going to die in the cellar of the funeral parlour clutching my neck. My ghost will join the fleet
to haunt more innocent funeral apprentices. Oh, it is a prank, isn’t it? He wanted to
dismiss what he had just heard with a laugh, but then he got goose bumps on his arms.

Did the voice say a corpse? A real human corpse? And overnight? His fingers
clutching the handset stiffened.

‘Are you still there, Wong Yu?’ asked the voice. ‘You don’t have to ask a
question if you don’t have one. I know you young people sometimes behave
strangely.’

‘Yes, yes. I’m here,’ Yu jumped to answer. He didn’t want whoever the voice
belonged to think him a weirdo. ‘I have no questions. I will be there tomorrow. Who
should I look for, please?’

‘Look for me. My name is Chung. And we are at no. 1 Maple Street.’

Mina told Yu a story about no. 1 Maple Street when he went to take a street map from
her ‘cubicle’, which divided off the opposite corner of the sitting room. Yu wished
she had kept her creativity to herself and left him to worry on his own. Mina was a
mediocre student. She had shoulder-length hair, a bang and rimless glasses. She was
in her second-last year in an English secondary school. She was perfectly normal
when she didn’t draw, paint, sculpt or practise calligraphy, but she engaged in at least
one of those activities every day. They had become her routine since she had taken up
Fine Arts as one of her subjects. No doubt she was a natural artist; Yu had had
glimpses of the vibrancy of her canvases. What made her slightly abnormal was not
her talent, but the transformation she underwent the moment she picked up an art tool.
She would begin to talk nonsense to anyone in her proximity and, when there was no
one around, she talked to herself.
That was one reason Yu had hesitated to ask Mina to write out his letter. He dreaded she would reveal his secret career intention to their parents by mistake. He had made her agree to keep confidential his decision to earn ‘dead people money’, which was the way their parents would put it. But she with her artist temperament couldn’t be trusted.

The other reason that had held Yu back from approaching Mina for help concerned her handwriting. All the characters manicured by her artistic hands were so ravishing that they didn’t look normal. That afternoon, he had used his mother’s brief absence from the kitchen to ransack the place in search of a thermos flask. He had found the flask shaped like a gigantic bullet camouflaged among jars of sundried tangerine peels, scallops and mushrooms. He remembered his mother had looked at him as if he too had gone mad. He had come out of the kitchen hugging a thermos; she had told him it was early autumn, the hottest time of the year.

Mina was drawing a monochromatic chameleon when she told Yu about the haunted yellow sign that hung outside no. 1 Maple Street. He knew there was a yellow sign but didn’t know it was haunted. The words ‘Kowloon Funeral Parlour’ were in white against a black background during daytime. When the sign was lit up at night, it turned the whole of Maple Street and the nearby flyover bright yellow. Mina held her red crayon in the air for a second and proceeded: ‘Many years ago, there was a night shift minibus driver who drove along the crescent-shaped flyover next to the funeral parlour every night. The yellow colour was so strong that it distorted the driver’s vision and his vehicle would sway by several centimetres. One midnight the driver passed through the pool of yellow light as usual. His van was empty but then he noticed a lady in a vermilion dress sitting in the back row of the minibus. She looked astonishing. The driver couldn’t stop staring at her jet black eyes, beautiful curls and
her matching vermilion lips. The driver gazed at her with all his might until they were out of the funeral parlour’s yellow light and he could no longer see her. Maybe the driver felt suddenly giddy with the loss of light; he lost control of the minibus and it fell over the flyover. There was only one death.’

Yu would normally have sniggered, but he now felt suddenly giddy. Mina’s chameleon sketch in red started to multiply. Green and blue shadows floated in front of his eyes for a while before they dissolved and returned to one again.

*Thanks, Mina. How timely you are to share the ghost story on the eve of my interview at the funeral parlour!*  

He marked the page where Maple Street was indicated among a cluster of streets with botanical names, clasped the street map under his arm and left Mina’s room feeling a little heavier. He threw the map onto his bed next to the thermos flask. He needed a thick coat. All the winter garments were stored in the cupboard above the TV in the sitting room. Seven cupboards of different sizes and shapes were mounted around the TV on Mina’s cubicle partition. They constituted the family’s storage. Yu stood in his mother’s way for the second time that evening. He stretched out to pull down plastic bagfuls of thick coats and blocked the TV from his mother’s view. The noise he was making disturbed his sister’s drawing as well. He must have gone mad – rummaging for a down jacket in the middle of a steaming apartment. Mother didn’t ask what or why – she was a housewife who didn’t normally ask questions. Yu peeped at her as he untied and tied the bags. His mother, sitting on the hardwood ‘sofa’, was folding pairs of socks. Although Yu kept eclipsing the TV, his mother didn’t show the slightest sign of annoyance. Judging from the TV conversations, he knew he had blocked some critical moments of the drama. He would say sorry if his mother asked him to step aside but she didn’t. She was the master of non-
interference – if she had missed some scenes, she had missed them. Similarly, if Yu had gone mad, he had gone mad. There was nothing she could do to change anything. He felt sorry for his mother.

Finally, Yu found his down jacket in the innermost bag. He had to hurry to restore order in the sitting room before his father came home. It was almost eleven o’clock and the limited space had turned into a landfill littered with bags. He would be in trouble if his father saw the mess. And his father was the interrogative type. Yu wouldn’t get away with the excuse of going camping with Daniel on Lantau Island, which he was planning to tell his mother. Merely the thought of confronting his father made Yu tense. He stooped, grabbed two bags at a time and threw them back into the cupboards in disarray. His mother didn’t say anything about the mess; Yu wouldn’t have bothered to take more care even if she had uttered the most sarcastic remark at that moment. He was running out of time. He had just managed to press the last bulging bag down and force the cabinet shut when he heard the clinking of a bunch of keys, the folding of the iron grill, the turning of the doorknob, the opening of the door. His father stepped in.

‘Father,’ Yu greeted; he smelt the reek of drainpipes and sweat from his father’s yellowish vest and worn-out jeans.

Father took off his mud-caked work boots and dumped them next to the door. He threw down his backpack and gazed at the TV. Yu quietly retired into his cubicle feeling giddy and sweaty from stooping and reaching. Mina in the other cubicle was stowing away her art materials. Their mother stacked up the clothes and took them to Mina’s cubicle where mother and daughter shared a bunk bed. Father folded out the sofa and put his pillow and thin blanket in place. The family members fell into slumber one after another. Only the TV remained on. It would remain flashing until
four o’clock in the morning when Father habitually opened his eyes and pressed the power button on the remote control.

It became real when no. 1 Maple Street materialised into Kowloon Funeral Parlour. Yu got off the minibus under the bridge where the hexed driver had died in the crash in Mina’s narrative. He found himself standing in front of a glass double door under a marble doorframe. The five characters of ‘Kowloon Funeral Parlours’ sparkled in gold. His stomach churned. The plate of rice with glazed barbecue pork, which had long been his comfort food before exams, had failed to calm him down. Instead, the grease was causing heartburn and the honey had turned sour on his palette. His forearms felt cold – cold air that had seeped through the gap between the glass doors. Drops of sweat rolling down his forehead were frozen mid-path. He shivered and goose bumps travelled down his back. He shrugged his shoulders to ease them from the weight of his camping backpack. He loosened his polo shirt and khaki trousers which had stuck to his skin.

If he had had some thread and a needle with him, he would have tried to mend the hole in his back pocket on the spot. Anything that could delay him. The gold-plated name of the funeral parlour reflected the setting sun and sent out fierce rays. The glass door reflected the passing trucks and lorries commuting in the industrial area. Yu saw in the reflection the row of shops on the opposite side of the road. There were flowers in the florist’s, coffins in the carpenter’s and paper arts in the paper shop. The shutters of some shops were half rolled down like a drooping old man. On the marble doorframe, streaks in dark green, black, grey and white looked like drifting clouds.

*Is there a ghost inside?* Yu was nonplussed. He hadn’t thought his plan audacious on the day he stood next to the Genius of Asia at the bus stop. Yu hated superstition.
It was one of the most annoying qualities in his mother, in his grandmother, in his aunts and in old women in general. He had always thought ghost stories were hilarious and the ghosts in scary movies looked fake. He had never believed in ghosts, until now. *What if I encounter ghosts inside the funeral parlour?* Nobody answered him, but the haunted yellow sign of the funeral parlour lit up suddenly and the whole street was dyed yellow. A minibus on the flyover next to the parlour building swayed left and right. *Would the ravishing lady in vermillion stroll down Maple Street after the sun goes down?* There was only one way ahead for him.

Yu saw the words ‘Cloud Gate’ mounted on a beam between two marble pillars.

He stepped through the Cloud Gate.

The name of the entrance to the funeral parlour had been written with an ink brush on paper, set in a wooden frame. The black words against the white paper stood out from the dark green, black, grey and white streaks on the marble pillars. But it wasn’t just the pillars. The same pattern covered the walls, the floor, the concierge, all the way to the far end of the hall. Yu assumed this was a marble concierge, for what he saw was the upper half of an old man dressed in a navy blue gown floating in the middle of a marble wall. The old man’s silvery hair shone. He was the only human being in sight.

Yu took a deep breath and proceeded with caution. The sound of his steps reverberated in the vastness of the hall. The hall was square in shape. It housed four tall marble pillars that could be joined to draw an inner square. The marble concierge was facing the Cloud Gate. Slowly, he made his way towards it. He passed the first pair of pillars, then the second pair. Despite the squeaky sound his sports shoes were making, the old man did not look up. All Yu could see was a head of white hair on a small body. The old man was writing. His navy blue gown was starched; his high
collar looked stiff like cardboard. He was bespectacled. His sparse beard looked prickly on his chin. His folded white cuffs rested tidily on his wrists exposing a pair of very aged hands. They were dark and wrinkled, covered with multiple swollen veins like rivers. They were steady though. The brush in his right hand moved to and fro between a record book and an ink pot. Its tip glided down the off-white columns of the page and filled them with sinuous characters. From top to bottom, right to left. Yu couldn’t see the man’s eyes behind the reflection of his large amber-rimmed glasses, but he could see the grey and bushy eyebrows, which told of intense concentration. The light in the hall was too dim for calligraphy. Yu watched as the blanks on the page were filled. And then the brush paused.

‘Which family have you come to see?’ asked the old man with a coarse voice as he looked up.

Yu felt as if his own eyeballs were being pierced by the old man’s gaze. His world went silent for two seconds before he heard soft talking and echoes of footsteps coming down the hall. Families and friends dressed in black and white were arriving to attend funerals. They gathered in front of a blackboard to the right of the concierge to check the names and locations of the families they had come to greet. It wasn’t a real blackboard but rather a drape of black velvet topped with a sheet of glass. The words were in white paint and had been written with an ink brush, apparently in the old man’s hand. They were very hard to decipher. Visitors stood there and pondered as the lift on the other side opened and closed.

‘Which one are you looking for, young man?’ asked the old man again.

‘Good evening. My name is Wong Yu. I came to see Mr Chung,’ Yu answered in one breath.
‘But we don’t have a Chung family here today,’ said the old man, sounding impatient. His eyebrows tightened and flared up like a pair of wings.

‘No, no, sir. I mean I came to see a staff member called Chung. I am here for a job interview.’

‘A job interview?’ questioned the old man. He was incredulous.

‘A job interview,’ Yu confirmed.

‘Ha, I thought we were hiring a girl,’ said the old man and raised his eyebrows.

‘I’m sorry?’ said Yu. He was incredulous too.

‘Don’t tell me your letter was written by your own hand!’ snapped the old man. His voice rebounded on the marble surfaces. Some mourners turned their heads to look at Yu and the fiery old man behind the counter. The old man swung the column of his brush in front of Yu’s face and said mockingly, ‘Well, I was hoping the new person would help me with this, but it seems you don’t even know how to write decently. I say you’re not trustworthy anyway. You cheated! You can go now. We’re not going to hire you.’

Yu was stunned. Have I failed the interview already? Have I blown my employment plan so soon? He didn’t turn to go though; he didn’t know where to go. He continued to stand there as if waiting for his luck to change. The old man straightened his sleeves and resumed his writing. He acted as if he was so immersed in his calligraphy that he didn’t notice Yu’s embarrassing presence, until his old telephone rang. The old man picked up the black handset swiftly and yelled. He shot Yu a glare and complained to the other end of the line that the supposed girl turned out not to be a girl, that the applicant had not written and therefore had cheated. More mourners passed by and turned to look curiously at Yu who held his ground and watched his accuser. Yes, I’ve asked Mina to write my letter. I am wrong but you
"don’t have to yell, old man. Not everybody possesses a gift to write beautifully!" The old man continued to whine like a child. *What’s the point?* On the other hand, Yu also noticed how foolish he was looking. They were like two children separated by the reception counter of the funeral parlour. The one inside was grumpy; the one outside was shocked. The former was yelling; the latter remained silent. It was not an ideal job interview situation; in fact, it was getting on Yu’s nerves. He thought it was about time to walk away. His dignity was worth more than a job, whether he was desperate or not. So, instead of looking like a poor boy yearning for a candy, Yu turned to leave.

‘Wait!’ shouted the old man. ‘Chung is coming down to see you.’

It was Yu’s turn to raise his eyebrows.

‘Wait here,’ the old man repeated. His coarse voice was now much calmer. Yu looked at the old man in disbelief and the old man looked back at him. He decided it was not the time to hold a grudge though he still felt angry. At this point he was not sure whether the old man was angry too, or simply annoyed. Neither of them talked until a white figure came over to break the ice.

‘Hello, Wong Yu. My name is Chung. We talked on the phone,’ said the white figure with a big smile.

Glad to be greeted warmly, Yu replied, ‘Nice to meet you, Mr Chung.’

‘Just call me Chung. And I call you Yu, okay? Welcome to Kowloon Funeral Parlour. And this is Uncle Bong. You two have talked already, I suppose?’ said Chung with his smile looking a little cheeky.

They nodded.

Yu wondered if many would wish to be welcomed to a funeral parlour, but Chung’s big smile was welcoming indeed. His was a big man and had a round face. He was wearing a long white gown with a high collar and long sleeves. A row of
buttons ran in a curve from his collar to his right armpit. Yu thought Chung looked elegant in his outfit. Subtle embroidery in milky colour flashed on his gown when the material caught the light.

‘Yu, I’m afraid I’m in a hurry because I am holding a funeral in one of the halls upstairs. Follow me downstairs so we can proceed with our plan, would you?’ asked Chung cheerfully.

‘Okay,’ Yu said and followed Chung who had already headed off towards the lift. Yu stopped and glanced at the grumpy old man who had again resumed writing behind the counter. Then Yu said without turning his head, ‘Thank you.’

Chung led Yu to the left side of the marble lobby where they waited by the lift door. More mourners in black and white were gathering in the lobby now. The peak hours of the funeral parlour must have begun. The lift arrived. Chung stepped aside and respectfully held the lift door. Yu also stepped aside for mourners. The rectangular lift was surprisingly deep – perhaps as much as three metres. When the lift was full, Chung released the door and it snapped shut. The number panel on top of the lift door indicated that the mourners were ascending the building. There was a B, a G and numbers 1 to 5. The numbers lit up one after another before the lift descended again. It was empty, so Chung and Yu stepped inside. Chung pressed B for basement.

Yu hadn’t realised the funeral parlour had a basement. In the deep lift cabin there was only one yellowish light. Wood pattern wallpaper on three sides of the cabin had curled up at the corners. An exhaust fan twirled noisily overhead. It couldn’t get rid of the smoky smell of incense that lingered in the air. The descent to the basement seemed to take a long time. Yu attributed this to the age of the lift, though the basement could be very deep underground as well. He shivered at the second possibility. His fear, which had disappeared momentarily when he encountered the
receptionist, had returned. *What’s going to happen? What kind of a corpse am I going to spend the night with? One with greenish skin and eyes wide open? With a horrible facial expression that marks his or her tragic death?* Yu felt nauseous. He found it hard to breathe in the confinement of the lift. He might feel claustrophobic if he was not let out the next second. The lift stopped and sank a little more before the door opened. Chung held the lift door for Yu who stepped onto a cement floor with whitewashed walls on his left and right. Facing him was a pair of swing wooden doors. There was a square window on each door but they were too dirty to see through. Chung politely held one door open as Yu stepped through.

It was a very long room dimly lit with yellowish light panels built into the fake ceiling. An aisle down the middle of the room divided it into a row of filing cabinets on the left and a row of trolleys on the right. Yu felt goose bumps on his arms. His threadbare polo shirt was too thin for the chill. He sneezed. A strong scent of disinfectant irritated his nostrils. He needed his down jacket but Chung was leading him down the aisle in a hurry. Yu clutched his bare arms and followed. On his left, the cabinets were coated in a shiny beige paint. They were stacked in fours and there were eight columns in total. Each cabinet was labelled with a small card with codes on it.

The cabinets looked a little bigger than normal filing cabinets from the front, but a lot longer from the sides – they were more than two metres long. Yu didn’t want to imagine what the cabinets contained – *definitely not files!* All of a sudden, the place was filled with shadows. He drew a deep breath.

‘Don’t touch anything, please,’ Chung warned Yu when they reached the end of the aisle, where two stainless-steel carts were stowed under a line of cupboards. There were numerous bottles of pink fluids, syringes and steel surgical apparatus inside a glass sliding panel.
‘Okay,’ Yu said and wrapped his hands tighter around his body. He had no intention of touching any of them.

They stopped at the door of a room within a room. Yu’s heart stopped beating. Chung looked through a rectangular window on the door and let Yu into the room. Yu saw the dead body of an old lady in the middle of a square room. She lay on a white wheel stretcher. Her head rested on a block. Her disproportionately small, flat body was covered with a white sheet and topped with a gold and red embroidered silk blanket that spread out over her. The old lady’s thin grey hair was tied in a bun, her face was powdered deathly white and her lips were painted tangerine. Her mouth curved slightly downwards. She was dressed in a vermilion gown; her high collar was exposed outside the blanket. Yu flinched.

‘So, here you are,’ Chung said with his permanent smile. ‘You’ll stay here until seven o’clock in the morning. Oh, let me find you a chair.’ Chung disappeared outside and for a few seconds Yu was alone with the body in the room. He stood at the foot of the bed and reflected. *Am I ready for this job? Am I really going to spend a night with the dead body here?* He felt weak at the knees; his heart was racing. *Is it a coincidence that the old lady here wears red, just like the ravishing ghost in Mina’s pep-talk? Is this old lady the minibus ghost? Should I run?* He had no time to decide.

When Chung returned with two folding chairs, Yu jumped.

‘Here you go,’ said Chung, leaning the two chairs against the wall. He glanced at Yu briefly. His smile widened as if noticing Yu’s fear. ‘Are you all right? Any questions?’

‘Yes, no,’ Yu answered. ‘Thank you for making the arrangements, Chung.’

Yu tried to behave normally even though his face was burning and his body was shaking in the chill.
‘You’re welcome. Make yourself comfortable and I’ll see you in the morning. Oh, one more thing,’ Chung added. ‘Please don’t touch the body.’

‘Okay,’ Yu said nodding with a nervous smile. As if I’d touch the body!

Chung went out and shut the door behind him. The lock turned twice and the room was deathly silent. Yu unloaded his backpack at once. He knelt down shakily with his back to the corpse and pulled out his jacket, his map and his thermos. He shoved the map back in the bag and pulled out a sleeping bag that he had decided at the last minute to take with him. Stop panicking! Yu warned himself as he took off his shoes, put on his jacket and climbed into the sleeping bag as fast as he could. He took a sip of hot Milo from the thermos and turned his head to face the wall. He wasn’t sure whether he was supposed to sleep or stay awake, but his reasoning was: if I lie on the ground while the body is up on the trolley, I won’t be able to see her. If I can’t see her, she can’t see me. Then we won’t bother each other, and nothing will happen. He pulled the hood over his head and shut his eyes. He should have asked Chung to show him the toilet, though that need was mostly psychological. The sight of the corpse was replaced by a vermillion colour behind his eyelids.

Nothing would happen. Nothing would happen.

Part of Yu started to believe the mantra. His breaths slowed down and deepened. The air in the room didn’t feel as cold as before. It enveloped him. He thought he would fall asleep any moment now. The fake ceiling above him made of white foam boards and aluminium bars was a huge map for tick-tack-toe. The dimly lit panels had generated enough narcotic yellow to send him into a trance.

Yu heard a clattering of gongs and cymbals and opened his eyes. He couldn’t see the dead woman from where he was lying, but he could smell burning incense coming
through the air-conditioning. His throat felt itchy. Lots of rituals were underway upstairs. He could imagine them: candle flames flickering over copper bowls of oil; yellow paper tigers on terracotta roof tiles crouched around the bowl; a master of some sort dipping a long paper strip into the oil and the paper catching fire. Yu followed the rituals in his mind’s eyes as the master waved around the burning piece of paper, which danced like a flaming dragon. Then he cracked the tigers one by one on tiles with a wooden stick. It was loud. Shards of terracotta scattered all over.

Yu checked the time. It was only eight o’clock. The noisy rituals upstairs wouldn’t finish until later. *How many dead bodies are there in this building?* The question reminded him of the filing cabinets outside. He turned his head towards the dead woman; all the muscles in his body tightened. He shut his eyes. It would be best to stop thinking.

*Nothing has happened. Nothing has happened.*

He chanted the mantra until the ritual noise upstairs had faded away and all he could hear were drafts blowing from the air-conditioner. But he felt warm in his sleeping bag. Behind his shut eyelids was the same vermillion shade; it was the midday sun. He stretched out his legs to thaw and relieved his hands from clutching his jacket. He moved slowly; he made no sound. But then he sensed other movements in the room, and suddenly opened his eyes. The dead woman was sitting up. Not like in horror movies where a corpse suddenly sat up straight. The old lady rolled onto her side and struggled up, supported by her frail elbow. Yu could see her vermilion dress adorned with pale pink edges. A large floral pattern was printed around her lap. A calla lily bloomed on its long stem. The curvy petal rolled and unrolled on her belly like an eddy. With much effort, she shifted to the edge and her legs hung loose above
the ground. They were too short to reach the floor. Yu watched her spindly legs dangle. Her embroidered velvet slippers swung precariously upon her toes.

In a sepia flash, an old movie scene unfolded. A lady in a red gown with long black hair was preparing a rope and a stool. Yu watched as she threw one end of the rope over a beam and tied a very tight knot. Her waist arched in the close fitting outfit and the tip of her beautiful hair swept across the small of her back. She looked ravishing. Her shaky feet in velvet embroidered slippers stepped onto the square stool and her head went through the loop. The calla lily on her dress was rolling and unrolling. The woman begun to gasp for breath, then she kicked away the stool. It fell with a loud bang, followed by the soft tap of something light falling onto the floor. A loose slipper had dropped.

Yu sat bolt upright, cold, sweaty and in shock. A folding chair had toppled over with a loud bang, sending a vibration across the icy floor and through the back of his legs. He winced and gasped for air. Clutching the back of his head, he took in the biggest breath he could manage and held it. He counted from five to one, and released it. The off-white walls, yellow light panels and the tick-tack-toe fake ceiling fell into place again.

Nothing has happened. Nothing has happened.

It must have been a bad dream – a bad dream triggered by Mina’s tale. Yu turned his head tentatively towards the dead woman. His neck was stiff, but he could faintly make out her grey hair and red collar. She was lying in the same position as before with the blanket on her chest. Is she going to sit up? Or she has already done so while I was sleeping? Did she touch me or pace up and down the room? Yu shivered. He wrapped himself up again in his jacket and sleeping bag. His knees started to bob up and down in the clammy sleeping bag. They were uncontrollable. Why did I take a job
in a funeral parlour?! Still trembling, he brought his thermos flask to his mouth and drank another sip of Milo. He felt like going to the toilet, but there was no toilet in the room. This is the weirdest camping trip ever! His signal-less mobile phone told him the time was 3.00 a.m. He decided it wasn’t safe to fall asleep again. He adjusted himself and ignored his bladder. He manoeuvred in his sleeping bag to lean against the wall next to the door. He didn’t mind looking stupid for one night – he must watch out for the old lady in red or the younger version of her in the same gown. No. 1 Maple Street could be haunted, as Mina had said.

Yu opened his eyes, startled, when the alarm clock on his phone went off at 7.00 a.m. All he could see was the polyester surface of the sleeping bag, which felt sticky on his face. He couldn’t believe that he had fallen asleep. The room looked the same. The old lady was still lying in the same position and the fallen chair was on the ground. Nothing had happened. Yu felt almost amused at his fears of the previous night. He took a deep breath of the sanitary air. He felt a pain in his bladder but his confidence about working in the funeral parlour seemed to have revived a little. He was organising his hair in the reflection of the glass window on the door when Chung appeared with his big smile.

‘Good morning, young man. How are you? I came to release you,’ he said cheerfully. He looked chubby in a white flannel shirt and matching pants. Despite the loose-fitting shirt, Yu noticed that Chung had a paunch that had been hidden in his ceremonial gown last night.

‘Good morning, Chung,’ Yu answered, still conscious of his hair.

‘So, are you ready?’ asked Chung. He glanced at the floor, on which were scattered Yu’s sleeping bag, his empty thermos flask, the lid of the thermos, his phone, his shoes, his backpack and the fallen folding chair.
‘Oh, just give me one second,’ Yu replied awkwardly.

He stooped to gather his belongings into his backpack all in one go, stood the chair against a wall and left the room. Chung, who was holding the door, withdrew his hand. The door swung slowly closed. Yu turned his head to check if he had left any of his belongings behind but the door had already shut. He saw his own reflection on the window. Behind his reflection the old lady was lying in the same posture. Her eyes were closed and her tangerine lips curved slightly downwards.

‘Let’s go, Yu,’ Chung called from the other end of the long aisle between the row of filing cabinets and the row of trolleys.

Yu threw his backpack over his shoulders. Chung held the swing double door for Yu to pass. He thought about asking to borrow the toilet but he preferred to hold rather than using the funeral parlour toilet. They stepped into the lift and ascended. Yu read from the button panel that next to ‘G’ was the Main Lobby. Underneath that he read ‘Hall of Clouds’, presumably because there were cloudy streaks on the marble tiles. The main lobby was empty when they exited the lift just as it had been when Yu first entered the hall yesterday. Not even Uncle Bong was behind the counter now.

‘So, Yu, that’s all. We’ll give you a call soon,’ Chung said and gave Yu a wink that was almost cute on his round face.

‘Thank you, Chung. Hope to hear from you soon,’ Yu said politely and left the parlour through the Cloud Gate. Based on Chung’s wink, he thought there was a great chance he would be employed. The early autumn sun felt warm on his shoulders and his heart was light. He loped along the footpath of Maple Street where lorries thundered by and emitted clouds of smoke. His bulging backpack bounced. He passed the florist’s, the paper shop and the carpenter’s from the other side of the road. All the shutters were still closed. Nobody saw Yu, the bouncing madman from Wong Tai Sin.
He wanted to tell Daniel all about his adventure at the funeral parlour immediately. He would have done so if he could afford calling long-distance. Reality brought him down to earth: he was still penniless, and he missed his friend. Yu hiked along the street between the hardware shops. Smiths, timber and glass refiners, paint and tile factories. Tiredness overcame him. He was ravenous, his backpack became heavier, as did his bladder. The sun hid behind the clouds. He thought he had passed the streets named Walnut, Lime and Fir but doubted it when he came to an unfamiliar junction on Willow Street. Feeling exhausted and confused, he unloaded his backpack on the ground to search for his map which had disappeared among his sleeping bag and his jacket.

A group of elderly people, having finished their morning exercises, made their way down the street. Perhaps he could ask them the way out of the botanical maze. He walked towards them. The grandpas plodded cautiously along, each holding a roll of newspaper under his arm; the old ladies sauntered on, each equipped with a plastic basket, well prepared for a shopping spree at the market. They approached Yu chattering and laughing. The sun came out for two seconds and disappeared again. The sudden brightness dazzled Yu and he stopped walking.

He couldn’t see their feet moving – he was blinded for a moment – but he stood and waited. When his vision returned, the old ladies approaching him all looked identical. They marched neatly forwards, spread out evenly in a single row. Their cotton shirts fluttered in various floral patterns and the styles and colours of their shopping baskets had changed. Their faces seemed to have come from the same mould. Each had a familiar powdered face with a mouth painted tangerine. One of them was wearing a vermilion dress with a blooming lily on it. Her lips curved slightly downwards.
The next moment, the group was right in front of him. Somebody’s shopping basket swept by and scratched him hard on the forearm. He looked down and found his map lying on the ground, opened. The top right corner of the page was folded down. It was Maple Street in miniature.
That evening, Yu returned the map to Mina. She was doing a Chinese water painting. The way she held the brush reminded Yu of the obnoxious receptionist Uncle Bong. He hoped Uncle Bong was called ‘Uncle’ only because he was old and respectable. It would be tragic for anyone to actually have an uncle like him. Mina’s room was sweltering and reeking of ink. She had turned the electric fan off so her crepe-thin calligraphy paper didn’t flap. But the stink of ink hovered in her cubicle, and became even stronger. Yu squeezed past the back of her chair with the map which he was balancing on top of a tilting stack of old newspapers next to Mina’s desk when she asked him a question without lifting her eyes from her painting.

‘How do you tell the difference between a pine and a fir, brother?’

‘I don’t know,’ he answered.

It wasn’t the best time for biology trivia. He was depleted of energy from finding his way through the maze of streets around the funeral parlour. The fact that the street signs were bilingual had redoubled the confusion. Now that Mina asked, he
remembered the translations of Pine Street and Fir Street had been swapped. While the English said it was ‘Pine Street’, the Chinese said it was ‘Fir Street’ and vice versa. How did you tell the difference between a pine and a fir anyway?

‘I don’t know either,’ Mina said dreamily, gliding her brush across the crepe paper.

A fir, or a pine, was manifesting itself under her brush. Mina seemed to be the better person than he to work in the funeral parlour. At least Uncle Bong would be happy to take her. So, those funeral hall people have tested my courage by locking me in with a corpse for twelve hours. I’ve been shocked by a bad dream. I’ve been shocked again in the street in the morning – probably just a visual distortion because I was exhausted. I’ve been scared but I’ve survived somehow. Now I can only wait for Chung’s call. Hopefully I can start working soon. He manoeuvred his way out of the room carefully so as not to tip Mina’s ink pot.

‘Are you ill?’ asked his mother at the door and felt the temperature of his forehead with the back of her hand.

‘Nothing. I just have a headache. Tired. I didn’t sleep properly last night,’ he yawned.

‘Camping in such heat is not good for you. Fire burns your heart and your body gets overheated,’ she said, inadvertently reminding him of his lie. He wanted to tell her that if he really got sick, it would be an account of cold, not heat.

‘Rub this on your temples,’ said his mother and handed him an oval vial. He read on the label: ‘White Flower Embrocation’.

‘No, I hate the smell,’ Yu protested.

‘Take it,’ his mother commanded.
He took it. The glass vial was flat like a disc, designed to be slipped into the side pockets of old women’s handbags. He flipped it between his fingers and grabbed it in his palm. It felt cold. Its blue oval label featured two blooming white flowers; on the back, he could feel three protruding words: ‘White Flower Embrocation’. He twirled the clear oil around in the narrow space of the vial. The scent of mint, nutmeg, liquorice and other herbs and spices seeped through the tiny blue cap. The smell reminded him of being stuck on a bus on a rainy day. When all the windows were closed and motion sickness attacked, old women groped for their vials of White Flower Embrocation to sniff and rub on their temples, noses and stomachs. The scent of the oil mingled with body odours in the oxygen-deprived bus capsule meant only one thing – suffocation. He twisted the tiny blue cap tighter before throwing it onto his dusty desk among many cut-out newspaper employment advertisements. One drop of lotion had escaped from the vial and now took a ride on his thumb. It was carried over to his bed. It was smeared over his pillow case, onto his hair, his face, his forehead and his nostrils. A rare pollution-free night breeze blew in through the window to stir up the scent of white flowers. Petals fell. The face of the dead lady with tangerine lips was fading away. The soothing fragrance quickly enveloped Yu and he sank into slumber before his father came home.

Yu was summoned to the funeral parlour again the next day. It had a surprisingly tight schedule. He was rubbing with some White Flower Embrocation the red scratch mark on his forearm that had been inflicted by a granny’s shopping basket yesterday as he waited outside the boss’s office on the fifth floor, the top floor of the funeral parlour building. The long corridor was empty and cool even though the streets outside were baking under the midday sun. There were no windows. At one end of the corridor was
the lift; at the other end was the staircase for emergency escape. Sitting on a sofa in
the middle, Yu loosened his polo-shirt in the air-conditioned drafts. The drafts carried
the scent of the embrocation. The same cloudy marble theme prevailed in this
corridor – grey streaks on white tiles. The lift opened and Uncle Bong came out. Yu
was surprised, but the old man was not. He walked past Yu with long purposeful
strides. The rubber soles of his shoes squeaked against the white floor tiles. The skirts
of his ankle-length gown fluttered at the side splits where Yu saw a pair of long white
pants. He walked straight past Yu and went into the manager’s office. Before the door
closed, a female voice invited Yu to go in.

‘I thought we were hiring a girl,’ said the stout woman behind the desk. She was
in her early forties and was the most modern-looking person he had met in the funeral
parlour so far. Her black suit gave her broad shoulders that matched her square face,
strongly defined cheeks and high forehead. She wore light make-up and her short hair
was slicked back in waves. There were two small bouquets embroidered on the collar
of her white blouse; apart from them, she was unadorned. Yu found her outfit funereal
yet somehow comfortable to look at. Her voice was gentle but assertive. He read from
the golden name plate on the desk that her name was Ms Kim Siu, the manager of
Kowloon Funeral Parlour.

‘No offence,’ Ms Kim Siu added.

‘Kim, this boy is an impostor!’ shouted old Uncle Bong from Ms Kim Siu’s right,
his forefinger pointing at Yu. Globules of saliva flew across the desk. They landed on
the many files and papers, on the IN and OUT trays, on the calculator, on the
stationery stands, on the pens and the letter sets. Yu raised his eyebrows at the word
‘impostor’ and looked Uncle Bong in the eye. Uncle Bong gripped the armrests of his
chair as if he was going to break them. The old man’s grudge against the young man was palpable, as if they had known and hated each other for ages.

‘This boy is not to be trusted,’ Uncle Bong fired a second shot.

Yu turned to look at the calligraphic scrolls on the wall, the mahogany sideboard and the vase of evergreen bamboos on top of it. He drew in a long breath. It wasn’t wise to fight with an elder.

‘Who wrote the letter for you?’ asked Ms Kim Siu placidly.

‘My younger sister,’ Yu answered.

‘She has beautiful handwriting,’ Ms Kim Siu said.

‘Yes. She is quite an artist,’ said Yu wondering why on earth they were so obsessed with people’s handwriting. But he added, ‘Ms Kim Siu, I’m sorry I didn’t write out the letter myself. It is because my handwriting is not very presentable.’

‘Then I don’t see why we should hire him!’ shouted Uncle Bong.

‘Ms Kim Siu, I am very enthusiastic about working for the funeral parlour. I will contribute a lot to your company,’ Yu at last asserted himself.

‘What do you know about our company?’ Uncle Bong retorted.

Yu’s heart sank. He actually didn’t know much about making money from dead people.

‘Ms Kim Siu, I wouldn’t have done that if I wasn’t desperate,’ he said, raising his voice in self-defence.

‘But we’re not desperate to hire people,’ Uncle Bong retaliated.

Yu bit his lip. Uncle Bong couldn’t be more right. There was a far greater supply of unemployed workers out on the streets than demand. No boss was desperate to hire anybody these days, especially fresh graduates with no experience. The old man, brazenly assuming triumph, said to Ms Kim Siu, ‘Are we?’
Luckily, Uncle Bong’s attempt to solicit support wasn’t successful. Ms Kim Siu raised her hand to silence him. She fixed her gaze on Yu’s résumé and his application letter in Mina’s handwriting. Nobody talked. Yu turned to look again at the vase of evergreen bamboos. There was a mahogany tea table and four matching stools in front of the sideboard. The centre of the table was inlaid with a marble slate. A pot with a white orchid sat in the middle of the table. A bamboo bookcase stood at the side; it was loaded with folders and spiral-bound documents.

‘Tell me, Wong Yu,’ Ms Kim Siu looked up at Yu. ‘How do you feel after staying with the body for a night?’

‘I feel okay,’ Yu answered plainly. *What else is there to comment on? I may have to venture down to the morgue again in the future if I’m employed. I may even have to handle dead bodies. But right now, I don’t even know if they want to give me the job. So much for the scary night and the issue of ghosts. I’ll worry about them later. I won’t mind as long as they hire me.*

The air-conditioner suddenly emitted a draft. Ms Kim Siu’s gaze returned to Yu’s papers. The cold air carried the scent of White Flower Embrocation. Uncle Bong brought out a vacuum flask and sipped. His black *pu-erh* tea infused the air; its nutty flavour clashed with Yu’s minty scent. Yu groped for his vial of embrocation and unscrewed the tiny blue cap in his pocket. A stronger floral smell of herbs and spices drifted into the atmosphere. Uncle Bong poured out some more tea to counteract the effect of the embrocation. Their olfactory fight didn’t last long before Ms Kim Siu looked up.

‘Wong Yu, I’ll give you a chance. Prove yourself,’ said the manager.

‘Thank you very much, Ms Kim Siu. I won’t let you down,’ said Yu jumping to his feet and giving Ms Kim Siu a ninety-degree bow. He could have shouted in
exhilaration! Ms Kim Siu’s words were like the first rainfall after a drought of four months. The flower bouquets on her collar bloomed. The evergreen bamboos on the sideboard applauded. He could almost hear the Genius of Asia, waving on the sheet metal body of a bus, singing, ‘Congratulations!’ He’d never tasted such glory!

‘We’ll see,’ said Ms Kim Siu glancing at Uncle Bong. Uncle Bong’s face had turned bright red. His nostrils dilated. The lump at the top of his throat was bobbing up and down under the wrinkled skin. He breathed unevenly as if he was about to choke. For one second Yu was afraid the old employee was going to have a heart attack but then Uncle Bong stood up, straightened his sleeves and left the room in long angry strides. The rubber soles of his shoes squeaked on the white floor tiles. The skirts of his navy blue gown fluttered. Ms Kim Siu and Yu watched in silence until the old man was completely out of sight. Yu wondered how he was going to survive stepping into the funeral parlour every day with Uncle Bong sitting behind the reception desk in vengeance.

‘Uncle Bong is a kind old man. We all respect him,’ said Ms Kim Siu, reading Yu’s mind. ‘But he also has a temper. Don’t worry too much about him.’

‘Of course, of course.’ Yu wasn’t convinced. But would he mind putting up with a nasty colleague? It was already a miracle that he had found a job.

Another draft from the air-conditioner swept by. Yu’s résumé flew onto the floor and curled up like a cornet. He bent down to catch it. His paper got stuck around a leg of his chair and continued to curl and uncurl in the wind. He smelt fresh flower, but it may have been his embrocation overdose. The wind mixed up all scents. He retrieved his résumé. As he was resurfacing he reached to rub his nose and then bumped the back of his head on the manager’s desk.
‘Are you all right?’ asked Ms Kim Siu warmly. She took the sheet of paper from him and weighted it down on her desk.

‘Yes, yes. I’m fine,’ Yu said, rubbing his head.

‘Any questions?’ she asked.

‘No, I don’t have any questions.’

‘Then I’m afraid I have to go to work now,’ said Ms Kim Siu standing up.

Yu also got to his feet.

‘I’ll ask Chung to take you around. Follow his instructions as you familiarise yourself with the routines of the funeral parlour,’ she said. ‘Come back the same time tomorrow.’

‘Yes, Ms Kim Siu. Thank you, Ms Kim Siu,’ Yu answered with a few bows. He picked up his backpack and headed to the door. ‘I’ll be here on time tomorrow.’

‘And,’ Ms Kim Siu called out after him, ‘welcome to Kowloon Funeral Parlour.’

Yu supposed that no one had ever been more thrilled at being welcomed to a funeral parlour. The Genius of Asia, now bereft of his singing career, might be pleased too. But Yu’s father – that was another matter!

But I still don’t understand. I still don’t understand. Why they hire you?’ asked Daniel. His voice repeated itself in the poor telephone connection between Taipei and Hong Kong. ‘And how did they know your letter was written by a girl’s hand?’

‘To be honest with you, I don’t know,’ Yu answered. Sitting at the head of his bed, his shins dangled over the side. He stared out the window at the foliage of Morse Park below, which looked like black broccoli in the dark. Lights in nearby apartment blocks were artificial stars. Their televisions blinked in unison. His mother’s vial of
White Flower Embrocation lay on his desk. The clear liquid in its bottle defused the streetlight into many starlets.

‘Maybe it was planned in your life, that you are the right person. You have the right combination of birthday, time, origin, et cetera. That’s why you feel all right after a night with the corpse,’ Daniel said.

‘So, according to your expertise, what might have happened to those who were not destined to do the job?’ Yu teased. ‘They would have died in the room?’

‘Not necessarily. They may have felt scared and run away,’ Daniel answered swiftly as if he really knew, ‘which you didn’t.’

_That makes sense. I wasn’t frightened enough to run away and that made me the chosen one._ Yu put his feet against the door of his wardrobe, just twenty-five centimetres from the side of his bed, then moved them towards his makeshift desk – a plank of wood perched on a pillar of old computer programming textbooks. His old university essentials looked lonesome in the tea shade streetlight.

‘You know what?’ said Yu. ‘It was very creepy in the morgue. You know there are dead bodies in those drawers. And the place is so uncomfortably quiet. It is like something is going to jump on you. Just to think about it again now gives me goose pimples. I don’t want to go down there again.’

‘Yu, can you stop worrying about it?’ Daniel said. ‘You are employed now, so why don’t you just put in the effort for a few months? If you really can’t stand it, look for another job.’

_That makes sense too. Daniel is a good counsellor sometimes._ If Yu behaved himself in the funeral parlour, he would have a stable income. He would give part of the money to his mother for household expenses, and save some for his future plans, whatever they would be.
‘So how’s your life over there?’ asked Yu. ‘Having fun dating sweet Taiwanese girls?’

‘Having fun learning to earn money for rich people,’ said Daniel and yawned.

‘And me earning money from dead people,’ Yu laughed.

‘It’s just a bit boring here, you know? Miss playing basketball with you and the three mad guys,’ Daniel said.

‘Me too,’ Yu said. An aeroplane flew past the summit of Beacon Hill flashing a red light. Beacon Hill no longer lit any beacon. It was only a wealthy residential suburb next to Wong Tai Sin now. Down in Morse Park, mercury lights still shone over the basketball courts.
There was no need to wander from one hall to another because all the halls looked similar. There were twelve halls for ceremonies: the largest two on the first floor, three medium ones on the second floor, another three medium ones on the third floor and the smallest four on the fourth floor. They were named according to the twelve seasonal divisions of the lunar calendar. The funeral parlour staff counted the hall from the lowest floor and always started from the side of the staircase. So the largest hall on the first floor was named Spring Launch, the one on its left was Rice Rain, the medium one on the second floor closest to the staircase was Full Pond, the one in the middle was Summer Launch, and so on. These elegant names were engraved on a piece of wood mounted on top of each door. Beautiful as they were, they were not very practical for mourners to locate the families of the dead, so each hall also had an Arabic number. As a result, everybody in the parlour referred to the halls as Funeral Halls numbers 1 to 12. So explained Chung the happy funeral parlour tour guide.
‘I think it is wise to save the hassle for everybody,’ Yu responded. He had been worried how he would figure out which hall was which with such a complicated naming system.

‘Only one person was unhappy about the change,’ said Chung.

‘Uncle Bong,’ guessed Yu. Even the Genius of Asia would have guessed.

‘Uncle Bong insists that the naming system is for feng shui. But we changed the system years ago and there have been no bad consequences,’ Chung said and winked.

‘No better or worse.’

They were in funeral hall no. 1. The room was long and wide. A dark green carpet had been rolled out on the marble floor across the middle of the hall. It would lead guests from the door to the altar. More than a hundred black folding chairs were set on either side of the carpet. The altar was decorated with white, yellow and green paper flowers like Christmas tinsels. The altar table was empty. The rectangle for the deceased’s big portrait was still blank. Two workers in blue shirts and pants came in pushing a handcart loaded with rectangular boards wrapped in shiny blue paper. The boards were lined with white paper flowers. Four silver cut-out words were glued on each board to form a mourning phrase, the funeral theme. Each word was also separated by a line of paper flowers.

‘Let me introduce you all,’ Chung projected his voice so he was audible over the rattling handcart. ‘This is Yu, our new colleague. This is Ah Tai, and this is S.B. Hong.’

‘Nice to meet you,’ Yu said with a bow.

Ah Tai, standing on the left, said ‘Hello’; S.B. Hong on the right bowed and smiled. They seemed friendly. A little fragile in physique, they barely reached Yu’s shoulders. Their hair was flat and their uniforms looked baggy.
‘Those are altar headers,’ Chung explained as Ah Tai and S.B. Hong climbed onto the altar table and hooked the board onto the beam. The header said: ‘Blessed the Long Life’. Ah Tai and S.B. Hong were efficient workers. They bowed to Chung and Yu again and wheeled their cartload of headers out.

Two back rooms adjoined each hall. To the right of the altar, a door opened into the deceased’s resting room. A window on the door allowed mourners to view the dead. The room was empty, though it looked the same as the one Yu had spent a night in downstairs. Yellowish light shone from the tick-tack-toe ceiling.

‘It is still too early to bring the deceased into the hall,’ said Chung glancing at his watch. ‘It is the hall master’s responsibility to decide when it is time. You know what a hall master is?’

Yu nodded. He had heard of the title. But Chung continued, ‘A hall master is the person in charge of a funeral ceremony. He calculates the right time to wheel the deceased into the hall for the evening ceremony. He also calculates the right time to put the deceased into the four-pieces-and-a-half – the coffin – and wheel the corpse out of the hall the next morning. We load the four-pieces-and-a-half onto a van and bring the corpse uphill. Have you heard of the right time?’

Yu had heard of the right time. He nodded, but Chung explained, ‘The right time is calculated according to the time of the deceased’s birth and death, his name, gender, age and origin. It is very important to observe the right time, especially in funeral matters. You know why?’

Yu shook his head. Chung continued to explain, ‘Because if we move the body at the wrong time, the deceased’s soul may fall apart in the course of transportation. Bits and pieces may remain in the human world looking for a human body to attach to. In other words, they become haunting ghosts. Things can get rather messy.’
‘Really?’ Yu responded too loudly and his voice reverberated in funeral hall no. 1.

‘Did you say there are ghosts?’

‘Don’t overreact, young man,’ Chung laughed. ‘Ghosts are just souls living on the dark side of the universe. We are souls on the bright side. Yin and Yang counter-balance each other. So there is nothing surprising. You get into something messy only when you don’t observe the balance. There’s nothing to be scared of.’

‘What?!’ Yu exclaimed. He couldn’t believe Chung had just said something he had heard many times on TV. He had never heard a real person asserting the existence of ghosts so calmly as if they were next door neighbours. He was scared there might be ghosts in the morgue, but Chung just assured him there were ghosts everywhere, as if he really knew. But hang on. Does Chung actually believe in the ghost world? Is this what staff at the funeral parlour believe?

‘Don’t worry about it, Yu,’ Chung said. ‘Let me show you the restroom for the bereaved.’

This was the other adjoining back room to the left of the altar. The room was windowless. Chung switched on the dim light. Two beige three-seater sofas and many folding chairs leaned against the walls. A door opened to a small toilet inside. Yu had not yet attended the funeral of a relative. Not that he was eager to. When his grandfather had died a year ago, the funeral had been held on the Mainland. Father hadn’t taken Yu and Mina to attend the ceremony. They had never been close to their father’s father. Father hated Grandfather for sending him to Hong Kong alone to stay with an uncle as a child. Grandfather was the only relative Yu knew who had died recently. People often said the ghosts of your grandparents tended to visit you in your dreams, but he didn’t remember having dreamt of Grandfather. What if Grandfather’s
soul had been shattered into pieces during transportation? Is he a haunting ghost on the Mainland now?

‘Let’s go and see other halls,’ said Chung turning off the light. The room for the bereaved was now pitch dark.

‘Okay,’ Yu said, following his companion.

Chung whistled a happy tune; Yu put his hands in his back pockets. They marched past all the halls until they arrived at the smallest one, funeral hall no. 12, on the fourth floor. All the halls really did look the same! Ah Tai and S.B. Hong had hung up all the altar headers. Yu had counted two of Ceased at Prime, two Soul to Heaven, three Lie in Peace and five Blessed the Long Life. The Soul to Heaven headers were not lined with yellow flowers, only white, because they were Christian funerals – the rest were either Taoist or Buddhist.

Chung bypassed the manager’s office on the fifth floor and led Yu up two flights of stairs. When they came to a blue metal door with an unlocked bolt, Chung announced: ‘We’ve reached the roof.’ His voice echoed in the stairwell. ‘This is where the great furnace is. Do you know the great furnace?’

Yu nodded but expected Chung to elaborate. And he did: ‘The great furnace is for burning large paper sacrifices. We called this the great furnace because each hall downstairs has its individual small furnace. If you have noticed, they were built into the foot of the wall beside the altars.’

Chung took out two thin white towels from his shirt pocket and gave one to Yu. Chung covered his nose and mouth with it and tied a knot at the back of his head. Yu, copying what Chung had done, asked, ‘Why are we doing this?’

‘Now is cleaning hour,’ came the answer, Chung’s voice muffled by the makeshift face mask.
Chung pushed open the metal door. An enormous cloud of paper ashes poured out. Yu shielded his face instinctively. Through the dust cloud he could see the great furnace. It was two metres wide and as tall as an average adult male. A towering chimney on top of the furnace was for emitting carbon dioxide high into the sky. Two workers were shovelling ashes inside the furnace. Chung waved at the workers; the workers waved back. They too had towels over their faces.

‘Ha, it’s Ah Tai and S.B. Hong again,’ Chung said behind his mask.

Yu couldn’t recognise the two workers but they were working as efficiently as before. One of them scooped water from a bucket and splashed it over the floor while the other shovelled the black wet mass into a tin box. An autumn wind blew. The sun on the roof was strong. The neighbouring buildings were no taller than the funeral parlour. They were old seven-storey constructions with green and cream paint peeling off the outer walls. Countless fish-bone antennas stuck out from their tops and sides, making them look like piles of garbage. Yu, although he was accustomed to the exhaust fumes on the Dragon Runway, couldn’t breathe properly near the great furnace. Slips of charred paper landing on his white T-shirt were morphing him into a Dalmatian.

Chung raised his voice to make himself audible over the mask: ‘The small furnaces in the halls are for paper money and gold and silver ingots only. All large paper art, such as houses, chairs, cars, boats, bridges and paper slaves have to be burnt up here. Since we have twelve halls, we arrange a sequence. We run the great furnace between 9.30 and 10.30 p.m. We start from hall no. 1 and end with hall no. 12.’

Yu nodded; luckily Chung noticed Yu’s response this time and said, ‘Let’s go back in.’

Once inside, Yu took off the towel and air rushed from his relieved lungs.
‘Thank you for the towel, Chung,’ he said. ‘I’ll wash this.’

‘Wash it and keep it. And bring it along to work every day,’ said Chung, tucking half of his towel into the elastic top of his pants. The other half hung on his hip. ‘This is one of the many essential things you need to bring along to work. We’ll now go down to the hub and get you other things you need.’

‘Okay, thanks again,’ said Yu.

As Chung straightened out his loose flannel shirt, a few pieces of charred paper floated off the smooth fabric, but however vigorously Yu shook his cotton T-shirt some of the Dalmatian dots persisted.

‘What’s the hub?’ Yu asked.

‘The hub is where we staff mingle,’ Chung said playfully. ‘And stop fiddling with your spotty T-shirt. You look fabulous in it. Let’s go down.’

Chung started to whistle again and headed downstairs. Yu tucked the towel into his backpack and followed. He hoped the hub was not the morgue. *I don’t want to socialise down there!* He leaned over the railing of the stairwell to peep at the basement. There was no white fog, just a cement floor. He didn’t want to think about the row of filing cabinets, wheel stretchers, the line of cupboards with sliding doors or the room. *There might be pieces of broken souls looking for a victim!* A faint chill touched his skin as if someone had left the freezer door open. He gave his hair a toss; a few pieces of charred paper fell. They fluttered gracefully down the vertiginous swirl of the stairwell like black butterflies.

Chung and Yu wound their way down until they reached the ground floor. A huge ‘G’ was painted in black on the uneven whitewashed wall. A piece of A4 paper below the ‘G’ read: ‘The Hall of Clouds’.
Uncle Bong was filling in family names on the room board. He held a pot of white paint in his left hand and an ink brush in his right.

‘Good afternoon, Uncle Bong.’ Chung drew his feet together and bowed.

Yu copied what his senior did. Uncle Bong didn’t look at them; in particular, he ignored Yu and his Dalmatian outfit. Uncle Bong cleared his throat; Chung, taking this as a signal of dismissal, led Yu behind the concierge to a wooden door labelled ‘Storage’. When Chung switched on the dim yellow light it revealed a storeroom.

‘Here is the hub!’ Chung exclaimed suddenly, catching Yu unprepared.

‘Oh, wow,’ Yu responded. ‘So this is the hub!’

‘Just give me a moment. Make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right back,’ Chung said disappearing behind rows of shelves.

Chung’s good mood rose but never went down. In contrast, Yu felt tired from his tour. He pulled over a folding chair and sat down.

The storeroom was an extension of the lobby. It was as wide as the lobby but not as deep. Rows of old metal bookshelves with beige coating were arranged on four sides of the room. A square patch in the middle was furnished with four folding chairs and a table. An old library smell wafted in the air even though the shelves were not holding books but rather stacks of coloured paper tied up in bundles with pieces of red nylon string or rubber bands. Yu picked up a sheaf of paper next to him. The name *Five Coloured Paper* was embossed on a colourful cover sheet under a picture of a Chinese goddess. She wore a long, peach-coloured frock with kaleidoscopic ribbons around her waist which ruffled in the wind. The golden folds of her dress shone. Flowers adorned her hair bun and long ponytail. She was sprinkling blossoms from a wreath in the sky. Red, blue, peach, purple and green. The bundle of paper was as light as feathers.
‘Come over here, Yu,’ Chung called from behind some shelves.

Yu put back the *Five Coloured Paper* and headed towards the voice along an aisle between shelves until he came to a changing room like those in sports centres. There were lockers on three sides of the room surrounding two benches in the middle. A doorway on the left led to a bathroom and toilet with many cubicles.

‘I found you these,’ said Chung throwing Yu a navy blue shirt, matching trousers and a pair of black shoes. ‘Try them on.’

‘Uniform?’ Yu asked.

‘Uniform,’ Chung confirmed.

‘Okay,’ Yu replied.

He slipped off his Dalmatian shirt and his jeans and hooked them above the bench and then put on the shirt and did up the fabric loop buttons at the front. It was too tight around his armpits, the collar was suffocating, the trousers weren’t long enough and the shoes were too big.

‘Not bad,’ Chung commented.

‘Are you sure?’ Yu inquired. When he saw himself in a full length mirror at the corner he burst out laughing. He had never worn traditional clothes and was too tanned and tall to look good in them. Traditional men were normally fair-skinned and small in physique and they wore their hair flat, like Ah Tai and S.B. Hong. Chung was not small though his hairstyle was flat.

‘Don’t forget to wear white socks to work. The company doesn’t provide those,’ Chung told him. Chung left Yu to contemplate his image in the mirror and went over to rummage in a cupboard on the other side of the changing room.

‘But what about these?’ Yu asked tugging at his sleeves and the end of his trousers. He thought he could fill out his shoes a little with a pair of thick socks.
Chung turned to look at him and said, ‘Um, you may have to bear with the tight armpits but you can lengthen the trousers a couple of centimetres yourself.’

‘Myself? How?’ Yu exclaimed, trying to control himself.

‘Yes. Yourself. With thread and needle,’ Chung answered. ‘You need to sew your name on your shirt and pants anyway. Like this.’

He showed Yu the word ‘CHUNG’ embroidered in white thread on the seam of his breast pocket. Then he lifted the end of his shirt to reveal another one on his trousers. The white word on his white shirt wasn’t visible unless you looked very closely.

‘Why do we have to do that?’ asked Yu, wondering whether he could do it. He had never sewed.

‘Because you’ll leave your uniform here to be washed. Put your name on so your clothes won’t get mixed up with your co-workers’,’ Chung sang out.

‘Can I just write my name on the tag with a ballpoint pen?’ asked Yu.

‘You use your pen to write your name inside your shoes. Use navy blue thread for your shirt and pants,’ said Chung. ‘Oh, let me mark the place for you. I can see you are lost.’

Chung found a piece of fabric chalk. He straightened Yu’s shirt and wrote ‘YU’ on his chest. Then he knelt down to write on Yu’s left trouser pocket. ‘This will do. You can take them home and fix them tonight,’ he said, stretching his big body after having knelt for a few seconds. Yu removed his uniform with difficulty and put his Dalmatian T-shirt back on.

‘And this,’ Chung gave Yu a small key, ‘is for your locker – no. 7. You can store your shoes and things that you need every day.’

‘Like?’ asked Yu, who was clumsily folding up his new uniform.
‘A thermos,’ replied Chung and produced one from what seemed to be his personal cupboard. He poured out some jasmine tea and offered it to Yu who accepted it gratefully. A cup of tea was just what he needed. Chung turned to copy something from one book to another on top of his cupboard.

‘Here,’ Chung finished and sat next to Yu on the bench holding two palm-sized notebooks. They were both narrow and had brown paper covers. The long spines on the right were held together with three staples. On the cover, the words ‘Staff Diary’ were printed vertically in the middle. One of the notebooks had ‘CHUNG’ written on the bottom left corner; on the other was ‘YU’.

‘So this one is for me?’ asked Yu feeling like a school kid getting ready for a new school year.

‘Yes. This is your work schedule,’ said Chung, handing him the notebook. ‘I’ve filled in the timetable for you for the next four weeks. We are shift workers in case you didn’t know. Since Ms Kim Siu has assigned you to me, you will be following my schedule. Have a look.’

Yu opened his new diary. It wasn’t a surprise to be on shift duties – most of the funerals in the parlour, except the few Western-style ones, were held in the evening. He supposed that this was the right time to transport the bodies and also the right time for office workers to attend funerals after work. He scanned the first page of his diary. The dates were written on top of the page with the times underneath. It was hard to read because the words were written vertically and from right to left.

‘You have a luxurious schedule, you know? Nine to five from tomorrow until the end of next week, like an office worker,’ said Chung.

‘I’m very happy with the schedule,’ Yu said.
‘Then don’t pull a long face, young man,’ Chung said and demonstrated a very bright version of his permanent smile.

Yu smiled too. He just hadn’t figured out what to tell his father about his new job. *Lie about it? A lie wouldn’t take me very far. Tell the truth? I would be doomed as soon as Father heard the words ‘funeral parlour’. Yu, the shame of the family, would lose his job and return to square one. No, I don’t want to be unemployed again! What to do then?* He couldn’t see his way ahead. It was like tiptoeing through a minefield, he could only manage one step at a time.

He must have looked very glum, for Chung gave him a vigorous pat on the back. ‘We’re done, Yu. We’re all set for some real work tomorrow,’ he announced and left the changing room.

Yu placed the diary on top of his uniform and shoved them into his backpack. He put his shoes into his no. 7 locker and slipped the key onto the ring that held his home keys. He checked his hair in the mirror. His white T-shirt was still dappled with black dots – like a Dalmatian! Only later would he learn that black dots on a white surface composed the colour scheme on one half of the Tai Chi symbol; that he was a soul on the bright side of the universe.
At nine o’clock the next morning Yu was greeted by a row of blue-windowed vans which had been parked along Maple Street. A flower plate was erected on top of each van announcing: ‘Chan Family Funeral’, ‘Lee Family Funeral’, ‘Cheung Family Funeral’, ‘Wong Family Funeral’, ‘Ho Family Funeral’ and so on. The words ‘Kowloon Funeral Parlour Co. Ltd.’ sparkled in bold white on the blue panels of the vehicles. Some of them were adorned with white flower tinsel. Each was ready to transport the four-pieces-and-a-half uphill when the right time came. Families in black or white mourning garbs would soon move from the halls after the morning ceremonies. The eldest son or brother of the deceased would carry the big portrait, which would have been taken down from the altar and placed next to the driver. A few significant family members would sit next to the four-pieces-and-a-half in the blue van. The rest of the family would board a coach. They would travel uphill to a cemetery or, in most cases, to a crematorium.
Yu dashed anxiously into the parlour. It wasn’t safe to linger at the front door at this hour when the dead bodies would be wheeled and hauled. *Who knows if the souls will trail behind the bodies in those strange processions? Better to be safe than sorry.* One of his father’s mottos had just come to mind. Father possessed a repertoire of mottos which he would sometimes say when he was walking to Fairwood for afternoon tea, taking public transport or watching TV: *You reap what you sow. Lazy in youth; regret in old age.* Those were his slogans. When Father read the newspaper and found a story in which the cause and effect trajectory matched one of his mottos, he took it as confirmation that he was a wise man.

Thinking about his father, Yu forgot to greet Uncle Bong at the counter. Excellent. Now their already bad relationship would be even worse. In the middle of the hub S.B. Hong was digging his chopsticks into his ham and egg *ramen* breakfast. He was a small man but a noisy eater. He slurped and squeaked the polystyrene bowl with his chopsticks with the same thoroughness he showed at work. Chung came out of the changing room wearing his ceremonial white gown and perennial smile. He seemed to be in a hurry.

‘Hey, Yu, you’ll empty the halls with S.B. Hong today,’ Chung instructed. ‘Clear the flowers from the halls as soon as the four-pieces-and-halves are out and the families have left. All the families will be gone before noon.’

‘Okay,’ Yu said.

‘I have to hold a morning ceremony now. Can’t take you with me until you are more acquainted with funeral rituals,’ Chung said and the corner of his mouth twitched as if suppressing a laugh. ‘Don’t want you to embarrass people.’

‘Okay,’ replied Yu. That was a fair decision; he wasn’t keen on attending the morning ceremony when the body would be transferred into the four-pieces-and-a-
half either. He knew what a morning ceremony was. He had attended Daniel’s
grandfather’s funeral the year before. Perhaps the experience had been so brief that he
hadn’t worried much about ghosts at that time. He had hardly glanced at Daniel’s
grandfather’s body before they had closed the lid.

‘I’ll explain to you the morning ceremony another time,’ Chung said, darting out
the hub but calling back, ‘S.B. Hong will show you what to do.’

‘Okay,’ Yu replied.

He turned to S.B. Hong, who had finished his breakfast, and asked, ‘So, where
shall we start?’

S.B. Hong answered with a series of rapid hand gestures. Yu shook his head and
held his palms upwards. S.B. Hong took out a small notebook and a short pencil from
his shirt pocket and wrote: ‘Take two handcarts. We go to funeral hall no. 12.’

‘Okay,’ Yu said.

S.B. Hong smiled and nodded repeatedly.

Yu tripped at the threshold of the back door as he stepped into the back alley of the
funeral parlour carrying six rattan flower-stands, three around each arm. His shoes
were still too big for his feet despite his winter socks. He had cut loose the hem at the
end of his trouser legs so they reached his ankles, but they had started to fray. Loose
threads caught under his shoes and around one of the flaring legs of the flower-stands.
He looked like an octopus with the eighteen rattan legs, three for each flower stand,
flailing around his own two legs as he made his way from funeral hall no. 12 to the
ground and out into the back alley. Eventually he regained his balance by setting
down one flower-stand on the concrete. He was glad he didn’t tumble over – it could
have been messy. He loosened the sixteen tentacles from his arms and lined the flower stands up on one side of the back alley.

The alley reeked. Five air-conditioners protruding from the outer wall of the funeral parlour were emitting greenhouse gases into the narrow sky. A huge exhaust pipe on the wall of the neighbouring building was not functioning yet, but it soon would be. The gutters at the feet of the walls were littered with garbage. Patches of green moss fed on the sludge. Flies and mosquitoes abounded. Yu sighed. Another two of his father’s slogans came to mind: *You always start a career on the lowest rung. Young people should taste some bitterness.* Judging from his working conditions in the pit this morning, his father couldn’t be more right! S.B. Hong rattled into the alley with two handcarts of flower bouquets. Skilfully, he pushed one in front and traile the other behind him. He unloaded the flower arrangements of various sizes and shapes and lined them up along the other side of the alley.

‘Are we going up again?’ Yu asked.

S.B. Hong shook his head as he brought over a rattan garbage basket, placing it in front of the unwanted flower bouquets. With his hands he traced the actions of flower picking and throwing things into the basket and pointed to Yu. Then he pointed to himself, his handcarts and the back door of the parlour. He made a ‘V’ with his fingers and flipped it over twice. His face contorted.

‘You mean I pick out the flowers,’ said Yu pointing to himself and the basket, ‘and throw them into the basket.’

S.B. Hong smiled and nodded.

‘While you go up’, Yu continued, ‘for a second round and we take turns?’ He made a ‘V’ with his finger and flipped it over twice.

S.B. Hong made a thumbs up, and nodded again.
‘Okay,’ Yu said and made an ‘O’ with his fingers.

As S.B. Hong went back into the building with his handcarts Yu stooped in front of a flower bouquet. He put his hand into the triangular bouquet and tore out a handful of white, purple and yellow chrysanthemums. A big bunch of them were arranged in the middle of the bouquet and were supported by some palm leaves at the back. The flowers were still fresh and blooming, yet he had to drop them into the garbage basket. The fluffy corollas broke apart and tricolour petals scattered around like little commas. *What a waste!* He peeped into the basket, which looked like a floral grave, feeling slightly guilty, but he continued to do as instructed. There were white daisies, violet orchids, pink carnations and ornamental grasses he couldn’t name. His hands were soon wet with condensation. The air-conditioners overhead were humming. A lorry beeped as it reversed. A bicycle delivering polystyrene tubs of ham and egg *ramen* groaned past the alley. The chrome bell on the bicycle rang out. It was a sunny morning, though the sun couldn’t reach into the dumpster Yu was squatting in. He ripped the bouquet down until what remained was a bamboo rack, a shoebox base, a polystyrene block punctured by flower stems and two white strips of paper with black edges.

He stared at the rack with the two paper banners, unsure what to do. The two strips of paper draped over the sides of the once-lush flower bouquet. The banner on the left said: ‘For Honoured Grandmother’; the other one on the right said: ‘Humble Grandson Tai Shing, Granddaughter Oi Fun, weep and kowtow’. He drew in a long breath. The black calligraphic words looked grave, too grave to be torn down. He exhaled. The paper fluttered a little. The back alley fell silent. The air-conditioners had stopped humming. The lorry had stopped beeping. The chrome bicycle bell no longer rang. A cool breeze rolled in from either end of the alley to expel the stuffiness.
The crisp paper banner in front of him quivered, as did those on the bouquets lined up against the wall. All the banners were written in the same formula: ‘For Honoured Mother-in-law, From Humble Son-in-law XX’, ‘For Mother the Greatest, From Humble Son XX, Humble Daughter XX’. He looked left and right. It was very quiet – so quiet that he could hear paper crack in the wind and flowers crumple in the basket. Then a blue-windowed van swerved past. Yu just caught a glimpse of it as the blue metal bonnet flashed in the sun. The ray of light penetrated the shady alley. A strip of paper detached from the rack and fluttered down the alley.

It stopped at a woman’s ankle.

Yu’s heart literally missed a beat. The *blue van that has just driven by carrying a four-pieces-and-a-half couldn’t have left something behind, could it?* A small woman in a patchy orange jumper and black trousers bent down to untangle her leg from the paper banner. She wore an ear-length bob that was dyed jet black. A silver hairpin that clipped her fringe sparkled above her right eye. Her green plastic thongs scuffed the ground as she made her way towards him. She caught the paper banner in her hand and threw it into the gutter absentmindedly.

‘So you are new?’ the woman inquired stopping next to Yu. He noticed that she had a wide mouth.

‘Sorry?’ Yu replied.

The woman wasn’t a ghost; at least she didn’t behave like one. She placed her hands on her waist and looked down on Yu. Since Yu was squatting, she had the advantage of towering over him.

‘I asked, “Are you new?”’

Yu didn’t like her attitude. Her tone reminded him of a housewife bargaining in a market. He turned to the side and started to dismantle a teardrop-shaped garland. The
garland was crowned by three smaller garlands in the same shape. The construction looked like a bear’s footprint in cartoons.

‘Hey! You! Answer me!’ the woman shrieked.

*For God’s sake get lost!*

Yu had thought no human being could possess an attitude more obnoxious than Uncle Bong’s, but it seemed he was wrong. White lilies were blooming in the centre of the teardrop garland. The petals had fully opened and were arching backwards. He plucked one lily. The golden pollen had already stained the white corolla during transportation. He inhaled the fragrance. Now the air in the back alley was fragrant. He took another sniff, but this time he noticed a whiff of something else in the air. Something bitter and caffeinated.

He stood up and looked over his shoulder. Uncle Bong was leaning at the back door with his flask of *pu-erh* tea in a cloud of smoke. A lit cigarette was clasped between his fingers that looked like gnarled roots next to his mouth. Yu recalled a saying: ‘Don’t talk about a man during the day and don’t talk about a ghost at night.’ The idea was that the moment you opened your mouth, they would be there next to you, in front of you, and the scariest of all, behind you. He hadn’t talked about Uncle Bong, he had just thought about him, but the rule still applied.

Yu threw the lily into the garbage basket and greeted Uncle Bong. The old man didn’t reply. He hoped Uncle Bong hadn’t witnessed him ignore the obnoxious woman, but the woman complained, ‘Uncle Bong, good to see you here. Your new man is so rude! He didn’t even introduce himself! Look, I don’t have all day. Tell your new man to hurry up! I need my flower racks back early today. My orders are piling up!’
‘I apologise, Auntie Fa. Good to see you. This is Wong Yu. I will make sure he
does as he is told,’ said Uncle Bong and let out a puff of smoke. He was staring at Yu.
‘He’d better be,’ Auntie Fa snapped, grabbing all the flower stands on the other
side of the alley with her two hands. Eighteen rattan legs flared around her. She
stormed out of the alley looking like an enraged octopus. Her bob bounced and her
thongs reverberated on the ground.

_Shit! This time I’m screwed._

Yu hadn’t expected to be cornered by these intimidating people. He squatted
down instinctively to resume work. Uncle Bong didn’t yell at once, though Yu sensed
the old man’s gaze. Wisps of cigarette smoke crept towards Yu; he tore at the bouquet
with a renewed efficiency. Purple orchids with white centres crumpled and fell. Petals
of yellow chrysanthemum and green leaves scattered all over the ground. There was
no discrimination between fully bloomed, blooming and not yet bloomed flowers.
They all ended up in the basket. Then Uncle Bong cleared his throat. Yu heard him
propel a glob of saliva and a soft ‘tick’ when it hit the ground. He turned to look.

‘What are you staring at? You good-for-nothing fool. Concentrate on your work!’
Uncle Bong snapped.

Yu froze.

The old man waved his cigarette and some ashes dropped onto the broken flowers
in the basket. He cursed, ‘Damn your lungs. Did you hear Auntie Fa complaining
about you? No respect! Look at you! What is the mess of stitches on your chest and
trousers? Do you not know how to sew you name? And your trouser legs are fraying!
What is this sloppiness? Improper appearance, improper mind. I’m warning you.
Behave yourself!’
The reprimand resounded down the narrow alley. The once fragrant lily in the basket smelt of nicotine. *What do you want, old man? Is this how you take your revenge because Ms Kim Siu hired me against your will?* Yu didn’t regret ignoring Auntie Fa, nor staring at Uncle Bong when he had spat. Uncle Bong would get at him in one way or another. The temperature in the alley rose. Yu stood up and turned to face the fuming old man.

‘Uncle Bong, I’m sorry I really don’t know how to sew, but I can do them again and do a better job next time. And yes, I wasn’t polite with Auntie Fa because she was rude to me in the first place. I looked at you because you spat. Just want you to know it is not hygienic to do that. Don’t you remember SARS?’

Uncle Bong’s eyes dilated and his eyebrows flared like the wings of a falcon. The old man was not used to being answered back. Yu was surprised too. Uncle Bong was older than his now dead grandfather. *It is not how things should be done; no younger person should talk back to an elderly man in such manner.* But Uncle Bong’s criticism was so unfair that he couldn’t control himself. The old man threw his cigarette butt on the ground and extinguished it with his rubber heel. He kicked the flattened butt into the gutter. The cigarette smoke in the alley was dispersing. He didn’t take his eyes off Yu.

A rattle came from inside the parlour. S.B. Hong emerged with two handcarts of flower bouquets. His skinny body flinched when he saw Uncle Bong and Yu standing face to face. He greeted Uncle Bong with a bow and wheeled his goods between the two men, making small nods to both sides as he passed.

‘Fix your clothes before I see you next time. I don’t want a beggar to work here!’ Uncle Bong bellowed. ‘And finish the flowers fast!’
S.B. Hong, who was lining the bouquets on one side and the flower stands on the other side of the alley, jumped again.

‘Yes, Uncle Bong,’ Yu answered. ‘I will.’

The old man flapped his long sleeves and went back inside. The petals on the ground fluttered and rolled towards Yu’s feet. S.B. Hong tapped Yu on the shoulder and held his palms upwards: ‘What happened?’

‘Nothing happened,’ Yu said and shrugged his shoulders. ‘I think my time of birth is in conflict with Uncle Bong’s.’

S.B. Hong nodded with an understanding look. He evidently believed what Yu had said. But Yu had just jeopardised his new job. Such stupidity! I should have held my temper even though Uncle Bong has been antagonistic. Didn’t I agree with Daniel’s suggestion that I should keep a low profile and work for a few months? But I’ve just been stirring up trouble! S.B. Hong started to destroy another bouquet. He pointed to the flowers and pointed across the road. He made two bony fists and wriggled his elbows in a running gesture. They had to hurry up.

It was Yu’s turn to go and collect bouquets from the halls. He borrowed S.B. Hong’s two handcarts and wheeled them inside, pushing one in front of him and pulling the other, as S.B. Hong did. The loose and rusty axles of the carts rattled. He slowed down on the marble floor of the Hall of Clouds to reduce the noise. He peeped at the old receptionist from the corner of his eye. Uncle Bong at the desk was concentrating on his calligraphy. Should I go over and apologise? Yu waited next to the lift door. He peeped at the old receptionist again. The lift dinged. A group of people wearing white headbands, hemp scarves and robes exited, reminding him of the four-pieces-and-a-halves that were still being lifted into blue-windowed vans in front of the funeral parlour. He politely held the lift door for the mourners to step out.
The white troop marched across the marble hall and disappeared out of the Cloud Gate. Yu wheeled his two carts into the lift and pressed the No. 3 button. The door closed slowly, and Uncle Bong was out of sight.

When Yu returned, the alley looked as if it had hosted a battle. S.B. Hong had trampled all the flowers, torn up the paper banners and tossed the polystyrene blocks in a pile. He then came to empty Yu’s handcarts and reloaded them with rattan supports from the disassembled bouquets. He pointed across the road and signalled Yu to follow. Each pushed one handcart and proceeded out of the alley. The brightness of the sun outside was dazzling. Sheet metal workers and carpenters were sitting out eating lunch in threes and fours. Housewives who reminded Yu of Auntie Fa rushed to pick up their primary school kids. A takeaway deliverer cycled past with polystyrene lunch boxes and paper cups shaking in the rear basket. Yu heard the ding of the bicycle bell. He felt embarrassed being in his funeral parlour uniform but the pedestrians in the neighbourhood didn’t seem to care. They were used to seeing people who earned money from the dead walking around in traditional navy blue outfits. S.B. Hong swiftly crossed to the other side of the road. Yu followed.

S.B. Hong saluted and nodded the moment they reached Sea Breeze Florist which was wider than the back alley and in an even more chaotic state. The cement floor in the shop was wet and unswept. Murky puddles were littered with heaps of rotten petals, leaves, branches and twigs. Buckets of fresh chrysanthemums, orchids, lilies, roses, daisies and palm leaves were scattered about. Three male workers in vests, shorts and gumboots sitting on low stools were constructing tear-shaped garlands. The air was sickly-sweet. Auntie Fa, her black hair bobbing, came out chewing a mouthful of lunch. She rolled her eyes at Yu and signalled to S.B. Hong to wheel their carts in.
The odour of wilting flowers gradually gave way to the smell of ink. In the back room of the shop where the floor was dry, four folding mah-jong tables were combined into one big table on which blank and freshly written paper banners were spread. Auntie Fa put down an ink brush and closed the ink pot on the table. *How peculiar! I thought all calligraphy practitioners are mild-tempered people who love peace!* It seemed that he was wrong. S.B. Hong was a fast worker; he unloaded Yu’s handcart as well as his own.

‘If you had come any later than this, I wouldn’t have tipped you!’ Auntie Fa said and gave S.B. Hong a twenty-dollar note.

Back in the alley, S.B. Hong tapped Yu on the shoulder, patted his shirt pocket where he had put his tip and put his index finger on his mouth: ‘Don’t tell anyone about the extra cash I have made.’ Yu made an ‘O’ with his fingers. *Who cares?* S.B. Hong smiled and took his two handcarts into the parlour.

Yu had been through a lot for one morning. He stretched his arms and straightened his spine. A rush of wind. Multicoloured petals on the ground somersaulted. Many of them fell into the gutter but one big lily cartwheeled out of the alley. It stopped at a lady’s ankle. Her snug outfit stretched as she bent down to pick up the flower next to her red embroidered slipper. On the other side of Maple Street, a lorry bearing a moon-cake advertisement was reversing. Moon-cakes from the Lotus Scent Chamber.
PART II

The Lotus Scent Chamber
‘Yu, now that you work with us, let me tell you about the Sorcerer Clan,’ said Ah Tai.

‘There are six head sorcerers in our funeral parlour and they are the heart of the parlour. Each of them masters rituals of a different region: Shanghai, Fujian, Guangdong, Chiu Chow, Sea and Land Riches and Hakka, the most common origins of Hong Kong people. Together they are known as the Sorcerer Clan.’ Ah Tai was a small man like S.B. Hong and was the champion talker in the funeral parlour. His dramatic expressions, short pauses and long vowels beat Chung and his smile by miles. Ah Tai had a very pleasant voice like a radio storyteller in the sixties, though his volume tended to be on the loud side, which made him sound like an old radio at full blast.

‘What is a sorcerer exactly?’ asked Yu.

‘You have to speak louder for me,’ said Ah Tai pointing to a skin-coloured hearing aid behind his left ear.

‘Oh, sorry,’ said Yu, and raised his voice, ‘What is a sorcerer exactly?’
Before replying Ah Tai took a sip of Oolong tea from his thermos. They were alone in the hub.

‘None of us know what their real names are. All we know is that they come to the funeral parlour at around five in the afternoon. Five to nine in the evening is the working hour of the Sorcerer Clan. It is believed that from twelve to four in the afternoon, the six head sorcerers share a routine, getting together to chat over bowls of tea and red-bean buns in their old hub, which has been their meeting place for a long time. It is called the Lotus Scent Chamber. No one knows where they go and what they do in their leisure time.’

‘Why the Lotus Scent Chamber?’ asked Yu. ‘You mean the old teahouse on Hong Kong Island, up the cobble street in Sheung Wan, don’t you?’

‘So you know the one,’ Ah Tai continued. ‘But why do you ask why? That’s the story I’m telling you, part of the tall tale of the Sorcerer Clan. There is nothing to explain.’

‘Because my mother buys moon-cakes from there every year. The kind stuffed with fried nuts and thin slices of ham. That’s the only moon-cake she eats,’ Yu explained.

‘It is only a coincidence,’ said Ah Tai and shrugged.

Yu shrugged too. If Ah Tai said it was a coincidence, a coincidence it was. The tall tale of the Sorcerer Clan sounded like part of a martial art epic. Yu had seen many sorcerers on various occasions. They chanted at shop-opening ceremonies, invoked gods at festivals, performed road rituals where people had died in car accidents, suicides, murders. He wasn’t sure which style of ritual had been used at Daniel’s grandfather’s funeral. Father said all sorcerers were imposters. They cheated people for their money by playing tricks and pretending to communicate with gods or
ancestors’ ghosts. Rituals were complete rip-offs. Funeral parlours in particular abused people’s superstitions. Father didn’t believe in gods, ghosts, feng shui or fortune telling – or so he claimed. His views were summed up in one of his slogans: 

*Rituals are effective only because you believe them to be.* Yu had been inclined to agree, but now wondered: *is there ‘real’ sorcery out there?* Ah Tai didn’t offer any useful information on this all-important point, though he seemed to know what he was talking about.

Yu lowered his head to continue folding gold and silver paper ingots while waiting for their lunch to arrive. He pinched the angles of an ingot tight and threw it into the nylon rice bag between his knees. A stack of pastel-coloured paper had been fanned out and weighted down on the table with a small stone. Yu took another sheet from under the weight. The thin square sheet was embossed with a square of gold in the middle. Yu rolled up the sheet, tucked in the flaps on both ends and nipped the angles slightly so they flared. He had learnt from his grandmother how to fold basic ingots when he was a small boy. His grandmother had a nylon rice bag too. It was woven into shiny white stripes and was prickly to touch, just like this one. Grandmother had stopped these activities after she was diagnosed with dementia years ago. Now she filled her days with milk and television, like an infant.

Before Ah Tai had told Yu about how the Sorcerer Clan spent their leisure time, Yu had figured out how the worker clan spent their ‘leisure’ in the funeral parlour – folding ingots. The parlour always needed ingots, so the workers folded some whenever they had time. Mourners were allowed to burn as many ingots as they wanted during a funeral – it was included in the hall rent. It was believed that the more they burnt, the wealthier their ancestors would be underground. So mourners and some devoted visitors would sit and fold ingots all night in the halls. But if the
mourners and visitors were not so good at folding ingots, it was the workers’ responsibility to maintain the fire in the small furnaces in the halls – the fire wasn’t supposed to die. That was why every funeral needed at least two rice-bagfuls of ingots on standby. There were twelve halls in the funeral parlour, which required twenty-four bags in total. And these were only basic ingots.

Ah Tai was folding advance ingots. They looked tighter, more triangular, more three-dimensional and more like real ingots than the basic ones. They looked like little rolling boats or fried won tons. Ah Tai lined them up ten in a row on the table. Whenever he accumulated thirty-five of them he joined them with toothpicks to make an ingot tower. He made a ring of twelve ingots for the base of the tower, then nine for the first level, six for the second level, four for the third level, three for the fourth level and, lastly, one for the pinnacle. When Ah Tai slipped an orange plastic dish underneath the tower it became portable. He moved it over to the shelf behind him where six other towers were already sitting.

Yu lifted the rice bag a little and gave it a shake. Ingots fell into gaps and subsided. He pulled the opening of the bag together and sewed it up with a hairpin and a piece of red nylon thread. The opening of the rice bag was punctured so Yu only needed to push the hairpin in and out of the holes in a running stitch. So simple even the Genius of Asia can manage it! Then he hauled it over to the wall where the origami waited to be burnt.

‘Where’s your family from, Yu?’ asked Ah Tai resuming their conversation suddenly.

‘Chiu Chow,’ Yu answered.

‘Then you’ll probably learn from Sorcerer Chiu Chow,’ said Ah Tai.

‘Learn about what?’ asked Yu.
‘Rituals,’ Ah Tai answered, waving the intricate ingot he was folding in his hand. ‘Because it is our duty at evening shifts to assist ritual procedures. Of course you have to be familiar with them.’

‘Why Chiu Chow for me?’ asked Yu.

‘Did you listen or not?’ Ah Tai’s voice took on an impatient tone. ‘Because you’re from Chiu Chow. Dea-jiao-nang. Chiu Chow people. Bak-m-bak? Understand?’

Yu didn’t speak Chiu Chow dialect; he only understood a few simple phrases, such as ‘drink tea’, ‘eat rice’, ‘Dea-jiao-nang’ and ‘Bak-m-bak’. He could improvise some more words if Ah Tai switched to converse in Chiu Chow, but Yu hoped he didn’t have to. He understood the custom of learning from the sorcerer of your origin. It just felt weird. It was the first time family origins had mattered.

‘Are you a Chiu Chow person too?’ asked Yu, then added tentatively. ‘Dea-jiao-nang?’

‘No, but close. I’m from Fujian,’ Ah Tai said proudly. He seemed happy to be asked. ‘We are still Ga-ghee-nang. The same people.’

Fujian and Chiu Chow were not particularly close on the map but Yu could imagine his and Ah Tai’s ancestors had been good neighbours along the coast of the South China Sea. Yu’s ancestors had dug baby oysters and fried them with eggs. Ah Tai’s ancestors had fished and made fish-balls. They had got along well. Ga-ghee-nang they had been.

‘And S.B. Hong is from Hakka,’ Ah Tai said, pointing to the mute man, who had just come into the hub with a handcart on which polystyrene lunch boxes and drinks were wobbling in white plastic bags. Ah Tai shoved his advanced ingots into a paper box and dropped it casually on the floor; Yu took the stack of ingot paper over to a shelf. S.B. Hong smiled and nodded. He laid out the food and a handful of change in
the middle of the table. Yu found his four treasure rice and iced lemon tea. The treasures of the day were roasted suckling pigs, roasted ducks, steamed chicken and half a salted egg. There was always a surprise when ordering four treasure rice because he never knew what barbecues he would be getting, though the salted egg was invariably present. He took the lid off the container, placed it in front of him and picked his meat onto it so he could spoon the rice. His colleagues were approaching their lunch with the same diligence. Ah Tai had ceased talking and S.B. Hong’s chewing noise had taken over.

The smell of hot food in the hub replaced the mouldy library smell. Yu forgot they were in a funeral parlour and that the morgue and filing cabinets were just under their feet. The air-conditioner groaned and emitted a draft above their lunch table. So far, Yu hadn’t revisited the morgue. He was yet to handle corpses at funerals. He would have to, perhaps after studying under Sorcerer Chiu Chow, as Ah Tai had said. He didn’t know how workers transferred a dead body into a four-pieces-and-a-half. Do they stretch the sheet underneath the body to lift it from the bed? The eyes of the body will still be closed despite the movement? What if they jolt it? Will that ruin the hairdo of the deceased, like, the bun of the old lady in the red lily gown? If they slip and drop the body, will the fragile skeleton of the old lady shatter as well as her soul? Yu’s hand jerked. The salted egg he had been scooping dropped onto the table and cracked.

‘Hah, good to be back!’ Chung’s voice came from the doorway. ‘I have had long rides to and from Kwai Chung’, he said, referring to Kwai Chung Crematorium.

Yu didn’t have to turn around to see Chung’s iconic smile. Ah Tai and S.B. Hong put down their chopsticks and gave Chung a slight bow. He was sweating profusely in his ceremonial gown. Yu tried to catch a whiff of burning above the middle-aged man’s body odour but there wasn’t any. Don’t be silly! The crematorium doesn’t burn
the dead body in front of the family! Chung had just escorted the family to press the button which sent the four-pieces-and-a-half inside the crematorium on a conveyor belt. The dead would have to queue to be processed. Crematoriums were very busy departments. Yu had witnessed how they worked. Daniel’s family had been in agony at the crematorium but they couldn’t have delayed pressing the button much longer because another family had already been waiting outside. Yu remembered that a sorcerer had hitched a ride on the journey uphill. As they had been about to leave the crematorium, the sorcerer had instructed everybody to step over a basin of fire. That must have been a preventive measure – in case a stray ghost was trailing behind them, waiting to haunt them.

Chung wiped his face and the back of his neck with a towel and threw it on the chair. He had a drink from his thermos and let out a sigh of relief.

‘So how are you fellows?’ Chung chirped.

‘All right,’ said Yu.

The other two nodded in agreement.

‘Good, good, Yu.’ Chung was happy despite having just witnessed another family press the button. He sat down opposite Yu, where a lunch box had been laid out for him. Seeing Yu’s plate of barbecues, Chung exclaimed, ‘Wow, four treasures.’

‘Yes. Would you like a piece?’ Yu offered.

‘Oh, no, thanks. That’s awfully kind of you,’ Chung said opening his lunchbox. It was vegetarian fried noodles. ‘I’m a vegetarian.’

‘Oh, I didn’t know that,’ said Yu, surprised.

‘I know, I know. I look too fat for a herbivore,’ Chung quipped.

‘No, I wasn’t thinking that,’ Yu laughed. He turned to the skinny colleagues at the table. ‘What about you guys? You two are meat eaters. Would you like a piece?’
‘No, thank you. I’m fine,’ Ah Tai declined.

S.B. Hong shook his head and smiled.

So Yu continued to eat, feeling a little dismayed that his four treasures were rejected by everybody.

‘It’s been long time since I last tasted meat,’ said Chung, tucking into his lunch.

‘How long have you been vegetarian?’ asked Yu.

‘Since I began working here,’ Chung said.

‘Really?’ said Yu. He had a hunch the conversation was going awry.

‘You know people tend to call dead bodies “salted fish”?’ Chung began. It was too late to stop him. ‘The metaphor is actually suitable. Think about a stiff dead fish wrapped in a white cloth. When I started to work here, I didn’t like the expression. It put me off preserved meat. And soon I stopped eating all kinds of meat.’

Yu stopped chewing. Something didn’t taste right. The pork was too burnt, the chicken marrow was too bloody and the duck was encrusted in a ring of cold fat. The meat had toughened fast in the strong air-conditioning – the flesh was drying out. Yu noticed a black dot on a piece of chicken. He stretched out a finger to rub it off. His fingertips had barely reached a bump on the yellow skin when he jumped. It feels disgusting – like the skin of a long-dead carcass! The image of the old lady in the red lily gown returned. This time her forearms were exposed. Chung had reminded him not to touch the corpse, but Yu had done so anyway. She had freckles on her skin. White skin appeared yellow under the yellow light. Saltiness settled on Yu’s tongue. His stomach turned. His throat expanded. A burning sensation surged over the molars at the back of his mouth. An acidic tide was rising.

This hadn’t happened to him for a long time. He abandoned his lunch mates and fought his way between the old library bookshelves to the bathroom, where he
vomited rice, salted eggs, roasted suckling pig, roasted duck and steamed chicken into the toilet bowl. His throat hurt from the gush of half-churned food. Morsels of the four treasures were barely coalesced in the bowl. He spat several times, flushed the toilet, then grabbed the toilet bowl and pushed himself up. His knees were wobbling.

‘Are you all right, Yu?’ Chung asked.

Yu was drooling. He nodded. Ah Tai and S.B. Hong rushed in to assist him to rinse his mouth under the tap. S.B. Hong was gesticulating with one hand while supporting Yu with the other. Yu failed to comprehend. Then Ah Tai shouted in his radio voice, ‘It must be food poisoning! We usually don’t order barbecues from the canteen opposite. They don’t look very fresh.’

Yu looked up. In the mirror his face was deathly white and his hair dishevelled. His chin was raining tap water and his nose was red. It wasn’t food poisoning; even the Genius of Asia could tell that. The most rapid onset of food poisoning took at least thirty minutes after ingestion. Besides, none of them had warned Yu not to order barbecue. What is Ah Tai’s verdict based on? The taste of salty charred meat still lingered in Yu’s mouth. He cleared his throat and coughed out the phlegm. A murky blob glided along the white ceramic surface of the sink and disappeared down the drain. Ah Tai and S.B. Hong led Yu to the bench in the changing room. Chung gave him a capful of jasmine tea from his thermos. Yu’s hand was shaking. His forefinger, the one he had stretched out to rub away the dark spot from the yellow chicken skin, was dancing involuntarily.

‘Lie down,’ Chung took the tea from Yu and helped him stretch out on the bench. ‘You have a jacket in your locker? Want me to get that for you?’

Yu fumbled out his locker key from his trousers.
Chung took out Yu’s clothes. He spread a jacket over him and rolled up a T-shirt to slip under his head as a pillow. ‘Don’t worry, boy. Have a rest.’ Chung patted Yu on the shoulder. ‘You just overreacted from my salted fish analogy. My apology.’

Chung put a hand over his mouth to conceal his smile. So Chung knew it wasn’t food poisoning! He didn’t mind if the chubby man teased him. He deserved it. ‘Take it easy this afternoon,’ Chung continued. ‘I’ll arrange for you to see a sorcerer tomorrow.’

‘What?’ Yu exclaimed. His heart rate which had just slowed down a little, accelerated again. What does a sorcerer have to do with my ‘food poisoning’? It couldn’t be a sign of me being shadowed by a ghost, could it?

‘Don’t panic. It has nothing to do with you throwing up in our toilet,’ Chung laughed. ‘You meet a sorcerer to begin learning some rituals so you won’t embarrass me at ceremonies.’

So it was as Ah Tai had said.

‘And our sorcerers don’t cure ailments anyway,’ Chung added cheekily and left to continue with his vegetarian lunch.

Chung is right. I’ve just overreacted. I must have looked a fool throwing up in the middle of a lunch.

The air-conditioner let out another cold draft. Aluminium bars divided the fake ceiling of the changing room into a tick-tack-toe map. Yu pulled his jacket higher. Something hard in the pocket hit the bench and he groped for it. White Flower Embrocation! He unscrewed the tiny blue cap and rubbed the fragrant oil on his temples, below his nostrils and on his stomach, as old women did when they suffered from motion sickness. He closed his eyes and his breathing slowly evened out. He could smell
flowers in the air. Next to the bathroom door, a freckled hand was holding a calla lily. It opened and closed against her red gown like an eddy.

Ah Tai had said it was just a coincidence that Yu’s mother only bought moon-cakes from the Lotus Scent Chamber. So, it was another coincidence Yu’s mother had bought moon-cakes from the Lotus Scent Chamber that evening.

It had taken Yu a long while at primary school to realise the moon-cakes his family consumed were unusual. Normal moon-cakes were soft, not crunchy; and sweet, not savoury. They melted in your mouth and didn’t get into the gaps in your teeth. They were made of lotus seed paste, not fried nuts and thin slices of ham. But the crunchy moon-cakes were Yu’s parents’ favourites – one of the very few things his mother and father had in common. It gave them an excuse to make a ferry trip across the harbour to Hong Kong Island a week before Mid Autumn Festival every year. They’d stroll up the cobble street in Sheung Wan to the Lotus Scent Chamber where tea was still served in bowls and dim-sums were still carried by waiters on trays with leather strips that hung around their necks.

Yu’s parents had come back from their excursion to Hong Kong Island that evening. After showering Yu saw the familiar turquoise moon-cake tin on the mah-jong/dining table. His mother was making four cuts in a moon-cake. She took one-eighth for herself and passed the rest over to her husband who was half-lying on the sofa in an off-white vest and green boxers. He tossed a slice into his mouth and chewed. It was his weekend day off, when he took a break from digging the ground and probing into drainage pipes; when he sat around all day with the racing section of the newspaper in his hands. Yu was about to retire to his cubicle when his mother offered him a slice of moon-cake.
‘No, thank you, I’m still full from dinner,’ he lied. The truth was he hadn’t eaten a thing since his disastrous lunch and had no appetite for moon-cake with sliced ham in it.

‘The frog at the bottom of a well doesn’t know anything,’ said his father suddenly sitting up. He folded away his paper, took off the spectacles he wore only on racing days and helped himself to another slice of moon-cake. The way he chomped on it with occasional sucking put Yu off. He wanted to retreat into his sanctuary fast but then his mother uttered the very words he didn’t want to hear. Perhaps the moon-cake excursion that had made her excited but his mother had a habit of making unnecessary remarks.

‘I’ve sewed your uniform. It’s on your bed,’ she said, savouring her slice of moon-cake.

‘What uniform?’ Yu’s father asked with a bulging left cheek.

‘The uniform for his new job,’ answered his mother innocently.

‘What kind of job?’ inquired the father.

‘Oh, what kind of job, by the way?’ she asked, remembering that she hadn’t asked Yu that question.

Yu had prepared for this. He wouldn’t have asked his mother to fix his uniform if Uncle Bong hadn’t picked at him. If he told them the truth on the spot, his mother might faint and his father would start to yell. He would write out his slogans on old calendar sheets and stick them around the house: *Money made from dead people is dirty money. No messing around. Find a proper job.* He would have to quit …

*No! I know I’ll have to tell the truth eventually, but this is not the time!* He paused to ponder his words while the game show on television kept his parents entertained.
They burst out laughing together and then it was time for commercials: Wan Chai
Computer Centre was holding a sale.

‘What kind of job?’ asked his father again, his narrow eyes looking hard at Yu.

‘Computer maintenance.’

‘Where?’ asked his mother.

‘Wan Chai,’ Yu answered.

‘Lots of credit card street booths in Wan Chai. Don’t you dare touch those. Credit
cards are traps!’ his father said and slid half way down on the sofa again.

They stopped talking. Yu dashed into his cubicle and closed his door before
anybody could open their mouths again. His funeral parlour uniform was folded
neatly on his bed. His name had been re-embroidered and the frays on his trouser legs
mended. He rolled the uniform up, picked up his backpack from the floor between his
bed and his wardrobe and stuffed the uniform into the bag. He sat down on the end of
his bed and pushed his legs into the space under the computer desk next to the
processor. His toes gripped onto the edge of a box of old CDs, photo albums, school
magazines – debris of the past. The tiny cubicle didn’t offer much room for
sentimentality. He had got used to throwing away homework exercises and selling
textbooks of the previous year when he was in school – things that Mina wouldn’t
need. He didn’t know what had happened to the rest of his childhood memorabilia.
They might have ended up as landfill. Loud applause signalled that the game show on
TV was coming to an end. His mother put away her moon-cakes from the Lotus Scent
Chamber; his father started to lay out his bedspread and Mina went to take a shower.

Yu could now monopolise the phone line for a short browse on the internet. He
stretched out on his tiny bed while waiting for the connection tone. He wished there
was more space in his life – space on-line, space in his tiny room, and space for honesty.
Sorcerer Chiu Chow and Sorcerer Fujian were friends; it was very difficult to
differentiate the two of them. In fact, all the six head sorcerers looked alike. They all
dressed in navy blue. They wore long-sleeved cotton tops and cotton trousers. Their
loose shirts had stiff collars fastened by cotton knots and loops. They left their shirts
untucked. But the most characteristic feature of the sorcerers’ uniforms was their long
and inelastic white socks that didn’t wrap tightly around their shins but were tied with
a piece of string just below their knees. And they tucked their trouser legs into the
socks. They wore flat-heeled cloth shoes with zebra stripes which looked tight on
their feet in contrast to the baggy socks. They leaped through water and air in those
shoes, Yu imagined.

Sorcerer Chiu Chow came to the funeral parlour outside his normal five to nine
schedule especially to see Yu, the new Chiu Chow ritual apprentice. Sorcerer Fujian
came along because he and Sorcerer Chiu Chow always appeared together. They
might have been the sorcerer counterparts of Yu and Daniel.
‘There they are. Look, Yu, the one on the left is Sorcerer Chiu Chow,’ Chung said looking through the door of the hub.

Yu propped himself against the jamb and stuck his head out. From behind Uncle Bong’s counter, Yu saw two skinny old men in navy blue outfits and funny socks come through the Cloud Gate. They stopped at Uncle Bong’s counter.

‘The one on the left, you said?’ asked Yu.

‘The one with a beanie on his head,’ said Chung, peeping from behind Yu.

That was a better clue. The sorcerer on the left wore a blue beanie that looked like a house-shaped milk-carton. Two ribbons draped the back of his head; a piece of white jade sparkled on his forehead. So that was Sorcerer Chiu Chow. Sorcerer Fujian, on the right, didn’t wear a hat. His hair was pulled into a longish bun on top of his skull and it was pierced with a jade pin. Their apparel was no different from the sorcerers, or sorcerer imposters if Yu’s father insisted, Yu had seen on other occasions.

‘Why are you peeping like that, Yu?’ asked Chung from the inside the hub.

*So that Uncle Bong won’t see me!*

Yu and the old man were not talking these days. Uncle Bong didn’t comment on Yu’s re-embroidered names and mended trouser legs. He would know they hadn’t been done by Yu’s own hands just glimpsing at them, but again nobody had told Yu not to ask for help. Yu couldn’t worry about sewing now anyway; he was worried about meeting Sorcerer Chiu Chow.

‘What exactly are we going to do with Sorcerer Chiu Chow?’ asked Yu.

‘Nothing much. This is just for Sorcerer Chiu Chow to get to know you,’ answered Chung.

‘How is he going to get to know me?’ asked Yu.
‘He reads you,’ said Chung.

‘Like reading my palms and face?’ asked Yu.

‘Something like that,’ said Chung. ‘There’s nothing to worry about.’

Yu was still worried. He had never been in direct contact with a sorcerer. He had never had his face or palm read even though Wong Tai Sin Temple was just across the Dragon Runway, while tourists travelled kilometres to have theirs read. Father had said whatever a sorcerer read was a load of bullshit. Yu doubted it was all bullshit, though he wasn’t keen on fortune telling either. But why does Sorcerer Chiu Chow have to read me before teaching me rituals? Is that to confirm I am the right person again? There was something about the whole sorcerer business that Yu couldn’t quite understand. Things could be simpler if all sorcerers were indeed imposters; at least I would be sure they were after money. Yet Yu had no idea what a sorcerer was; still less did he know what Sorcerer Chiu Chow was after.

The two sorcerers must have been good friends of Uncle Bong. They stopped at the desk and started to converse loudly with the receptionist. Cantonese in three different accents collided. Yu recognised Sorcerer Chiu Chow’s accent over the top of Sorcerer Fujian’s Fujian accent and Uncle Bong’s unidentified one. Chiu Chow people were loud talkers. Yu remembered the time when his grandmother had been up and healthy, she used to speak Chiu Chow with Yu’s parents when she came to visit. They had talked loudly. Yu and Mina would turn the volume of the television higher and higher on those occasions, but the Chiu Chow talkers had always won.

The discussion between the two sorcerers and the funeral parlour receptionist in the lobby continued but Yu couldn’t catch what the three friends were discussing so enthusiastically. Is Uncle Bong complaining about me to the sorcerers already? Yu
shouldn’t expose himself outside the door of the hub any longer lest Uncle Bong turned around suddenly. Yu drew his head in.

‘You young people these days do behave strangely sometimes,’ Chung laughed.

‘Let’s go. We’ll wait for Sorcerer Chiu Chow in hall no. 5.’

That was a good idea.

Yu smeared another cymbal with toothpaste and passed it over to Chung, who buffed the brass surface with a rag in small circles. They had already polished fifteen pairs of hand cymbals – just to occupy themselves with something while waiting for Sorcerer Chiu Chow. Yu didn’t know how long they still had to wait. Chung lined the cymbals up on the chanting bench they had set up on the left of the altar. Yu drew out a gong from underneath the bench. He dotted the copper surface with blobs of white paste and passed it to Chung. The wide copper disc struck Chung’s thermos by accident making a loud ringing sound. The ring deepened in funeral hall no. 5 like a stage cue in a Chinese opera.

Sorcerer Chiu Chow stepped into the hall; he was talking on his mobile phone. Chung and Yu stood up, bowed and greeted the sorcerer. Yu expected to be ignored but the sorcerer raised his left hand to them in a gesture of greeting. The act might have been friendly if he hadn’t been yelling into his phone. Sorcerer Chiu Chow was not more than 160 centimetres tall. A small man but a loud talker. The sorcerer continued to talk as he went over to the mahogany sideboard next to Chung and Yu’s bench. He pulled out from the sideboard a black robe that fell down to his ankles and a silvery horsetail brush with a long and thin handle like a wand. He slipped his left arm into a long sleeve of the gown, switched the phone to his other hand, talked for a few seconds before slipping his right arm into the other sleeve. He clasped the phone
between his shoulder and ear to fasten the robe with a small bow in front of his chest.

Still talking, the sorcerer studied his reflection in a polished gong hanging on top of the sideboard and adjusted his milk-carton beanie.

Then he turned his back to Chung and Yu to smooth out his horsetail brush. Yu was surprised to see a large symbol on the sorcerer’s back. A circle was divided by an inverted ‘S’ into two commas – one white and one black. A white round dot sat within the black domain; a black dot sat within the white domain. Three rows of yellow dashes formed an octagonal frame around the circle. It was Tai Chi, the universe. It was believed to expel ghosts the same way garlic or a cross did vampires. The symbol on Sorcerer Chiu Chow’s back was most likely for protection when he fought ghosts though who was to know whether there really were ghosts and whether Sorcerer Chiu Chow combated them? Yu found the black, white and bright yellow composition of the symbol stunning.

Sorcerer Chiu Chow turned around; he seemed to be prepared. He rested the long handle of the horsetail brush on his left forearm, his thumb through the ring at the end of the handle. Silvery strands poured from this elbow like a fountain. In his right hand was his phone. Yu couldn’t believe the sorcerer was still talking. He sat opposite Yu at the bench. Yu groped for another pair of hand cymbals from underneath the bench and squeezed toothpaste on them. The sorcerer didn’t look at him. His eyes were staring at a patch of blank space above Yu’s left shoulder. The sorcerer nodded and uttered sounds of agreement as he listened to whoever was speaking on the other end of the line. His face was divided into sections by streaks of wrinkles: strips of forehead, eyes, nose, cheeks, mouth and chin. His discoloured lips were severely chapped. A black mole protruded from his right cheek from which a long strand of hair sprouted. The hair swayed as the sorcerer nodded in concentration.
‘Even for dying matters they have to bargain,’ Sorcerer Chiu Chow bellowed suddenly after a prolonged silence. He gave his horsetail brush an angry swing. The long and silvery strands sparked a half moon against his dark gown. The folding chair cracked and squeaked under the pressure of his vigorous jolts. His right leg bobbed impatiently on his left knee. The Nokia 3210 with a black leather cover that matched his gown was about to break in his grip. Yu squeezed too much toothpaste on one of the cymbals, but he passed them over to Chung anyway.

‘We said two thousand dollars for the red envelope, on top of the ritual fee, all the sacrifices, paper dolls, clothes, this and that,’ screamed the sorcerer. ‘Guess what? When it was over, they suddenly started to argue. Saying that the dance was too short, chanting not sincere enough, the incense smelt bad, and there were yellow spots on their muslins …’

The sorcerer swore a lengthy curse on the respected family’s last eighteen generations. As he did so, he kicked over a stack of white headbands Yu had torn out from a roll of calico yesterday. He had diligently folded each of them thrice into 35-centimetre-long strips according to S.B. Hong’s detailed instruction but the stylish construction had just collapsed into a white anthill.

Yu stole a look at Chung. Chung had just begun to clean the inside of a dee-dah horn, apparently with great concentration. Then Yu felt the push of a fat knee under the table. Chung rolled his eyes towards the white anthill and looked at Yu. His smile looked cheeky. Yu put down his cymbal, wiped his fingers clean on his trousers and stooped over the pile of white strips.

‘What’s the fucking point?’ yelled the sorcerer.

Yu jumped, mistakenly thinking the question was directed at him.
‘Wasted so much saliva. But still they paid the same price at the end. We say auspicious money is auspicious money. Like it or not, you give it. Those Mainlanders know nothing about traditional practices. Talk, talk, talk. If they really have the guts, take their dead body back north and do whatever,’ yelled the sorcerer and rolled his eyes. ‘Anyway, save a breath to warm my stomach. I’ll talk to you tomorrow when I see you at the Lotus Scent Chamber. Bye.’

A beep ended the call. Funeral hall no. 5 fell silent.

Sorcerer Chiu Chow slipped his black phone into his black gown, brought out a vacuum flask and started to sip. His drink smelt of goji berry and chrysanthemum. The sorcerer seemed to be calming down after the vehement business phone call. Yu kept a cautious eye on the sorcerer as he refolded and stacked the white strips one by one. Sorcerer Chiu Chow might or might not have been good at fighting ghosts, but he was certainly after money. There was no difference between real and fake sorcerers in this regard, Yu decided. Chung raised the dee-dah horn to his mouth and tested a clean note. The silver head of the horn resembled that of a trumpet. It was joined to a black wooden tube with seven holes. The end of the tube was attached to a silver mouthpiece, a tiny pair of reeds. Without warning, Chung held the reeds between his thick lips and a light string of tune leaped into the air. The body of the horn was thinner than Chung’s little finger, but it didn’t obstruct the rise and fall of the notes. The tune sounded coarse. The simple rhythm repeated itself among a handful of notes, not fast, not slow. The sorcerer tapped the table with his long fingernails, keeping time and filling the pauses between breaths. The edge of a high note cracked and it all wound down to where the melody had begun. Chung, Yu and Sorcerer Chiu Chow were back in Beijing. At the time of the Qing dynasty, passing time in a teahouse with
a birdcage and cricket fights, like three old friends. Outside, dry sandy winds swept across the Forbidden City.

‘Tell me your name,’ Sorcerer Chiu Chow asked.

‘Family Wong, given name the single word “Yu”, which means feather,’ Yu answered.

‘Not just feather,’ Sorcerer Chiu Chow shook his head and walked towards where Yu was stooping. The sorcerer pointed to the folding chair at the head of the chanting bench and ordered, ‘Sit.’

Yu stood up from the pile of white strips to sit on the folding chair. The sorcerer lifted Yu’s chin with his long fingernail. ‘Hold,’ he ordered.

Yu held his chin up. The sorcerer stroked his small beard and stared at Yu. The sorcerer’s gaze wandered from Yu’s forehead to the tip of his nose, to the corners of his eyes and his earlobes. Then he strolled off. Yu, still holding his chin up, followed the sorcerer with his eyes. The sorcerer went from Yu’s left to Yu’s right and back again. The long strands of the sorcerer’s horsetail brush sparkled; the Tai Chi on his black robe swayed solemnly. Yu couldn’t see Chung; he didn’t know where the happy middle-aged man had disappeared to. Yu tried to keep his face still. The sorcerer was in the process of getting to know Yu. What can a sorcerer read in a face? Yu didn’t have a clue. But Yu hoped whatever the sorcerer read in his face would allow him to keep the job. He needed Sorcerer Chiu Chow to agree to teach him rituals and that was the goal of this meeting. Yu’s father would have slapped Yu on the face if he could see what Yu was doing. Then the sorcerer stopped in front of Yu; he put his hands behind his back.
‘You were born in the year of Horse, the seventh in the cycle of twelve,’ said the sorcerer. ‘And “yu” is the name of the fifth note in the ancient music scale. Five and seven are important numbers in the universe.’

‘Important numbers in the universe?’ Yu repeated. *That sounds intriguing, and yet how does the sorcerer know my year of birth? He read my curriculum vitae at Uncle Bong’s desk, perhaps?*

Sorcerer Chiu Chow shut his eyes to do some calculations. His fingertips danced rapidly while his eyebrows contracted and relaxed. It must be a very long sum. He could have used the simple calculator function on his phone. Yu sat and waited until the sorcerer gave his horsetail brush another swing and opened his eyes. The silvery strands slapped on the sorcerer’s shoulder and slid down his black robe. He stared Yu in the eye; the sorcerer’s eyes were ablaze.

‘Wong Yu,’ Sorcerer Chiu Chow announced. ‘Your name is Yellow Feather, a young bird.’

‘A young bird?’ Yu repeated.

‘A young bird,’ the sorcerer continued. ‘Do you know how you got your name?’

‘No, I don’t,’ Yu shook his head. ‘I’ve never asked.’

‘Let me tell you. Listen,’ said the sorcerer. ‘On the day you were born, a rare bamboo slip dropped in Wong Tai Sin Temple. It was bamboo slip no. 77, “Smith Gong in Jeopardy”.’

The bamboo slips told one’s fortune. There were one hundred slips in a cup. People tossed the cup of slips until a lucky one fell out. The number on the slip was linked to a script. It was another famous activity in Wong Tai Sin Temple – aside from palm and face reading – that Yu hadn’t tried. He should feel ashamed having
resided in Wong Tai Sin all these years. Does Sorcerer Chiu Chow know I live in Wong Tai Sin too, or is it just a coincidence?

‘Script no. 77 refers to the story of smith Gong,’ the sorcerer began. ‘Once upon a time there was a smith with the name Gong who understood bird language. Despite his talent, he was very poor and was starving. One day a bird friend informed him that a tiger had dragged away some sheep in the South Mountain. Smith Gong followed the bird’s prompt to the mountain and indeed found dead sheep lying around. Gong was thrilled. He hauled a sheep onto his back and prepared to head home. Just then, the family who were looking for their lost sheep arrived on the spot, having followed the bloodstains. They believed smith Gong was the thief and took him to court. Poor Gong was thrown into jail.’

Sorcerer Chiu Chow paused to reach for his tea; he held the lid of his vacuum flask in his right hand while holding his long sleeve with his left hand.

‘The loyal bird friend didn’t leave innocent smith Gong captive,’ continued the sorcerer with a clear voice. ‘At midnight, a flock of birds gathered in the southern sky. Their yellow feathers reflected the moonlight and resembled a moving halo. As everybody, including the jailer, was mesmerised by the bizarre scene, the loyal bird friend stole the key to smith Gong’s jail and Gong escaped. The next morning when the jailer checked the jail, all he found was a yellow feather. Smith Gong was nowhere to be seen.’

‘What does that mean?’ asked Yu.

‘You are the bird in the myth. It means your character may be light as a feather, but you can achieve something big,’ the sorcerer explained. ‘Light as a feather, but as substantial as Tai Mountain.’
Yu had heard the proverb from somewhere but not from his father’s mouth. *It isn’t one of Father’s mottos. It probably hadn’t been in his mind when he gave me the name.*

‘So, Wong Yu, you are born to determine the right time in heaven and the right venue on earth. I am going to teach you our intricate Chiu Chow rituals,’ concluded Sorcerer Chiu Chow.

‘Thank you, sorcerer,’ said Yu, standing up and bowing. That was a relief. At least he could continue in the job. It was hard to imagine the consequence if Sorcerer Chiu Chow had refused to teach him. Yu might have had to greet the other five head sorcerers until one of them found him to be a right person to learn their rituals.

‘Um,’ Sorcerer Chiu Chow approved. ‘Now, put this on.’

The sorcerer threw Yu a black robe he had taken from the sideboard. Yu slipped it on. It was a plainer version of the sorcerer’s robe. It reached down to Yu’s ankles and the fabric was light as a feather. Yu did up the line of hook-and-eyes at the front of the robe. He wondered if he had a Tai Chi sign on his back too, for protection. A zephyr came from the air-conditioner. Then Yu remembered that a sorcerer’s rituals were supposed to lead souls on their journey over to the ghosts’ world. Dead souls crossed the Gold and Silver bridges, stopped at a pavilion to have a last glimpse of their families, drank soup to forget about events in their past lives … bits and pieces Yu had learnt about funerals arranged themselves in his mind. *If Sorcerer Chiu Chow is a genuine sorcerer, does he see ghosts when he performs the rituals? Will I see ghosts too when I follow?*

‘And hold these tight.’ The sorcerer pushed into Yu’s hands a pair of hand cymbals, one of the polished ones on the bench. ‘Wrap the straps around your fists and clank them vertically. Up and down, not sideways. You hear me? Stupid!’ Sorcerer Chiu
Chow lashed Yu on the face with his horsetail brush and bellowed, ‘You are not concentrating!’

That was true. Yu was distracted by a strong urge to look over his shoulders to check for signs of semi-transparent human-shaped shadows. In funeral hall no. 5, black folding chairs were lined up in rows. The artificial leather upholstery gleamed at the same angle. The emptiness of the hall was palpable.

‘Chung, Chung!’ shouted the sorcerer.

Chung reappeared from behind the altar. ‘I’m here, Sorcerer,’ said Chung, beaming.

‘I sing, you demonstrate,’ Sorcerer Chiu Chow commanded.

‘Yes, Sorcerer,’ Chung said and grabbed two cymbals from the table.

Off they went. The sorcerer chanted a song as he strolled around a copper basin. Chung followed the sorcerer’s moderate rhythm in an exotic step – left, right, half-left, sidestep, right, left. Yu didn’t understand the words of the song; it was in Chiu Chow dialect. The sorcerer took out a wooden ruler from inside his sleeve and waved it in the air. He uttered a line and tapped the centre of the basin with his ruler. It was a cue for a change in action. Chung broke into a pivoting dance along his orbit and clanked a chain of rapid rhythm with his cymbals. The sorcerer sang a verse in a very high pitch and hit his ruler on the floor next to the basin. It was loud. Yu knew the ritual – a common one with a basin of oil, paper tigers and terracotta tiles. Chung resumed movement number one. The sorcerer chanted; Chung danced. They continued for some time. Yu was dazzled by Chung’s sense of coordination.

‘All right. That’s enough,’ Sorcerer Chiu Chow raised his hand and said. ‘Now you know the dance. This is Break the Hell, a basic funeral routine.’

‘Break the Hell?’ Yu repeated.
‘Break the Hell ritual is to ease the souls from torments in Hell,’ Chung explained.

‘We put eight paper tigers on eight roof tiles around a basin of oil. The sorcerer strikes one tiger after each song section until all of them are shattered.’

‘Oh, yes. I just didn’t know what it’s called,’ said Yu.

The sorcerer took a quick glance at his watch and said, ‘Now, Chung, practise with him.’

‘Yes, Sorcerer,’ said Chung, bowing.

‘Thank you, Sorcerer,’ said Yu, who also bowed.

‘Bye,’ said the sorcerer as he put away his ruler. He rummaged inside his sleeve for his mobile phone and started to dial. Sorcerer Chiu Chow must have had more engagements than anybody expected. ‘Hello?’ Yu heard the sorcerer speaking in his accented Cantonese outside the hall.

‘So you know “Break the Hell”?’ Chung winked at Yu. He threw his cymbals onto the table with a loud clank and wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

‘I’ve seen it before at my friend Daniel’s grandfather’s funeral,’ Yu replied.

‘Do you know souls are tortured in Hell if they have done evil things in life?’ asked Chung, and added playfully, ‘Ungrateful sons who disobeyed their parents are deep fried in woks.’

‘Thank you for reminding me of that,’ Yu replied ironically. Has lying to Father made me an ungrateful son already?

‘But the harshest form of torture is reserved for those who commit suicide,’ Chung said. ‘The souls will experience their death over and over again in Hell. For this reason, these souls may linger in the human world longer than they should.’
And they become haunting ghosts. Yu felt another zephyr from the air-conditioner sweep by and circulate around the empty hall. Where will the soul be when the sorcerer performs ‘Break the Hell’? Does the soul hover in the middle while others dance around? Or does the soul sit quietly in a corner? Yu heard the squeak of a folding chair and turned around. Chung was standing, like Yu himself, and there was no one else in the hall. But the noise sounded as if someone had just sat on one of the folding chairs. Yu froze. It could have been simply the contraction and expansion of the chairs’ metal. He turned around. He saw his reflection in the hanging gong above the sideboard. There was a Tai Chi symbol on the back of his robe.

‘Anyway,’ Chung heaved a sigh. ‘Do you like the song I played on the dee-dah?’

‘It was beautiful,’ Yu replied, wiping a film of cold perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand. ‘Is that a ritual song too?’

‘It’s the theme song of Peking Mansion, a damn good TV series,’ Chung laughed.

‘But you young people don’t like these Mainland productions.’

Yu was speechless. Without further ado, they picked up their cymbals and began staggering around the copper basin. At the far end of the hall, an old lady in a lily gown sat quietly in the corner and watched.
A clay pot of food had been set on a portable gas stove on a tile to protect the plastic surface of the Wong family’s folding mah-jong/dining table. Brown broth was bubbling surrounding an island of steamed chicken in the middle of the clay pot. The yellow skin of the chicken was sagging in the steam. Underneath the dome of meat were stewed shitake mushrooms, pork belly, bean thread noodles, more meat and vegetables, and chunks of turnip at the bottom. His mother had bought the elaborate clay pot meal from Fairwood, a fast food restaurant, to celebrate Father’s birthday, which was also the National Day of the People’s Republic of China.

Yu was laying out pairs of chopsticks, bowls and spoons on each side of the table; his father was half-lying on the sofa with a bottle of Tsingtao beer. He held the green bottle in one hand and the remote control in the other. He was watching a pack of hyenas chasing a young deer on an African plain. His paunch under his tawny woollen vest contracted and he gave out a burp. Father was watching a National Geographic program on the foreign language channel because the normal TVB
channel was showing a documentary of contemporary Chinese history to celebrate the National Day and tonight was about Japan’s invasion of China. The massacre during the Second World War was not a suitable background for Yu’s father’s birthday celebration. It was important to avoid inauspicious references tonight. Their mother had reminded Yu and Mina to be very careful with their conversation, though they hardly talked during dinner. Yu adjusted the chopsticks to make them parallel to the side of the table. The hyenas were devouring the deer alive on TV but that was not regarded as inauspicious.

Mina slid open the plastic kitchen door. A cloud of smoke spread into the rest of the flat. Mother emerged from the kitchen with a pot of rice wrapped in a pink tartan tea towel. Father moved over to his cushioned wooden chair at the table with his beer and the remote control. His chair always faced the television. Yu sat on his father’s left on a plastic stool; Mina sat opposite Yu on another plastic stool. Mother always sat on the remaining chair – with her back to the television.

Mina took Father’s bowl and filled it with scoops of red rice, unrefined rice with soft maroon-coloured bran. The healthy grains were eaten for their colour because red was lucky, while white was associated with death.

‘Eat rice,’ Yu called out.

‘Eat rice,’ Mina echoed.

‘Eat, eat,’ Mother said.

Father lifted the bottle of beer to his mouth and chopsticks tucked into the clay pot. Father was fond of eating peculiar parts of animals. He picked the rump of a chicken, the points of chicken wings and the bones of roasted pork. Mina and Mother ate mostly vegetables. Yu usually picked anything that came into the vicinity of his chopsticks, but he was avoiding meat these days.
The mountain of food in the pot was going down while a mound of bones was rising on Father’s side of the table. Every member of the family seemed to be interested in watching stronger animals killing weaker ones in the African wild. There was noise of chewing, sucking, mulching and clinking of china against china.

‘This clay pot is not bad,’ Mother said as she put down her chopsticks. ‘A good bargain from Fairwood.’ She stood up to start cleaning up the table.

‘I’m full,’ Yu said.

‘I’m full too,’ Mina also said. She stacked Yu’s empty bowl over hers and took them into the kitchen to be washed.

Yu looked at his father from the corner of his eye. His father was busy spitting out some more bones onto the table. The wrinkles seemed to have deepened on his weathered face under the effect of alcohol. His woollen vest stretched tighter over his paunch. The credits for the National Geographic program were scrolling down the television screen. On a normal day, Yu would have drifted back into his room discreetly, but it didn’t look right to leave the birthday man alone with his dinner in the sitting room. *Here is that awkward moment of the year again! How did I survive the last one? What have I done? What kind of conversation have I managed to make with Father?* Yu sat down on the sofa. The hardwood felt cool on the back of his thighs. Another foreign language program was going to begin.

Yu hoped his father wouldn’t ask him about his computer job in Wan Chai. He would die for sure if his father found out about his actual job tonight. If he did, Yu would be blamed for any unfortunate event that happened to Father or the family in the coming year, or years. Yu would be reminded for the rest of his life that he had lied – a scab his father would keep on picking. Yu looked out of the window and drew a deep breath. An evening breeze swept across his face; it felt light as a feather.
Perhaps I can ask Father the origin of my name. Was it his intention to name me after the loyal bird friend that saves smith Gong? Does he believe my character will be ‘light as a feather but as substantial as Tai Mountain’? Does he know the rare bamboo slip no. 77 dropped in Wong Tai Sin Temple on the day I was born? Did Sorcerer Chiu Chow make up all those stories or are they partly true? Yu hadn’t been thinking much about Sorcerer Chiu Chow’s words but now he was curious. Let’s ask.

‘Father,’ Yu began.

‘Eh?’ Father made a sound from deep in his throat. He had finished eating and sat back on his chair.

‘Why did you name me Wong Yu?’ Yu asked in one breath.

‘What?’ Father was channel surfing and missed the question.

‘Why …’ Yu was beginning again when Mina came from the kitchen with yellow dishwashing gloves to take Father’s bowl. She was scooping Father’s bone mountain with two empty Mark Six lottery cards into the bowl when she muttered, ‘Let me collect father’s bones.’

Yu stopped. The channel surfing stopped. Father glared at Mina; she froze. Father swung his forefinger at Mina’s face and yelled, ‘You really want your father to die soon, don’t you?’

No one dared answer back. Yu knew that whatever he said would only aggravate the situation. Even the Genius of Asia couldn’t take back the inauspicious reference to collecting Father’s bones from his grave. Mina piled all the dishes, including Father’s bones, into one waste mountain and carried them to the kitchen. Father continued to glare at Mina and she walked a little faster. Her head was drooping as it did when she focused on her painting. Yu abandoned his question and retreated quietly into his
Father extended the sofa into his bed and resumed pressing the remote control buttons. Father didn’t need Yu or Mina to apologise, just to get lost.

Sorcerer Shanghai was the arrogant one among the six head sorcerers. He was obsessed with his sacrifices; the gold and silver ingots in particular. He was very picky with the decorations of the altar and the altar table, which was called the Spirit Table. He always opted for funeral hall no. 1, the biggest hall in the parlour. He wanted the hall to be filled with elaborate paper art and flower bouquets. And a massive amount of gold and silver of course.

‘Shanghai funerals are lavish affairs, in case you don’t know,’ Ah Tai told Yu in his radio voice as they packed their handcarts with gold and silver ingots, incense and other tableware. S.B. Hong looked Yu in the eye and nodded.

‘Is that his funeral or the funeral of the dead?’ asked Yu.

‘Doesn’t matter,’ Ah Tai waved off Yu’s joke. ‘My point is: you don’t want to mess with him and his flamboyant ceremony. I’m talking from experience here.’

S.B. Hong nodded. So he had the same experience.

‘Okay,’ said Yu.

Sorcerer Shanghai sounded extremely materialistic and unpleasant. It was hard to believe a sorcerer who was supposed to have the ability to direct ghosts through Hell could be so vain. Yet although Sorcerer Chiu Chow was clearly interested in money, he seemed more likely to be a genuine sorcerer than Sorcerer Shanghai. Sorcerer Shanghai could be a fake! Luckily, Yu was not required to meet the arrogant sorcerer or listen to what he might say about Yu’s birth.

Ah Tai, S.B. Hong and Yu set off for funeral hall no. 1. If they finished setting the Spirit Table fast, they might not cross paths with Sorcerer Shanghai. Yu’s cart was
loaded with gold and silver, Ah Tai’s was loaded with food and drink and S.B. Hong’s with incense and candles. They rattled their way along the glistening floor of the funeral parlour corridor, which smelt of lemon detergent. They turned into the long green carpet of the vast hall on the first floor.

‘Be very careful with your cart,’ Ah Tai instructed.

‘Okay,’ said Yu.

They proceeded in single file between two hundred black folding chairs that were lined up like an army on both sides of the carpet. The text on the beam of the altar said: ‘Long Live His Nobility’. *Snobbish Shanghainese!* The ceiling in this hall was higher than those of the other halls. Yu didn’t feel the sudden drafts emitted from the valves overhead but a dull hum lingered – the noise of air circulation. Warm air rose and cold air sank. Yu could hear the currents in the space above the chairs. He looked left and right. The emptiness of the seats reminded him of the strange creak he had heard at the meeting with Sorcerer Chiu Chow. Part of him believed that the creak hadn’t been contraction or expansion of the metallic folding chairs. *It is always chilly in the funeral parlour. The temperature just doesn’t change enough for metal to contract or expand!* Yu looked left and right again. He didn’t want to be surprised by the souls of the Shanghai nobility here.

‘Stop!’ Ah Tai shouted, but it was too late. The ingot towers and other valuables on Yu’s handcart had collapsed the moment he bumped into the Spirit Table at the end of the carpet.

‘Didn’t you look?’ Ah Tai frowned at Yu while S.B. Hong held out his two palms and shook his head: ‘Why did you do that?’

‘I’m sorry,’ Yu stooped to repair the damage. He had been distracted.
‘I’d just reminded you to be careful, Yu,’ said Ah Tai. S.B. Hong made a kneading gesture with his two hands as if he were handling a very delicate ball of dough. ‘What if Sorcerer Shanghai saw that?’ Ah Tai added and S.B. Hong shook his head gravely.

Then they would all suffer, Yu guessed. Better clean up the mess before the sorcerer saw it. He picked up the bags of basic ingots and took them to the small furnace next to the altar, then collected the gold bars, which were of golden cardboard folded in trapezium tubes, from the floor and piled them in a flat-topped pyramid. He checked the damage done to the ingot towers. The wreaths of ingots had disintegrated but that could be fixed. Yu salvaged the orange plates on which the towers were supposed to sit and the bottom layers of the towers. He found the second and third layers and stacked them accordingly. It wasn’t a complicated construction but since some of the ingots at the bottom were flattened the towers kept wobbling. *Sorcerer Shanghai will definitely notice that!* Yu turned to Ah Tai and S.B. Hong for help.

‘What have you done to my gold towers?’ yelled an arrogant voice.

Yu looked up and saw a round-faced sorcerer on the threshold of the grand funeral hall no. 1. He wore a golden robe with a technicolour tiger embroidered on the right of his chest, a dragon on his left, two magical cranks on his shoulders, and various gods along the seams. Spectacular! Behind him, a line of round-faced attendants in orange robes spread out in a row. Their outfits had a beautiful soft sheen.

‘Good afternoon, Sorcerer Shanghai.’ Ah Tai and S.B. Hong stood straight in front of the Spirit Table. Ah Tai greeted the sorcerer aloud while S.B. Hong mimed.

‘Good afternoon, Sorcerer Shanghai.’ Yu also stood straight and greeted the sorcerer.

Yu wished his uninteresting navy blue uniform could camouflage him on the long green carpet but Sorcerer Shanghai saw him and the mess of gold and silver that had
spilt from his handcart. The sorcerer charged at Yu with angry strides; the sorcerer’s attendants fanned out to the chanting bench on the left of the altar. They walked with their heads up, their noses pointing to the high ceiling, their eyes staring straight ahead and their lips tightly shut. Yu thought all round-faced people were friendly and talkative like Chung, but Shanghainese roundness was an exception. Sorcerer Shanghai stopped at the small wooden table where Yu had been trying to reconstruct the ingot towers. The older man pulled out a crushed ingot from a tower and glared at Yu.

‘What is this?’ shouted the sorcerer.

‘An ingot,’ Yu answered softly.

‘No, it is not,’ said the sorcerer and threw the ingot at Yu like a dart. It hit Yu on the chest and dropped onto the floor. ‘Refold it!’

‘We will help,’ Ah Tai offered promptly. S.B. Hong tapped his heart and raised his hand. They both knew Yu hadn’t learnt to fold advanced ingots yet.

‘Why? Doesn’t he know how to do it?’ Sorcerer Shanghai demanded.

Ah Tai and S.B. Hong eyed Yu worriedly.

‘Sorry, Sorcerer, I don’t,’ Yu answered. He couldn’t say anything else.

The sorcerer’s small eyes fixed on Yu. He wore a milk-carton hat like Sorcerer Chiu Chow. There was a piece of white jade on his forehead. The jewel glinted. At the chanting bench, his attendants had rolled out a maroon table runner and were lining up their private musical instruments on it: a dee-dah horn, some hand cymbals, a gong, a copper bowl, a wooden drum, some small bells and some sticks. The silver sparkled too.

‘Really?’ Sorcerer Shanghai smirked. His contemptuous round face looked like flat dough. ‘Then why are you here? Just to ruin my sacrifices?’
Your sacrifices, Sorcerer! Yu cursed in silence. It was unwise to talk back. He didn’t know how a sorcerer would respond to an insubordinate remark. The outcome could be worse than what Mina had experienced on Father’s birthday.

‘Oi, nong-ho! Sorcerer Shanghai.’ Chung in his ceremonial gown appeared at the doorway and called out a ‘hello’ in Shanghai dialect.

It was probably the only thing Chung could say in that language, the same as Yu’s ‘dea jao nang’, Chiu Chow people. But it didn’t matter. Yu wanted to embrace this rotund guy who had come to rescue him from the sorcerer’s fury.

‘Oi, Chung, nong-ho!’ Sorcerer Shanghai greeted Chung in response and pulled out another deformed ingot from the tower. ‘Look, Chung, you know me very well. I like my ingots to be perfect, but this imbecile doesn’t even know how to fold them!’

One of the attendants brought over a vacuum flask and poured out a capful of steamy drink for Sorcerer Shanghai. The sorcerer threw the ingot on the table and took his tea even though he was talking to Chung. The sorcerer’s drink smelt of vintage Ginseng.

‘Oh, Sorcerer, you haven’t met Yu? He’s our new assistant,’ Chung said. His habitual smile appeared sincere. ‘He hasn’t learnt how to fold advanced ingots yet. But Ah Tai and S.B. Hong will do it. And I’ve checked your paper sacrifices and flower bouquets. They will be here any minute.’

‘Oh, Chung, I can only trust you.’ The sorcerer was delighted by the news of his other sacrifices, but he still glared at Yu above his hot Ginseng.

*What’s the big deal here, Sorcerer?* Yu reflected. All the ingots would be burnt and turned into ashes anyway. By then no one could recognise which ones were squashed and which were not. As if the ghosts in Hell were really going to receive the money and get richer. *Oh, wait, what if Sorcerer Shanghai is a real sorcerer? Then he*
may know if the ghosts have received the ingots. He may have seen and conversed with the Shanghai ghosts down there. They may have come to tell him what they needed. Is that why he is so anxious?

Chung winked at Yu with his back to the Shanghai group. Yu mouthed to him a ‘thank you’. Ah Tai and S.B. Hong folded new ingots swiftly and fitted them into Sorcerer Shanghai’s gold towers. S.B. Hong spread a yellow tablecloth over the Spirit Table. Ah Tai placed an ash bowl in the middle for incense sticks. Yu smoothed out the creases on the silky yellow surface.

‘There,’ Sorcerer Shanghai joined them again with two of his attendants who had brought over a golden curtain with tiny tassels along the edges. ‘Over the altar,’ instructed the sorcerer.

The two attendants trampled on Ah Tai and S.B. Hong’s work space without saying ‘excuse me’. They threw their golden curtain over the regular white one that draped the altar.

‘And these go to the sides,’ the sorcerer told another two of his attendants who were holding umbrellas shaped like rockets or Gothic towers. They had pointy roofs and cylindrical bodies. One was white, the other was red. Long muslin strips fluttered at the edges. The attendants hooked the umbrellas up by the little rings at the tips of the roofs with two long poles. Yu laid out three pairs of chopsticks, three bowls and three cups along the front edge of the Spirit Table and peeped at the proud attendants. The umbrellas were believed to shield ghosts from the sun as they walked, or floated, guided by a sorcerer. Still feeling humiliated, Yu couldn’t help wonder if Sorcerer Shanghai’s fussiness over details was based on reasons more complicated than vanity. An intuition told him that Sorcerer Shanghai knew something about the Shanghainese in Hell that no one else knew. Ah Tai put half a duck egg in each of the bowls. Yu
filled them with steamed rice and pressed it into perfect domes with his scoop. Ah Tai put another half duck egg on top of the domes. S.B. Hong placed two red candles next to the meal.

‘And these go next to the big portrait,’ Sorcerer Shanghai indicated to two other attendants, each holding a vase of crepe paper flowers.

There was a strip of golden paper on each flower arrangement. One said: ‘The Spirit Place of Sum Hoi of the Yeung Family’; the other one said: ‘The Spirit Place of the ancestors of the Yeung Family’.

‘What are those?’ Yu whispered to Ah Tai, who brought over a tall tower of oranges that were skewered together and decorated with shiny coloured paper. Yu leaned as close to Ah Tai’s headphones as possible.

‘Those are temporary houses for the dead souls,’ Ah Tai explained softly. He was pouring white rice wine into the three cups. ‘The one on the left with the name of the dead was where the soul sat during the funeral.’

‘Really?’ Yu said. *So the soul won’t appear in one of those empty chairs in the hall. It has a special seat.*

‘The one on the right for family ancestors is rarely seen,’ Ah Tai continued. ‘Only Sorcerer Shanghai requests them, to invite the Shanghai family’s eighteen last generations to the ceremony.’

S.B. Hong brought over a tall tower of buns that were skewered together and decorated with shiny coloured paper. There was a pink stamp on the top of each bun. Yu looked at the paper flowers again; they were arranged in the shape of an archway. *Is that the entrance the Shanghai family’s eighteen last generations would use tonight? The ancestor ghosts would attend the ceremony in the hall. Is that why Sorcerer Shanghai always requests funeral hall no. 1?* Yu wondered. He heard a dull humming
over the empty chairs of the vast hall. Chung came in, leading two men in purple windcheaters who were carrying a three-dimensional paper mansion. The back of their jackets carried the words: ‘God’s Delight Paper Arts Industry’.

‘Here are your paper sacrifices, Sorcerer Shanghai,’ said Chung, directing the two men to place the huge mansion at the foot of the Spirit Table.

It was a beautiful red-brick house almost as big as a toy house for children. It had three levels with black-and-white flaring roofs and balconies with balustrades. Behind the windows’ green shutters, a girl servant was sifting a basket of grain in the kitchen. Another girl servant was laying out a meal in the dining room. A boy servant was farming with a pickaxe in the back yard. An old man, butler or neighbour was fanning himself on a bench next to the front door. There was a coastal breeze. An idyllic town next to the Yangtze River unfolded in front of Yu’s eyes. It was Shanghai in the Qing dynasty, before the foreign invasions, where Shanghainese souls returned after death to reside in simplicity.

‘Over there, please,’ Chung directed the traffic as the men in purple wheeled in more paper arts.

The Shanghai economy had expanded fast. An angular silver Mercedes Benz was parked next to the mansion. A chauffeur dressed in a black suit and a cap stood by. The delivery men unloaded a pack of canned abalone from Australia, a bottle of XO, a dozen cartons of Marlboro Red, a green American Express credit card, a couple of first-class air-tickets with Cathay Pacific, a Toshiba LCD television and a DVD player with remote control.

The coastal breezes disappeared. If there was one thing Sorcerer Shanghai knew about ghosts, he surely knew how to make Shanghainese the richest ghosts in Hell, teased the Genius of Asia.
‘Good, good,’ Sorcerer Shanghai nodded and smiled at the opulence.

Ah Tai and S.B. Hong took advantage of Sorcerer Shanghai’s distraction to put the last of the items onto the Spirit Table. Yu then followed his co-workers out of funeral hall no. 1 before Sorcerer Shanghai could come to bother them again. The delivery men brought in the traditional child servants. The troop of paper boys and girls were made to resemble the physique of six-year-old children. They had bright pink faces and felt-penned eyes. They wore spotty paper shirts and pants in orange, blue or green, and little black shoes. The florescent pink faces of the children left blue and green spots on Yu’s retinas. He turned to look at the empty black chairs at the side and looked ahead again … The child servants were approaching Yu along the long green carpet. Yu saw their malnourished bodies, their awkward postures, their bent arms and fingerless hands that looked like door wedges. The girl servants’ mouths were red; the boy servants’ jacket buttons sparkled. Two by two they lined up like school kids entering a classroom. The first pair of boys with colourful scarves had the word ‘Chauffeur’ on their white shirts. The second pair wore broad-brimmed hats. The next pair had trays of tea and cakes glued to their hands. The next pair carried bamboo sticks, while the next had flowers in their hair buns. Another pair carried fans and handkerchiefs, and a final pair wore striped headscarves. They were all smiling. Yu saw one of them wearing a vermilion dress with a blooming lily on it. Her face was powdered white and her lips were painted tangerine. Yu blinked. It was Auntie Fa from Sea Breeze Florist. She had a silver hairpin clipping her fringe, plastic thongs on her feet and flower bouquets in her hands. She recognised Yu; her lips curved slightly downwards. Yu wheeled his handcart aside to avoid her flowers but one of her rattan racks scratched Yu on the arm. As she passed, she trailed behind her a scent of fresh lilies.
It was said that on the east side of Guangdong province there were two neighbouring villages called Sea Riches and Land Riches. Sea Riches people fished; Land Riches people farmed. It was an old practice that the two places were grouped together as Sea and Land Riches. It might have been for administrative reasons or due to the fact that people from the two villages shared a common character. It was said that if a man from the land of Sea and Land Riches went to work in the city, he would wind up in either of two organisations – the police or the triads.

Yu hadn’t met Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches – not that he was looking forward to it. His experience with sorcerers had been peculiar so far: Sorcerer Shanghai might or might not affiliate with the Shanghainese ghost clan; Sorcerer Chiu Chow had uncovered or made up a story about the origin of his name. If he were permitted to propose a change to the sorcerer clan, he would suggest they establish a certification system so ordinary people could tell authentic sorcerers from imposters. That would
make things a lot simpler. And I wouldn’t be stuck with Sorcerer Chiu Chow’s story but with no way to prove or ignore it.

Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches seemed to have come from a place of extremes. Does he belong to the police or the triads? Yu toyed with his mother’s White Flower Embrocation in his pocket as he zig-zagged up the staircase. He was heading towards Ms Kim Siu’s office on the fifth floor. He never knew when he might bump into a sorcerer but Yu could predict the manager’s purpose in summoning him. It was the end of October. Yu rubbed a little embrocation on his temples and knocked on the door of the office.

‘So, how was your first month of work, Yu?’ asked Ms Kim Siu from behind her desk. ‘Are you used to the routine of the funeral parlour yet?’

‘It has been great,’ Yu said. He put his hands on his knees. ‘I’m getting the hang of things.’

Yu realised his answer came straight from his job interview training workshop at university. Ms Kim Siu’s elegant black suit was crease-proof, the miniature flower bouquets wavered a little on her blouse collar, and her short hair shone in perfect waves.

‘Good. That’s what I like to hear,’ Ms. Kim Siu smiled warmly.

Yu smiled back and nodded, not sure whether to elaborate.

‘I’ve heard there is a problem between you and Uncle Bong,’ said Ms Kim Siu.

‘Oh, that was a … minor misunderstanding,’ Yu stammered. His heart sank. Is that why Ms Kim Siu has summoned me? To discuss my problem with the old man? He felt foolish to have told her that things had been ‘great’.

‘I don’t know what it was but I think it is time to clear that up,’ said Ms Kim Siu.

‘Yes,’ Yu said and nodded. ‘That’s right.’
'If you could apologise to Uncle Bong,’ Ms Kim Siu said, ‘over a cup of tea.’

‘Yes,’ Yu said.

‘It may be just a gesture but I think it is important to maintain a harmonious working environment within the funeral parlour,’ Ms Kim Siu said.

‘Yes,’ Yu said.

‘I hope that won’t be too hard for you to do,’ Ms Kim Siu said.

To pour Uncle Bong a cup of tea and say ‘I am sorry’ was simple enough to do, though Yu doubted if he would be forgiven. Ms Kim Siu had probably heard Uncle Bong’s version of the incident in the back alley. Yu might have been rude but the root of the problem was Uncle Bong’s prejudice against him. Yu turned to look at the vase of evergreen bamboo on the sideboard and the mahogany tea table inlaid with slate marble. The clouds in the marble did not flow. Why is it always the younger person’s obligation to say sorry? Ms Kim Siu leaned back to open a drawer on her right. The air-conditioner emitted a cold draft that swished past the manager’s shiny curls and stirred Yu’s scent of White Flower Embrocation. The leaves on the evergreen bamboos flapped like gentle applause.

‘I would appreciate it if you could sort out your differences with Uncle Bong, since you’re part of the team now,’ Ms Kim Siu said and handed Yu a white envelope with ‘Wong Yu’ written vertically in Uncle Bong’s calligraphy. ‘Here’s your first pay packet.’

‘Thank you, Ms Kim Siu,’ said Yu and bowed.

There it was! Yu accepted the envelope with both hands. He felt a wad of cash inside. The black words on a white envelope made it look like Silk Gold – gift money to the mourners, but it didn’t matter. This was his first real salary! He ran a fingertip along the glued flap on the short side of the envelope and was tempted to tear it open.
‘Yu,’ said Ms Kim Siu, ‘is there any problem with what I have asked you to do?’

‘I don’t have a problem with that,’ Yu replied. He might have been resentful if he had been asked the question on any other occasion; but he was keen to escape from the manager’s office and check his money. Ms Kim Siu was clever to have trapped him and Yu was aware of that.

‘I’m glad,’ Ms Kim Siu smiled. She rested her hands on the desk. ‘So you promise?’

‘Yes,’ Yu said, sweeping his thumb across the white envelope. ‘I promise.’

A promise was a promise, but he could do it later. Yu left the office feeling delightfully surefooted despite still wearing his oversized shoes and tight uniform. Things had been great! He had a job and was earning money. Yu balanced his backside on the handrail of the stairwell and slid down to the fourth floor. He tore open the Silk Golden envelope and counted the wad of notes. It came to nine thousand. He shoved them back into the envelope and planted a big kiss on it. He jumped down a flight of stairs. He grabbed the handrail with one hand and was swinging a half circle when a stout figure suddenly appeared at the window of the fire exit and pushed the door hard.

‘Watch out!’ Yu cried. ‘Ai-yah!’

Yu couldn’t stop his momentum mid-course and his forehead thudded into the door of the fire exit. The impact sent vibrations through his jaws.

‘What the hell are you doing in the stairs?’ yelled a tall sorcerer who barged through the doorway.

‘What the hell are you hurrying for, Sorcerer?!’ cried Yu lying flat on his back. The sorcerer, who was dressed in a white shirt, black vest, black trousers and funny white socks, ran down the stairs without stopping to look at him. Yu scrambled up
from the floor; for a couple of seconds, he felt fine. He could hear the light tapping of the sorcerer’s rubber soles as he descended. *Perhaps the sorcerer is a sacred man after all and is not to be offended.* But soon after Yu had muttered his rude remark, his forehead began to swell. Heat began spreading over his eyelids; then it was hard to keep his eyes open. With what remained of his vision, Yu checked that he was still clutching onto the white envelope on which his name was written and continued slowly down the stairs.

Yu arrived at the hub feeling as though he had walked ten kilometres from the stairs. He didn’t expect to see the same sorcerer towering in the middle of the hub but there he was.

‘Who the hell gave me a pig’s head with no bone?’ yelled the sorcerer.

S.B. Hong and Ah Tai were sitting at the table among heaps of ingots; Yu was standing at the doorway. All of them froze.

‘Who gave me this pig’s head? Stand over here!’ the sorcerer bellowed. ‘Who said I want my pig’s head roasted? And worst of all, boneless!’

The sorcerer chucked a roasted pig’s head in the middle of the table. It landed with a loud thump. Ah Tai, S.B. Hong and Yu jumped. Gold and silver paper flew all over the floor. The pig’s head rolled over and revealed a hollow at the back where there was a mass of burnt fat and tendons, no bone.

‘We people from Sea and Land Riches are born with a hard core. We grow up drinking bitter water and we die with dignity. You give me this boneless, shapeless pig’s head. Are you belittling the people from Sea and Land Riches? Huh?’ yelled the sorcerer, kicking one of the idle handcarts with his left foot.
Turning towards the fragile-looking S.B. Hong, the sorcerer put his left elbow on his left knee and his right hand on his waist and put his large angular face up close to S.B. Hong’s, as gangsters did. The sorcerer’s face was tanned and stubbly. His lips were thin and colourless like blades. His forearms, exposed outside his rolled-up sleeves, were muscular and hairy. S.B. Hong flinched; his lean face had turned ashen. Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches looked fierce.

While S.B. Hong was quivering under the sorcerer’s glare, Ah Tai took the pig’s head from the table and carried out an autopsy. The investigation was unnecessary for even Yu with his inexperience and his impaired eyesight could see the head was nothing more than a roasted pig’s face. It could have been a mask if someone had poked two holes for the eyes. To Yu’s surprise, the sorcerer turned to Ah Tai and waited.

Ah Tai’s examination lasted for so long that the cloud of anger in the hub began to subside. Yu and S.B. Hong took advantage of the momentary calm to pick up the scattered ingot paper in their proximity. They were getting used to the sorcerer’s presence in the hub. The nut-brown pig’s face stared straight at Yu as Ah Tai pressed and pinched it. Dead pigs always wore a smile on their faces. The corners of their mouths always curled upwards as if they had been satiated in life. The eye sockets on the pig’s head in Ah Tai’s hands arched upwards like two new moons. Its ears stood straight up and alert. Its two swelling cheeks suggested joy. He was beginning to enjoy looking at the placid animal when the sorcerer roared again.

‘No bone means there is no bone. Don’t play with me, boy,’ the sorcerer shouted.

He slapped the pig’s face with his huge hand. It flew from Ah Tai’s grasp. Yu with his impaired vision scanned the air for the smiley face but to no avail. There was
a loud crack when the pig’s face landed on its forehead on the floor in front of Yu’s feet and its crispy skin cleaved. The pain on Yu’s own forehead sharpened.

‘I don’t care what you do. I want to see a proper pig’s head with bones by five o’clock!’ Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches ordered and stormed out of the hub. He didn’t look at Yu.

Yu stooped to pick up the fractured head and mumbled, ‘Oh, boy.’

‘What happened to your face, Yu?’ laughed Ah Tai. ‘How come you look red like a roasted pig?’

‘Ask the sorcerer. I was in the stairs when he pushed the door of the fire exit towards me and it hit me on the forehead,’ said Yu and pointed to the doorway where Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches had just left.

‘Oh, so you and Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches have already met,’ Ah Tai teased.

‘Go put some ice on your forehead.’

S.B. Hong, whose face was no longer ashen, agreed.

‘But what about this?’ Yu raised the pig’s head in his hand.

‘Don’t worry,’ Ah Tai said. ‘The deliverers must have put the pig’s head with bones in the hall for the Guangdong funeral by mistake because this roasted one is used for Guangdong funerals. We’ll just swap them.’

‘Is that it?’ Yu was surprised.

‘Well, we’ll have to buy a new roasted head from the canteen across the road too. The sorcerer has cracked this one, obviously,’ Ah Tai said casually. ‘Things like this happen sometimes.’

S.B. Hong nodded again.

‘It happens sometimes? So you two knew what had happened from the beginning!’ Yu felt cheated. ‘So you were pretending?’
‘We have to,’ Ah Tai shrugged. ‘And let me tell you why. It is Uncle Bong’s job to direct the deliverers where to put the roasted head and where to put the head with bones. Do you want us to tell the sorcerer it was Uncle Bong who had made a mistake so the sorcerer would go and persecute him? Uncle Bong is an old man. It doesn’t matter for us to suffer a scolding from Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches – he isn’t that bad a sorcerer after all – but not for Uncle Bong.’

Uncle Bong was old and respectable; therefore he shouldn’t bear the consequences of his faults. Yu was impressed by his colleagues’ loyalty. Compared to what Ah Tai and S.B. Hong had endured to protect the old man, to pour Uncle Bong an apologetic cup of tea and admit responsibility for what had happened in the back alley was not difficult at all. But Yu still didn’t want to apologise – it isn’t fair! Yu taped a lime-green cold pack over his forehead. If one day Father finds out about what I have been doing, I’ll have to apologise again, even though it hasn’t been entirely my choice to mess with the ghostly stuff for money. I was desperate.

S.B. Hong volunteered to walk across the road to buy a new roasted pig’s head. Yu set off with Ah Tai to funeral hall no. 8, which was to hold a Guangdong funeral tonight. Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches should be able to calculate whose fault it was if he was a genuine sorcerer. He hadn’t needed to threaten people with his imposing physique. Yu thought the Sorcerer wasn’t very wise, or that his sorcery wasn’t all that trustworthy. They found Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches’ pig’s head sitting on a red tray on the altar. Its nose protruded and its head was three-dimensional. It was very different from the boneless, shapeless pig’s face. This pig’s head must have been bleached, as its skin looked white, glossy and firm. It smelt slightly acidic. Ah Tai lifted the tray holding the head with both hands. The head smiled, as if happy to be going to the right hall.
‘Ha, where are you gentlemen going at this hour with a lovely pig’s head?’ asked someone in China’s most beautiful Cantonese accent.

A sorcerer strolled into the hall fanning himself with a white paper fan decorated with calligraphy. He wore a white knee-length coat with all the fabric buttons done up, and black trousers. A wooden pin with a copper knob at the end pierced his long hair bun. Yu couldn’t believe he was bumping into a second sorcerer in such a short time. He prayed this one would be more pleasant to meet than fearsome Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches.

‘Sorcerer Guangdong,’ Ah Tai and his pig’s head greeted and bowed.

‘Sorcerer Guangdong,’ Yu repeated Ah Tai’s words. Yu was peeping courteously at the sorcerer that his lime-green cold pack slipped off his forehead as he bowed.

‘Oh, let me retrieve that for you,’ Sorcerer Guangdong said folding up his fan and slipping it into his sleeve. He bent down to pick up Yu’s cold pack.

‘Oh, that is very kind of you, Sorcerer,’ Yu said.

Yu held out his hand to receive it but the sorcerer took his time to fold the magic tape strips three times. Then he held the back of Yu’s hand in his and placed the cold pack in Yu’s palm.

‘Here you are,’ said the sorcerer whose hands were warm and soft.

Despite the warmth of those hands, a shiver crept up Yu’s spine. The sorcerer’s kindness was exaggerated. His perfect accent and archaic manner were operatic – like an ancient figure that had jumped out of a Cantonese opera. ‘Thank you, Sorcerer,’ said Yu.

‘You are welcome,’ China’s most beautiful Cantonese accent replied. ‘Are you, little brother, not feeling well today?’
‘Nothing serious,’ Yu said. He felt diffident with the sorcerers today. ‘Thank you for asking, Sorcerer.’

‘Oh, please don’t mention it,’ Sorcerer Guangdong waved his hand and smiled beautifully. His cheeks were pink, his lips were red and his teeth were two rows of pearls. He gazed on Yu with his almond eyes. There was not one wrinkle on the sorcerer’s symmetrical face, though his hair was grey. Sorcerer Guangdong looked very handsome, in a theatrical way. He took his fan from his inside sleeve again and fanned himself gently. He asked, ‘Oh, don’t mind me being awkward. Have I met you before, little brother?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Yu.

‘This little brother is Yu, our new funeral assistant,’ said Ah Tai, introducing Yu and swinging the pig’s head towards Yu’s a little.

‘Oh, charming, charming!’ the sorcerer raised his voice and waved his fan fast. His cheeks turned pincher and his Cantonese echoed in the hall.

‘Charming,’ Yu responded. He could feel the sorcerer’s breeze on his face.

‘Charming!’ Ah Tai didn’t need to project his voice; it was loud enough naturally.

Sorcerer Guangdong smiled, Yu smiled, Ah Tai smiled, and the pig’s head in Ah Tai’s hands smiled too. The sorcerer’s fanning slowed. Now Yu could read calligraphy inscribed on the fan. It was a folktale: Qian Long, the Qing Emperor went to inspect the town, disguised as a commoner. Sorcerer Guangdong acting as Qian Long stepped onto the stage in platform shoes and sang the arias. The weather was fine. The sun shone over the market place where elderly people rested in the shade and children played. What a peaceful era in the Qing dynasty! Qian Long sat down in a teahouse. Phoenix, the shrewd lady owner, went up to serve him. Her outspokenness on politics impressed Qian Long, who also found her attractive. He teased her; she
retaliated with her sharp tongue. She didn’t believe the man in front of her was the Emperor until Qian Long revealed his true identity with the Emperor’s golden dragon lithograph.

Sorcerer Guangdong folded up his fan and languidly smoothed down his sleeves. He could belong to the time of the Qing dynasty. Sorcerers always experimented with medicines for longevity; perhaps Sorcerer Guangdong has succeeded? Perhaps he has swallowed a big pill and has just gone on living, hence his archaic manner, guessed the Genius of Asia. Yu elbowed Ah Tai; they should get going.

‘Oh, Sorcerer, I’m afraid we have to go. We have this lovely pig’s head to attend to,’ Ah Tai said finally.

‘Oh, of course, of course. I wish you could stay longer so we could have some tea,’ said the sorcerer disappointedly. Then he turned to Yu. ‘So I will see you again, Yu.’ Then he bade Yu farewell with a wide theatrical grin. ‘Get well soon.’

A full pig’s head with bones meant a lot to Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches. When Ah Tai and Yu entered funeral hall no. 6, the sorcerer was pacing back and forth in front of the Spirit Table on which a round red tray decked with a round lotus leaf had been prepared for the pig’s head. The stout sorcerer had changed into a carmine robe with a Tai Chi symbol on the back. The black-and-white Tai Chi symbol was surrounded by golden flying dragons, for extra protection; the ancestor ghosts of Sea and Land Riches must be fearsome, Yu thought. He held the pig’s head by its cheeks with his fingertips and lifted it off Ah Tai’s tray. The bleached skin was tough and cold. Yu felt the prickle of invisible bristles. He was aware of the tiny indentations his fingers were making in the pig’s cheeks; and of the weight of hardened blood and bones. An image of a powdered white human arm dappled with freckles entered his mind. The
sense of deathliness intensified and his hands became numb. But Yu subdued a shudder and placed the pig’s head precisely in the middle of the lotus leaf.

‘Wonderful!’ Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches cried.

Yu exhaled deeply and rested his hands at his sides with his fingers wide apart. The sorcerer seemed to have forgotten the mistake he assumed Ah Tai, S.B. Hong or Yu had made. He stood in front of the pig’s head, which was shining on the green leaf like a full-blown lotus, and held out his arms solemnly. His wide sleeves hung under his arms like a curtain. The sorcerer looked up at the man in the big portrait. Yu craned his neck to look past the stout sorcerer and his robe. In a frame of white and yellow flowers was the image of a bald man not older than sixty. The corners of his mouth didn’t curve upwards like the pig’s head. His small eyes didn’t resemble two new moons. Ah Tai lit the white candles at the sides of the portrait (white candles are used for people who die under seventy years of age; red candles for those die aged seventy or older) and the pig’s head lit up with a baby-pink glow. But not so the man in the big portrait. The candlelight revealed scars on his face. The stitches of one crossed his right cheek bone like a centipede. A dent in the middle of his forehead had been patched by a piece of skin which looked like an invisible strip of plaster with ragged edges. The corner of the man’s left eye appeared purplish. His lips didn’t close properly. His bushy black eyebrows appeared to press on his small eyes, which stared ahead helplessly.

The man looked as if he had been bashed to death. Was he a policeman or a triad gang member? Yu cast a glance around. The mourners, who were arriving, all wore black shirts, black trousers, black blazers and black leather shoes. They had all left two to three of their shirt buttons undone. Some of them had thick gold necklaces. Some wore black sunglasses. It seemed there were only men, and that they were not
ordinary men. Yu felt that he and Ah Tai should retire now that they had redeemed themselves for a mistake they hadn’t made. He didn’t feel all that safe in the hall. *The mens’ black blazers could be hiding guns or other weapons!* Yu looked at Ah Tai, but Ah Tai raised an index finger: they needed to stay a little longer.

Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches closed his eyes and formed words with his blade-like lips. Yu couldn’t understand his Sea and Land Riches dialect. What else did they need to do for him? To pluck the bristles on the pig’s head or to look for the head of another animal? He was sure this was a gangster’s funeral. Two men in black blazers laid the Spirit Table with beef noodles and four treasure rice, cans of coke and many bottles of alcohol: Shanxi Bamboo Green, Red Oat Brew, Rose Dew, Five Grains Dew, Five Peels Dew … They all had 40 per cent alcohol content or above. Yu saw a coil of snake in one of the bottles. Another contained a skewer of some cockroach look-alikes brewing in a pool of amber-coloured liquid. Yu’s father never drank any of those; one had to be very brave to drink them. But the dead man from Sea and Land Riches was apparently born with a tough spirit.

Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches stopped muttering. He took out a yellow scroll from inside his left sleeve. Ah Tai held it in front of the sorcerer and cast an eye towards Yu, so Yu also went over to grab the scroll with both hands. The sorcerer raised his hands and ordered, ‘Open!’ Yu and Ah Tai pulled open the scroll. A scent of musk wafted into the air. It was a long yellow parchment on which a passage was printed in red. There were blanks in the passage, which were filled with calligraphy in black ink. The title on top read: ‘Road Ticket’. The sorcerer held his right sleeve with his left hand. He ran his index and middle fingers along the columns of characters as he read the passage aloud. The Sorcerer’s coarse dialect rebounded within the four walls of funeral hall no. 6. Yu read from the parchment:
Dear Majesty,

This is to report that the [eldest son] from the family of [Fu], named [Ka Sing], origin [Sea Riches, Guangdong], has completed his span of life in the living world in the year [2003] on [25 October], at the age of [52]. Permission is awaited from your highness for [Fu] to transfer to his afterlife. May all his worldly wrongdoings be kindly forgiven, and may peace be restored to him.

This humble request is submitted with remembrance from [his blood brother] in the living world, [Cheung].

The Road Ticket functioned as a letter of introduction to the Emperor of Hell. The sorcerer finished reading. He dipped two fingers in a bowl of white rice wine and dotted the bottom of the long parchment. The men in black blazers had quietened down. The sorcerer motioned Yu and Ah Tai to place the long parchment across the altar. Ah Tai weighed down his end of it with a block of wood; Yu adjusted the tray with the pig’s head to make room. The pig’s head smiled. The air-conditioner emitted a cold draft and the white candle flames flickered. Shadows flitted between the piles of buns and oranges, the tub of beef noodles, the four treasures rice, the cans of coke, the bottles of spirits and those that contained the snake and the cockroaches. The pig’s ears fluttered a little and its smile broadened.

Yu turned to Ah Tai in shock. Ah Tai was handling the objects on his side of the table so he hadn’t seen what Yu had seen. Yu turned to look at the pig’s head again. *Its brain can’t be coming to life!* Outside the mortuary room stood a man in a black blazer. He was staring through the window in the door. There was a body, dressed in a
black suit with no tie, lying on a white stretcher inside the mortuary room. *Is that man at the door Cheung the blood brother? Or is Fu Ka Sing’s soul looking at his own body?* If the back of the pig’s head had been a dead brain hardened with clotted blood and cooked vessels, the blood was now flowing through the brain like streams through a complex landscape. Hundreds and thousands of red streams smelt of lilies. Fu Ka Sing’s soul would travel along the scented streams back to the land of Sea and Land Riches, though his ashes would remain in the city where he had resorted to live a gangster’s life. An old lady in a red gown strolled past the door of funeral hall no. 6. Cheung the blood brother put on his black sunglasses.

Ah Tai elbowed Yu to prompt him to relight a candle that had gone out. Yu shuddered but swiftly found a lighter on the Spirit Table and relit the white candle. The flame burnt steadily in its halo. Under the white light, the Road Ticket was weighed down securely next to the pig’s head. The smile on the pig’s head looked the same as it had before. Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches in his carmine robe was drinking from his vacuum flask at the chanting table. More men in black blazers were gathering in the hall. Yu drew in a deep breath; the scent of candle was soothing. He wondered how he had been carried away by the sorcerer’s Road Ticket. *Has the sorcerer just done something so the pig’s head summons the soul of the man from Sea and Land Riches who has died a tragic death? What exactly is the purpose of this pig’s head with bone?*

Ah Tai bowed to the sorcerer at the chanting table and Yu followed. It was time to go. Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches didn’t throw anything at them, but Yu’s lime-green cold pack slipped off his forehead again. Yu bent down to pick it up. It reminded him of the hit he had suffered on the stairs. Perhaps that had given him vision?
‘Where is your family from originally, Daniel?’ asked Yu.

‘Fujian. Some of my ancestors swam over to Taiwan during the civil war. They established businesses here. That’s how I come to be up here too,’ Daniel answered in one breath.

‘I’m from Chiu Chow,’ Yu said.

‘So you are dea jao nang,’ Daniel laughed. ‘Why do you ask about my place of origin suddenly?’

‘Because I’ve never asked,’ said Yu. He knelt on his mattress to shut half of the window above the headboard of his bed, turning the pivoting metal handle all the way down to leave no gap for the chill to sneak in during the night. Yu sank back into bed leaning against his pillow in his corner. He could smell rust on his fingers. The once shiny milk-coloured paint had fallen off the window handles long ago, just as white paint had come off the moulding ceiling. ‘So you are from the same area as Ah Tai. It seems that I tend to befriend Fujian people. Chiu Chow and Fujian are pretty close, you know.’

‘I see. So you’ve learnt something from your funeral parlour people. What about the sorcerers?’ asked Daniel.

‘Give me a break from sorcerers,’ said Yu.

Yu threw his head back on his pillow. He stretched out his legs until his feet reached the doors of his wardrobe. He tried to count the numerous grey dots on the ceiling. Within the boundary of his cubicle mould was spreading. He would rent a more decent place for himself when he had saved enough money. But perhaps he was thinking too far ahead right now. He had secured his funeral job just a month ago, which was his biggest achievement since he had graduated.
But as Daniel mentioned the sorcerers, Sorcerer Chiu Chow’s story came back.

‘Hey, Daniel the Great, do you know how you got your name?’ Yu asked.

‘You mean “Daniel the Great”?’ Daniel asked.


‘Because I was born in a treasure mountain, I guess,’ Daniel answered. ‘No, I don’t know. Do you know?’

‘No, sorry, I don’t. But I do know mine. Want to hear?’ said Yu.

‘Damn. I thought I was on the verge of discovering that my real father owned a mountain of gold. Anyway, tell me yours,’ laughed Daniel.

Yu unfolded the story as it had been told by Sorcerer Chiu Chow about a rare bamboo slip that had fallen in Wong Tai Sin Temple on the day Yu was born – no. 77, ‘Smith Gong in Jeopardy’. He told Daniel that ‘Wong Yu’ meant ‘Yellow Feather’ and a young bird. The bird in the story had first made smith Gong a suspect; then it helped him escaped from jail during the night. Night fell deeper and quieter as Yu went through the story of his birth. Lights went out one after another in the nearby apartment blocks. Traffic on the Dragon Runway thinned to a trickle. An autumn wind started to blow. The air pollution of day was drifting into the stratosphere. The broccoli-like trees down in Morse Park became harder to distinguish.

‘Huh. This is very peculiar,’ Daniel said. ‘How did the sorcerer know you live in Wong Tai Sin in the first place?’

‘He might not know,’ said Yu. ‘He didn’t mention where I live.’

‘But he was talking about your birth so of course he knows,’ then Daniel added, ‘given that he is a professional sorcerer.’

‘I’m not sure if he is a professional sorcerer but, now that you mention it, it does sound peculiar that he referred to Wong Tai Sin Temple but not other temples,’ Yu
said and looked out of the window. He saw a section of the Dragon Runway in the
distance, but the temple was on another section of the road near the bus stop where
the Genius of Asia hung out. Yu couldn’t see it from his room.

‘So, Wong Yu, what do you think is your relationship to Wong Tai Sin? You are
both Wongs,’ Daniel said.

‘Are you saying I could be a descendent of Wong Tai Sin?’ Yu laughed. ‘Isn’t that
going a bit too far?’

‘I don’t see why,’ Daniel said. ‘If I were you, I would definitely go to the temple
tomorrow.’

‘To do what?’ Yu yawned.

‘Just to be there and see what will happen to you!’ Daniel said.

‘You mean to see what fate will reveal to me,’ Yu corrected Daniel, rubbing his
eyes.

‘That’s exactly what I mean,’ Daniel laughed.

Yu drew in the remaining half of the window and shut out the night. A long time
ago, before Yu was born, his father had decided to seal all the windows with a semi-
transparent film of plastic to save the hassle and money of putting up curtains. The
plastic had grown less and less transparent with the accumulation of dust and dirt over
the years. The weather had warped the glue from the corners of the plastic. Yu
uncurled one corner of the plastic and extended it to its original position. He pressed it
down to the corner of the glass with his forefinger. The fractal pattern on the plastic
looked like dancing fans. Yellow streetlight was filtered and turned into a soft cream
colour. Sleeping with his window closed reminded Yu that it would soon be winter.
He lifted his finger. The corner of the plastic sprang back. It looked like a calla lily.
‘Do these colours remind you of those pagoda wind chimes sold in the temple, brother?’ Mina asked suddenly.

She came into the kitchen where Yu was tackling the doors of a cupboard that had stuck. His noise must have woken Mina from her artist’s solitude. She’d come from her studio cubicle clutching a bunch of coloured pencils and a sharpener.

‘What?’ Yu asked.

He slipped his fingers into the gap between two weather-warped plywood doors cautiously and pulled gently the door on the one on the right. He didn’t want to break it. There was a creak somewhere in the cupboard but the doors remained stuck. He pulled harder; the door itself creaked but he saw no visible damage. He was sure his mother, who was folding clothes in front of TV, heard him, but she didn’t interfere. The cupboard was opened only on the eve of Lunar New Year. It was almost a family ritual but Yu had to break the rule for once. He needed to find something to fulfil his promise to Ms Kim Siu, who had caught him in a weak moment.
‘What are you looking for, brother?’ asked Mina.

‘Some New Year tea and teacups,’ said Yu as he pulled harder. He heard the horn of a steamship as the door opened, rubbing against its compressed frame. The scent of last Lunar New Year and damp newspaper pervaded the air. He peered between old Horlick jars and plastic bags as he searched for the family’s finest china and ancient pu-erh tea.

‘Do you know where they are?’ Yu asked his sister.

‘They’re in a glossy white paper bag deep inside the cupboard. The bag has ‘Tiffany & Co.’ written on it. The cups and saucers are wrapped in newspaper,’ Mina said dreamily.

‘Thanks.’ Yu was glad to have Mina’s detailed description.

Mina slipped past Yu to the other side of the kitchen where she sat on a plastic stool next to the garbage bin and began to sharpen her pencils. She didn’t ask why Yu needed the New Year tea and teacups. Yu took out a jar of star anise and bags of hair-like vegetables from the cupboard. The kitchen was quiet except for the noise of a TV drama coming from the sitting room. He could hear the blade in Mina’s sharpener as it shaved around the tips of her pencils and formed wood ribbons with colourful edges.

‘Do these colours remind you of those pagoda wind chimes sold in the temple, brother?’ Mina asked, and continued without waiting for Yu to respond. ‘Those metal wind chimes are shaped like five-level pagodas. Each roof has six flaring corners and a tiny golden bell is hung under each corner of the roofs. The five roofs are of different colours. They are joined up with a thin gold chain in the order of pink, blue, peach, purple and green, from top to bottom. Six copper tubes are hung below the lowest roof. A copper disc with six punctures sways in the middle. When the wind blows, the tubes swing and chink against the disc.’
‘Those wind chimes,’ Yu said as he lifted out an emerald green canister at the side of the cupboard. ‘I know what you’re talking about.’

Yu didn’t know how Mina had made the connection between those wind chimes in temples and her coloured pencils. She made associations between objects that for other people had nothing in common. He grabbed the emerald green canister and pulled off the dome lid. The tin felt rough. Patches of rust marred the picture of mountains and streams on the square body of the canister. He opened the air-tight cap; a rich nutty scent told him he had found the antique pu-erh tea.

‘I’ll have to borrow a piece of this,’ he muttered.

Mina didn’t look up. She was still thinking about the wind chimes. ‘There are hundreds and thousands of them at the stalls next to Wong Tai Sin Temple. You can hear them from afar on a windy day, brother,’ Mina said.

‘Really? Can you?’ Yu said. He dipped his fingers into the small opening of the canister and broke loose a small lump of the family’s expensive tealeaves, which felt like dried mud on his fingers.

‘Yes,’ she confirmed.

Yu doubted it. The sound of wind chimes, even though there were a lot outside Wong Tai Sin Temple, would be quite hard to catch through the traffic noise on the Dragon Runway. *Mina’s sense of hearing has to be superior to hear the chimes from afar. She must be imagining it.* Yet it seemed that his sister had noticed something about the temple he had hardly registered. *Does she know bamboo slip no. 77 rarely falls out of the cup but it did on the day I was born?* Yu sniffed at the lumps of tea. A pungent bitterness invaded his throat. Only respectable elderly folk such as Uncle Bong drank pu-erh. They called the burnt aftertaste that lingered at the back of your tongue ‘sweet’.
‘The stalls outside the temple sell lucky windmills too. Lucky windmills with little bells …’ Mina murmured.

‘Found it!’ Yu spotted the glossy white paper bag that matched Mina’s description. He put the lump of tea aside and reached out for the white bag. It was filled with balls of newspaper.

Yu unfolded the top layer of paper to reveal a white bone china teacup with a turquoise brim. Its delicate handle curved like a vine with three tiny hooks that looked like shoots. He unwrapped a saucer with a matching turquoise brim. He put the cup on the saucer and the lump of pu-erh tea at the side. The tea set looked fancy, in an odd way. It didn’t match the Wongs’ shabby apartment at all. The beautiful china was just for flattering visitors during Chinese New Year. Yu wondered what his mother would feel if she knew he intended to take them to the inauspicious funeral parlour. He stuck his head out of the kitchen door to check that his mother was still absorbed in the TV drama.

Mina finished sharpening her pencils. She bunched them up and gave the sharpener a shake. Colourful shavings fell into the garbage bin like flower petals. Yu put the tea set on the kitchen floor. He could imagine Uncle Bong lifting the cup by its curved handle with his fingers that looked like old roots. Uncle Bong would be impressed by the aroma of the tea even before he sipped it. When he sipped the jet black liquid his eyebrows would rise above his eagle eyes. Yu would be forgiven for whatever crime he had committed against the elder of Kowloon Funeral Parlour that day in the back alley. Mina stood up and pushed the plastic stool aside with her foot. Yu thought he should rewrap the fragile china in its original wrapping for protection. He pulled out two sheets of newspaper from the Tiffany bag. The sheets were shaped like eggshell halves from years of being wrapped around cups and saucers. He was
fitting one shell against the bottom of the cup when an autumn wind blew in through the window. The other eggshell half cartwheeled across the grey kitchen floor tile over to Mina’s side, halting at her ankle. She bent down to catch it before it flew past but in her haste she squashed it, deforming the shell shape. She handed it back to Yu and walked out of the kitchen. The ball of newspaper was crushed at one end but flared outwards at the other, like a blooming lily. Yu looked down at the grey floor, where shadows of Mina’s coloured pencils flashed in front of his eyes: pink, blue, peach, purple and green.

Uncle Bong wasn’t at the reception desk the next day. Yu’s heart started to race when he saw Chung writing with an ink brush behind the counter instead of the grumpy old man. Given the age of Uncle Bong and his hot temper, could it be a heart attack?

‘Good morning, Chung,’ Yu said and bowed.

‘Hello, Yu,’ Chung replied cheerfully. His friendly voice sounded out of place in the Hall of Clouds, which was usually a gloomy territory. ‘What? Aren’t you happy to see me?’

‘I’m happy to see you. I just wonder where Uncle Bong is,’ Yu said.

‘Uncle Bong has taken a week off. He went up to the Mainland to attend a funeral,’ said Chung. ‘It’s a cousin of his.’

‘I see,’ Yu said, relieved to know it was not the funeral of Uncle Bong himself. Yu still had a chance to serve the old man a cup of tea.

‘And since you are here,’ Chung put down Uncle Bong’s ink brush. ‘Let me give you your schedule for the next month. Do you have your Staff Diary with you?’

Yu opened his backpack and pulled out the small brown book.
'Starting from next week, you’ll be on evening shifts,’ Chung said. He opened his own diary on the left and Yu’s on the right. He started to write out Yu’s schedule with a pencil. ‘You’ll help in the morgue, bring in the four-pieces-and-a-halves and assist Sorcerer Chiu Chow during rituals, and so on.’

‘Oh,’ Yu said softly.

‘Question?’ Chung asked without looking up.

‘No …’ Yu uttered from the back of his throat. He had been expecting to be sent to work in the morgue one day, but this information still came as a mild shock. Next week, I’ll have to head down to the chilly basement again. I’ll revisit the rows of filing cabinets that don’t contain files and the inner room with its corpse. The corridor down there is filled with shadows. Dead souls and their bodies queue for their funerals. Yu’s shoulders stiffened. The tip of his nose felt cold. A family in white mourning clothes entered the lobby. Their flannel shirts, trousers and shoes with no laces – laces were inauspicious because they indicated that the dead couldn’t loosen their ties from the living world – were camouflaged among the streaks of cloud on the marble walls. They didn’t stop at the desk to ask for information. Chung waited until the white troupe disappeared into the lift and asked Yu, ‘Are you afraid?’ Then the corners of his mouth twisted.

‘No, I’m not,’ Yu rolled his eyes. ‘Afraid of what?’

‘Ghosts,’ Chung said matter-of-factly.

‘No …’ Yu said, but he hesitated. Chung believed there were ghosts everywhere. He had said that they lingered on the dark side of the universe, while people like Chung and Yu were on the bright side. Yu still didn’t know whether to believe Chung or not. If there really were ghosts, I should stick a Tai Chi symbol on my back like the head sorcerers did, for protection. Oh, I’ll never understand these things about ghosts
and sorcerers! Wish I didn’t have to think about them. Never had to before I started to work in the funeral parlour.

‘If you don’t have any problems, your evening shifts start from Monday,’ Chung said.

‘Okay,’ replied Yu.

Perhaps the only real problem related to Yu’s lie to his parents. Does a computer maintenance company have evening shifts? Yu guessed some systems jobs had to be done outside normal working hours. That shouldn’t sound too strange to his father, if he asked. Another family in white passed through the Cloud Gate in short rapid strides. It was about the right time for the morning rituals to begin. Chung returned Yu’s Staff Diary to him.

‘Here you are. I have to get changed for the ceremonies,’ said Chung stretching.

‘And you will come with me to buy fabrics today after lunch.’

‘Buy fabrics?’ Yu asked.

‘Yes, we go to Shum Shui Po,’ said Chung. Then he whispered, ‘And after that you may go off early – an unofficial reward for purchasing duty. You don’t get this privilege all the time but you are a lucky boy today.’

‘Okay,’ Yu replied. He hoped his luck wouldn’t desert him.

Chung laughed heartily.

Shum Shui Po had been Hong Kong’s CBD in the sixties when the textile industry prospered. Then big factories had moved to the Mainland and many small local factories had closed down. But some family businesses remained in seven-storey buildings in the district. They opened small shops on the ground floor of the buildings and used the other floors for their factories, warehouses and homes. Chung drove a
blue-windowed funeral parlour van along the main road of Shum Shui Po under numerous signs that hung from the walls of overburdened old buildings beside the road. Their company name, ‘Kowloon Funeral Parlour Co. Ltd’, sparkled on their vehicle in bold white characters. Yu could see reflections of their van as it swished past shop windows displaying cheap jeans, no-brand shirts, satin nightgowns and pyjamas. Chung had allowed Yu to change into his normal clothes for the purchasing trip. Yu was in his long-sleeved yellow T-shirt, khaki trousers and Nike shoes; Chung remained in his white shirt, white trousers, black shoes and brown woollen vest.

Chung switched on the radio just in time to catch the 2.30 p.m. news but he wasn’t listening. He was whistling his favourite Peking Mansion theme song as he steered the van into the crisscrossing streets of shops. Yu was concerned about the impression the company vehicle and Chung’s outfit might make, but as they pulled over and jumped out, the Thai, African and Filipino buyers who were enjoying their respective purchasing excursions paid Chung, Yu and their vehicle no attention.

Chung led Yu to a narrow green gate between two fashion stores. A metal box with white plastic buttons and a dotted speaker was fixed on the wall next to the gate. Chung pressed button 7A. The speaker produced ear-piercing static. Yu plugged his ears and tried to decipher the words written in blue ink on the label next to the button. The characters had faded into one purple cloud. Under a film of yellowish scotch tape, Yu could just read: ‘Rainbow Bridge Textiles’. The static continued; Yu turned to look into the shop next door. Bolts of cloth in myriad colours, patterns and materials were leaning against a wall. The ones closest to the door were pink, blue, peach, purple and green. The colour combination reminded him of those pagoda wind chimes sold in temples. There were plenty of them outside Wong Tai Sin Temple, as Mina had said. How funny it is that her imagery tends to stick in my mind! Sure, Daniel
suggested me go to Wong Tai Sin Temple to see what fate will reveal, but he wasn’t serious. The static stopped; the gate sprang outwards with a loud click and Chung caught it. Yu saw a steep and narrow staircase sandwiched between two grey walls. They started to climb.

It was dim and quiet inside. The heavy concrete walls kept out the noise of the traffic. The granite steps were taupe and the handrail was painted shiny black. Bunches of wire and meters were attached to the whitewashed walls. There were two units on each floor. Shop names were fixed around the doorframes but they were hard to read in the dull light. There were round windows on the wall facing the main road but they were all shut. Thin sunlight shone through the dust and dirt on the window panes. Yu followed Chung as they climbed, alternating between bright and shady stairs.

‘Where are you, boy?’ Chung’s voice spiralled down from above.

‘I’m on the fifth floor,’ Yu called out. The door on the left was numbered 5A and the one on the right was 5B.

‘Why are you lagging behind?’ Chung laughed. ‘Hurry up!’

‘Okay,’ Yu called out.

‘Is that Chung?’ a woman’s voice asked.

Yu made it to the seventh floor and saw a slim woman in a simple knee-length dress and cardigan at the door of 7A. She smiled. Her eyes were dark and round. Her hair was short and slightly curly. A red-and-white sign on her door said: Rainbow Bridge Textiles.

‘Hello, Phoenix,’ Chung greeted. ‘This is Yu, our new assistant.’

‘Good afternoon, Auntie Phoenix,’ Yu greeted her.

‘So you are Chung’s new deputy,’ Auntie Phoenix said softly. ‘Come on in.’
Auntie Phoenix was not Qian Long, the Qing Emperor’s phoenix. It was just a coincidence. Chung and Yu stepped through Auntie Phoenix’s sitting room to a side door which led to Rainbow Bridge Textiles fabric warehouse. The room was very stuffy. Fabric was stacked along one wall. Bolts of cloth were stacked on top of one another and four steel rods were erected in front of the pile to safeguard the rest of the room from landslide. The remaining space comprised a workshop equipped with sewing machines, steam pressers, some other complex-looking machines and a long wooden bench scattered with straight and curved rulers. Pieces of broken thread and fabric waste littered the green-and-white floor tiles. All the windows were closed, to keep dust away, Yu supposed. Auntie Phoenix switched on the ceiling fan. The slow-turning blades only stirred up the smell of steel and engine oil, though the slivers of thread and fabric on the floor quivered.

‘Here you are,’ said Auntie Phoenix as she pulled four white plastic bags that were filled to the brim towards them.

Chung took his list out of his shirt pocket. He squatted on the floor and started to empty the contents of the bags. He placed on the bench three rolls of red, blue and green cloth no bigger than normal toilet rolls, and checked them against his list. Yu opened a bag and found packages of silk rosettes made of black and white ribbons. The word ‘Receptionist’ was sewn in black on a thick white ribbon. The tags were not for Uncle Bong. They were for the family members who sat at a desk next to the door of the hall during a funeral. They greeted other mourners, accepted Silk Money and gave out lucky envelopes, which contained a dollar coin, a tissue and a candy.

‘How many?’ asked Chung.

There were fifty rosettes in one package and there were four packages in total.

‘Two hundred,’ Yu said.
Chung, who was holding four balls of knitting wool in white, red, blue and green, checked his list. ‘That’s correct.’

‘Here are the long rolls,’ said Auntie Phoenix. She was a small woman but she had no problem lifting four bolts of cloth. She brought over a thick bolt of shiny white cloth, a lighter bolt that looked like calico, a bolt of yellowish coarsely-woven hemp and a bolt of black cloth. She moved aside a few boxes that stood in her way and placed the rolls on the bench. Some slivers of fabric flew out from one of the boxes. Yu picked them up from the floor and tossed them back in. He saw reels of colourful thread in the box next to it. Another box contained lots of zips. Another further away was covered with a black cloth, though some white laces were hanging at the side.

Yu returned the black and white rosettes to the bag and pressed them down. A piece of thread flew up and tickled his face. He rubbed it with the back of his hand and felt the bump on his forehead that had been inflicted by Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches. The sorcerer had been dressed in black and white, the colour combination of the rosettes in the bag. Auntie Phoenix came in holding a tray. She placed two cups of tea on the bench.

‘Have some tea,’ she offered, handing Chung a small white cup.

‘Thank you, Phoenix,’ said Chung standing up to receive it.

Yu stood up too. The red cloth suddenly rolled off the bench. It fell onto the floor and unrolled like a red carpet, or a red stream, from his feet to the mound of fabrics along the wall. Yu moved over to retrieve the head of the roll. At the foot of the fabric mountain, the last five rolls were pink, blue, peach, purple and green.

‘Phoenix,’ said Chung.

Yu looked up. He thought he heard Qian Long speaking in the voice of Sorcerer Guangdong.
‘Here is the cheque from the funeral parlour,’ Chung continued.

Yu stooped to re-roll the red cloth. The folds and creases on the material looked like ripples. It was a long red stream across a green-and-white landscape. The colours of the lowest five fabric rolls reminded him of the pagoda wind chimes outside Wong Tai Sin Temple. He could hear the chimes as he went upstream in search of the source of the red river. He could smell flowers. Then he saw a pair of black shoes under two white trouser legs. It was Chung; he was drinking tea. Yu tacked the end of the red cloth with a pin and returned it to the white plastic bag. It seemed that he couldn’t get rid of the strange images that had come into his mind during his recent encounters with the sorcerers. *I might soon become hyper-imaginative like Mina!*

‘Your tea, Yu,’ said Auntie Phoenix.

‘Thank you, Auntie Phoenix,’ said Yu, straightening up and feeling his spine click. He held the small white cup in his hands. There were chrysanthemum petals floating on the golden tea like little commas. Yu gulped them down with the tea.

‘Phoenix,’ said Chung. He put down his teacup and clasped the four bolts of fabric under his left arm. ‘It has been lovely to see you but we should go now.’

‘It’s always great to see you, Chung,’ replied Auntie Phoenix as she led them to the door.

‘See you, Auntie Phoenix,’ Yu said picking up the four plastic bags.

‘And your new deputy is a sweet boy, Chung,’ said Auntie Phoenix. ‘See you.’

Yu followed Chung as they slowly descended. Chung whistled the *Peking Mansion* theme song again. His upper body tilted to the right to balance the weight of the bolts. His crinkled white shirt was pulled to the left. Yu felt for the steps under his feet cautiously. He clutched the handles of two bags in each hand; the bags were so full that they flared out on his sides like wings. The stairwell was not wide enough for
him and his ‘wings’ to walk abreast, so he turned sideways to descend in a ‘crab walk’. The staircase echoed Chung’s whistle and light steps. He steered his white bolts of cloth in a zig-zag down the narrow staircase as easily as if it were a flowing stream. *Practice makes perfect*, Yu’s father would say. As Yu made a U-turn between doors 5A and 5B, he lifted his bags up to avoid the dirt. A ray of late afternoon sun shot through a dusty round window and shone on his face, his yellow T-shirt and his white plastic bags. For one second Yu looked like a young bird with yellow feathers flapping its wings in the concrete stairwell.
PART III

The Temple of the District
Yu was bouncing to the heavy beat of the latest hits on Pop Radio 997 in the last carriage of the MTR train. Before five o’clock the underground train was not crowded. Yu watched through the windows of the sliding door the station of Lok Fu fly out of sight. The station was green. A bunch of secondary school girls in identical brown skirts and jackets hopped in flipping through a *JJ Magazine*. They were having lots of fun, but Yu couldn’t hear the noise they were making with his radio pop songs blasting in his ears. When he saw the words ‘Wong Tai Sin’ in black against a chrome yellow pillar, he got off.

He flowed with the current of passengers on the platform towards the escalator. The entire platform was covered in tiny square tiles in black and chrome yellow. The colours resembled a sorcerer’s robe – a combination of Sorcerer Shanghai’s golden robe and Sorcerer Chiu Chow’s gigantic Tai Chi sign in black. It also matched the station name: Wong Tai Sin, a headmaster sorcerer, could tell fortunes and cure incurable ailments with magic medicines that looked like Maltesers. He had been a
shepherd many thousands of years ago. One day, he had got lost in the mountains but then he had found the Way. He had followed the Way to its end and had become a god, a charitable god that gave out free clothes and medicines. He was worshipped in a temple. People called him Wong Tai Sin, the Great Immortal Wong.

Yu rarely took the MTR at this hour; in fact, he wouldn’t be taking the MTR if he hadn’t gone with Chung on the purchasing excursion. The ‘Exit’ sign in reflexive green above the escalator was flashing unsteadily. The Chinese character ‘Exit’ was composed of two mountains stacked one on top of the other – an exit was a path between two mountains. The green sign loomed closer as Yu flowed forwards with the crowd. Which exit should he take? He had two in his mind. He could either surface through Exit A or Exit C1. Exit C1 led him home, to Lower Wong Tai Sin Estate, while Exit A led to Wong Tai Sin Temple. Sorcerer Chiu Chow has made a saga out of my birth with the bamboo slip, the temple, smith Gong, Yellow Feather and the rest, but he didn’t predict that I would visit Wong Tai Sin temple twenty-two years later. What fate will reveal to me if I go there? Should I simply ignore the sorcerer’s words?

Yu pushed through the rotating pins at the gate and mingled with other Wong Tai Sin people in the station concourse. In the late Friday afternoon, housewives with permed hair and purses under their arms were heading home with plastic bags that reeked of raw blood and fish. Single old men staggered along with takeaway dinners from Fairwood. Immobile old ladies on wheelchairs were pushed by their Indonesian maids. Bags of vegetables hung on the back of the wheelchairs. Potential Geniuses of Asia in white shirts and tight grey shorts plodded home carrying huge school backpacks, water bottles across their chests and snacks in their hands.
Yu turned towards Exit C1 with extra determination. The air in the chrome yellow concourse was warm with exhalation. He took off his earphones. He wanted to see if he could hear the wind chimes – Wong Tai Sin Temple sat somewhere above the station concourse. Noises rebounded under the low ceiling. He didn’t hear wind chimes, but rather the calling of a male voice.

‘Hey, hey,’ a male voice beckoned, audible even in the concourse full of echoes. The voice was husky from smoking, huskier than Uncle Bong’s.

Yu looked back. A man in a grey tartan shirt and dark green shorts was leaning on the metal barrier separating the paid and non-paid areas of the station. Like Yu the man was on the non-paid side. Resting his elbows on the steel bar he waved, his tan face opening into a bright smile through his teeth that looked like a sooted fireplace.

Yu’s instinct told him to avoid eye contact. The smiling face was very likely another mad man in Wong Tai Sin. He must be an underground dweller for his flannel shirt was too thin for the cool weather outside. Yu hadn’t taken the MTR since he had started to work in the funeral parlour. He imagined this was why he hadn’t met this latest disturbed local.

‘Hey, hey!’ the man called out at Yu in the same coarse voice again.

Yu ignored him. It was always wise to ignore mad people in Wong Tai Sin the first few times. They might pull out a cleaver and slay you! He still remembered the mad grandpa who used to patrol the Morse Park with a cleaver under his arm. A cleaver in a red plastic bag sandwiched in a folded newspaper. The grandpa had been a public menace before he was institutionalised.

So Yu wouldn’t venture to step any closer until he determined that the man was as harmless as the Genius of Asia. Yu continued towards Exit C1, stealing a glance at the man. The man saw him peep and beckoned faster, looking very friendly. Yu felt
guilty about avoiding such friendliness; the journey to Exit C1 suddenly seemed to take forever. The man looked thoroughly ‘decent’. His face was square and tanned, his nose big and straight, and his small eyes full of spirit. Can the man be normal? Is he an ‘uncle’ I once greeted? Yu’s father had made him greet various strange men as ‘uncle’ since he had been a small boy. Those ‘uncles’ could be his father’s workmates, ex-workmates, friends, enemies, neighbours from the district, or neighbours from outside the district. Yu’s father liked to network with people whom he assumed would be useful one day, though he didn’t talk much within the four walls of their tiny home. The man’s tartan outfit reminded Yu of the ‘Downstairs Uncle’ who used to live in the apartment right below the Wongs before the new immigrant from the Mainland had moved in. Or he could be the ‘Illegal Street Hawker Uncle’ who pushed around a handcart to sell noodles at midnight. That hawker wore lots of tartan too. Perhaps he was the ‘Afternoon Tea Uncle’ Yu’s father used to sit with at Fairwood. Yu felt anxious. If the grey tartan man was indeed an ‘uncle’ and Yu ignored him, his father would learn about his son’s unsociable attitude, for the ‘uncle’ clan was loyal enough to inform each other of untoward incidents on the streets. He didn’t want to offend any of them. Better be safe than sorry.

‘Hello,’ Yu said softly, turning his head.

He had spoken quietly so that he could walk off without being rude if the ‘mad’ ‘uncle’ didn’t catch his greeting. But the man’s sense of hearing was acute, like Mina’s. He stopped waving, and asked:

‘You came to worship Wong Tai Sin, didn’t you? Are you lost?’

Either the man possessed a special vocal technique or his mouth looked distorted in the chrome yellow light: the words seemed to flow half a second behind the changing shapes of his lips.
‘No, I’m not lost,’ Yu answered at a normal volume.

‘Don’t fear when you are lost. Just follow the way,’ the man said. He pointed to two lines of wire tape arrows on the floor. There were green ones on the left and yellow ones on the right, pointing in opposite directions. They were for crowd control.

*He’s not making any sense! He’s not an ‘uncle’. I should dash home. I shouldn’t have answered him!*

‘I’m going home,’ Yu muttered and turned away.

‘But you’re lost,’ the man insisted. ‘You don’t know which way the temple is.’

‘No, I’m not going to the temple,’ Yu said.

‘Why not?’ asked the mad man.

Yu looked at him. *Why not?* Yu stood with his toes pointing to Exit C1 but his upper body was turned towards Exit A, at the other end of the concourse. The strange man, leaning against the barrier, pointed to the ceiling as if to indicate the temple was right above his head. His elbows on the steel bar didn’t move.

‘Do you know Wong Tai Sin doesn’t live in the temple up there?’ the man asked and fixed his gaze on the low ceiling of the concourse. Yu stared at him. His yellowish eyeballs reflected the fluorescent lighting. Yu didn’t think the temple was right above their heads. It should be somewhere further down the concourse, near Exit A. Yu’s hearing was not great; he couldn’t hear either the tossing of bamboos slips or the pagoda wind chimes.

‘No,’ Yu said.

‘I’m not Wong Tai Sin,’ the man said.

‘I didn’t say you are,’ Yu replied.

‘I’m Pao Ding.’

‘What?’
‘Pao Ding.’

‘You’re joking.’

‘There was once a butcher. He possessed refined carving skills. When he butchered a cow, he first felt with his hands the position of the cow’s rib cage, pelvis, neck and limbs. Then he stuck in his knife. He glided his blade around hard bones and entangled ligaments. He swerved through the gaps between the joints and flesh. He separated the truck from the limbs, fats and hides. Never bothered to untangle the masses of tissue, nor did he try to chop any bone. So, gently and carefully, the butcher worked through the cow like a ritual dancer and the whole cow was dissected in no time. All the cuts were so smooth that they gleamed like beeswax. After all that, the butcher wouldn’t even be sweating,’ the man said and wiped his own forehead with the back of his hand. There was a line of calluses on his palm below his fingers. Thick crusts of dead skin sat between his thumb and forefinger. ‘I’m Pao Ding the butcher,’ he concluded.

‘What?’ Yu wanted to laugh. *This is mad.* Yu had studied the fable of Pao Ding in classical Chinese in secondary school. They had been forced to recite the fable in full.

‘I’m the butcher,’ the man confirmed. ‘When I was running my meat stall, I was famous for my skill.’

‘Wait a second,’ Yu chipped in. The last piece of information had just solved the mystery. ‘You are the “Beef Stall Uncle” from the wet market in Lok Fu!’

Pao Ding ignored his exclamation. He continued to describe how he had set a record by butchering twenty cows in one hour. His skill had been magical and his admirers had been in awe. So the madman had been a successful butcher once, and now he thought he was Pao Ding the mythical butcher. Makes sense. Yu thought it was time to slip away. He should step back as discreetly as possible before joining the
stream of pedestrians behind him. *But hang on. There is something sticking out underneath the man’s grey tartan shirt. What is it? It doesn’t look like a mobile phone. Oh no. I can’t believe it. Avoid eye contact! Don’t let him notice what you’ve noticed.*

The man was still revelling in his Pao Ding fantasy. Yu took one step back then began to take another, sensing the man was about to pull out a full-size butcher’s cleaver. When the cleaver arced towards him Yu threw himself to one side. He was first dazzled by a steely reflection. Then he fell onto the ground. The man swung his blade a second time. Yu grabbed a pedestrian’s huge red-blue-white striped nylon bag and threw it at Pao Ding. Screams filled the underground concourse. Yu fell back and bumped his head hard on the steel barriers. Before he lost consciousness, he felt a hot stream trickling down his calf and he heard a bell tinkle.

Yu was lying in pain. His yellow shirt was clammy and prickly and stuck to his sweaty armpits.

‘Wong Tai Sin isn’t in the temple. You’re lost. Don’t fear. I’m here to help you. There is a path for you that swerves around obstacles. Just follow that and you will find the Way.’

*How many times have I told you that I’m not lost? I’ve been in Wong Tai Sin ever since I was born. And you’re just a new madman from Lok Fu. You think you are Pao Ding, don’t you? Have you said enough? Leave me alone now. Damn it! My head hurts. Did he crack my skull? Am I bleeding? Am I going to die? So I’m dying under the blade of Pao Ding? This can’t be serious! And where are my legs, by the way? I can’t feel them.*

‘Don’t fear. We are trying to help you.’

*Now who’s this? Why does everybody speak the same?*
‘Tell me your name.’

*Is that Sorcerer Chiu Chow? My family name is Wong, given name the single word* Yu.

‘Is he dead?’ asked a Wong Tai Sin pedestrian.

‘He’s just fainted,’ answered another Wong Tai Sin passer by.

Arrow-shaped shadows in yellow and green flashed under Yu’s eyelids. Small bells tinkled in his ears. He was lifted onto a stretcher and hauled into an ambulance. It was very dark, but Yu saw no tunnel leading to an eternal white light. The tinkle continued, a silvery sound like wind chimes – Mina’s pagoda wind chimes with five flaring roofs of pink, blue, peach, purple and green. The little bells at the corners of the roofs rang like a muse to direct Yu along the Way, whatever that might mean. Louder and louder the tinkle grew as his blindness dissolved to reveal a spinning, pointy and shimmering object. It wasn’t a flaring roof; it was a windmill.

Wong Tai Sin Temple sold lucky windmills too. Pieces of glossy paper were stapled together to form slats. Eight pointy slats twirled in a shimmering circle. Yu’s mother used to put one on their iron grill to catch the wind when they were experiencing bad luck. A windmill changed your luck.

Round and round the windmill turned. Yu could feel it behind his forehead. He wondered why there was wind inside his head. *Pao Ding must have cracked my skull; so wind leaks in. Or is it the injury inflicted by Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches?* In slow motion, the windmill pulled away from Yu’s eyeballs and began to shrink. Now he felt it in the centre of his head. There was a rack behind the windmill constructed with three rattan rings – one big circle and two small circles arranged like Mickey Mouse ears. The big windmill was tied to the middle of the big circle; three small windmills were tied onto the small circles. They were all twirling vigorously; *wind*
must be strong in there. Shiny pink and gold paper strips spiralled along the rattan rack like DNA. Six tiny bells dangled on the colourful rack. An empty red envelope with blessings written in gold was glued in the middle. Above the red envelope, two triangular red flags fluttered.

Then Yu felt a piercing pain as if the stick in the middle of the windmill rack had pierced his brain. He wanted to touch the spot but he could not bring his fingers to it. The windmill was drilling in. Yu threw his head from side to side trying to shake off the spinning thing. The windmill was rotating on its axis – or Yu was revolving around it. Either way, he felt dizzy. I must pluck the bloody thing off! He summoned every inch of strength from his enfeebled body and leaped at the windmill.

It was a near miss. But like in any good old story, Yu’s failure provoked the evil spirit. The windmill stopped turning and charged towards him. From the back of his head the windmill surged, slowly at first, then it picked up speed. The vanes accelerated into turbo engines. The big windmill emitted white heat and the three auxiliary ones followed. Yu thought the windmill rocket should have crashed out through his forehead long ago but there seemed to be light years to go before it would touch an edge. Then, all of a sudden, Yu was smacked in the face by a flying object. The entire space odyssey-cum-lucky windmill picture vanished in a poof. He found himself lying under a tick-tack-toe fake ceiling composed of white foam boards and aluminium bars. He gasped. The ceiling reminded him of the morgue.

Yu’s bed was an island in a sea of people. He saw his father, his mother and Mina on his right, while a doctor, a nurse and a plain-clothes detective were on his left. At least, Yu supposed he was a detective. He wore a blue tartan shirt under a black vest. He had an identity card in a black leather pouch clipped on his chest. They were all in a
salmon pink curtained cubicle. Yu’s mother was rubbing her eyes with a white handkerchief. Mina in her school uniform was hugging Yu’s backpack in her arms. Yu’s father at the end of the bed had put on a face mask to cover his nose and mouth securely. He was watching the doctor and nurse on the other side of the bed. Yu wanted to call his father, why he didn’t know, but there was an oxygen mask on his face that prevented him talking. Yu raised a finger in his father’s direction, but his father didn’t see him. Then the doctor flashed a torch in front of his pupils; things dissolved into a white blur. Then the dazzle faded and Yu saw a purple aura over everything.

The bespectacled doctor took off Yu’s oxygen mask. ‘Wong Yu. Can you hear me?’ asked the doctor in a loud voice, though it was muffled by the green face mask. The name tag on his white coat read: ‘Dr Lee’.

‘Yes.’ Yu’s voice was husky.

‘Good. I’m Dr Lee. This is Kowloon Hospital. Do you know why you’re here?’ ‘I was attacked by Pao Ding, a madman who claimed to be Pao Ding,’ Yu recollected. It sounded funny to be attacked by the mythical Pao Ding, but no one in the curtained cubicle laughed.

‘Good.’ Dr Lee was pleased with Yu’s clear-mindedness. ‘Since you have fully regained consciousness, I have to pass you over to the police for a statement in a moment. As for your injury, the cut on your right shin is not very deep. We have inserted seven stitches. We have also given you a tetanus injection. The bump on your head didn’t fracture your skull. With some rest, the stitches can be removed in ten days and you will be on your feet again.’

Though the medical report offered some comfort, Yu still had to adjust to the fact that he hadn’t died. Just a brief moment ago, he had thought his life had come full
circle. On the lonely island of his hospital bed, he could imagine himself as Da Vinci’s Vitruvian man, but lying on a Tai Chi symbol. *The return to reality is too quick; I need to make a more gradual return. Where have all the sorcerers gone when you need one? I must be going crazy, despite what Dr Lee said.*

‘Are you okay, brother?’ Mina asked in a near whisper. Her dreamy voice matched Yu’s state of mind.

‘Thank god you have woken up. What happened to you?’ Yu’s mother couldn’t wait for Yu to answer. She rolled her handkerchief inside her palms and joined her hands in a worshipping gesture: ‘Thanks for Wong Tai Sin’s blessing.’

His mother seemed to be talking to the blank space between Yu and the doctor. Wong Tai Sin had probably blessed Yu from an unknown dimension. Though the hospital cubicle wasn’t cold, Yu shivered.

‘So, I’m afraid we all have to wait outside while the detective does his job,’ Dr Lee announced as he made his way out through the pink curtain. They knew the doctor was not going to wait outside – it was busy in the emergency room. They thanked Dr Lee as he departed. Yu’s father parted the curtains and followed the doctor outside in search of more information. Yu’s father never trusted anyone, not doctors, not the police, not Yu. And his antennae bristled when confronting an emergency. He would collect more information than the police. Mina swung Yu’s backpack over her shoulder next to her own schoolbag and went outside with their mother. Yu saw the White Flower Embrocation in the semi-transparent side pocket of his bag and wanted it, but the curtain was closed before he could use his parched throat to call out.

Yu sank into the bed. Although the mattress wasn’t soft, he could feel himself sinking. His limbs were icy and his lips were cracked. His right shin was numb. The
stitched wound under layers of bandages seemed to belong to another planet. Yu rehearsed to himself: if his father asked why he had been in the MTR station in normal working hours, he would say that he was allowed to leave early because the company was doing some interior construction work. That sounded reasonable. The nurse checked some gauges on Yu’s headboard and left the cubicle. Now he was alone with the plain-clothes detective. Tartan was a funny pattern. There were so many variations of it. The detective introduced himself but Yu failed to catch his name. Maybe Dr Lee hadn’t checked Yu’s hearing properly. The detective’s vest was concealing something. Yu was sure there was a gun. Just like the triad members from Sea and Land Riches and Pao Ding, they all had hidden weapons. The detective held a writing board under his left arm and an Mp3 recorder in his right hand. A pen was attached to the writing board. The cap-less pen clinked against the railing of Yu’s bed twice. The tip of the pen was poised over a blank statement form. A thumb was ready on the ‘play’ button of the recorder. The detective closed the curtains tighter. The word ‘Police’ in bright yellow shone on the back of his black vest.

‘Shall we start?’ asked the detective, who then said something into the recorder in a flat voice. ‘Please state your name.’

‘Wong Yu.’

*It means a young bird, according to Sorcerer Chiu Chow’s interpretation.*

‘What were you doing at four o’clock this afternoon?’ asked the detective.

‘I was in Wong Tai Sin MTR and a madman attacked me with a cleaver,’ said Yu as clearly as he could.

‘Do you know the person who attacked you?’ asked the detective.
‘No, I don’t,’ Yu said. ‘But I thought I had met him somewhere before, maybe in the same district. He has a familiar face. I might have even greeted him before, not by name, just as one of my father’s friends.’

‘So, do you know the person?’

‘I don’t.’

‘But you stopped to say hello.’

‘Yes.’

The detective rolled his eyes and lowered his head to scribble on the statement form. Yu continued to recount the event.

He had grabbed a bag and chucked it towards Pao Ding for self-defence, then rolled to the side and had bumped his head. He had lost consciousness.

‘All right,’ said the detective and indicated that Yu should sign at the bottom of the form. As Yu signed, he saw the detective slip the recorder inside his black vest.

‘You are free to go now, you lucky man.’

‘Sorry?’ Yu asked. His ears might have missed the irony.

‘You don’t know,’ the detective said as he opened the curtains. Yu’s father came in immediately, followed by Mina and their mother. ‘You were saved by five dozen lucky windmills.’

‘What?’ asked Yu. The detective’s words were a riddle.

‘Lucky windmills,’ Mina repeated placidly.

‘A number of witnesses stated that the red-blue-white nylon bag you threw towards the suspect belonged to a lucky-windmill vendor who was on his way back from business,’ the detective said. ‘Apparently, your assailant was unlucky enough to be next to you when you threw the bag, and five dozen windmills with sharp vanes
and rattan sticks all collapsed over him. Well, that was it. The suspect lost his balance and some strong men held him down. Ha, lucky windmill indeed!’

Yu was engrossed by the missing details the detective had just provided. Yet he felt strangely detached from the story. He had seen windmills when he was unconscious; that must have been his subconsciousness working. Mina’s eyes were completely still, as if she too felt detached in the situation. Father was expressionless behind his face mask. Then, Yu’s mother said for the second time, ‘That was Wong Tai Sin’s blessing!’

‘Well, could be,’ the detective said airily. ‘Okay, lucky boy. I’ll let you celebrate with your family.’ And he turned to go. There was no irony in his voice.

‘Oh, please wait, Sir,’ Yu called out. ‘Can I ask one question?’

‘Ask,’ said the detective.

‘What will happen to Pao Ding?’

‘He’ll be institutionalised if he is diagnosed as mentally disturbed,’ answered the detective.

‘Oh,’ said Yu. So Pao Ding and the grandpa with a cleaver might meet in the same institution. Yu didn’t know the full story of the grandpa and his cleaver but they had both dwelled in Wong Tai Sin and they had a cleaver in common. Yu was staring at the tick-tack-toe ceiling on which aluminium bars crossed paths at right angles. He didn’t realise the detective had left without saying another word. Now it was silent in the pink cubicle. Yu wriggled his upper body. The crisp sheet rubbed against his yellow T-shirt. The dull noise of friction. His sense of detachment took flight into fantasy. He would have bolted out of the room, even just to the toilet, if his right leg had not been numbed with anaesthetics. His mother’s lower lip protruded, which showed that she didn’t comprehend the situation. Mina turned her dreamy eyes
towards the wall behind the headboard of Yu’s bed where a venetian blind was
shielding the window. She pulled down two aluminium slats and peeped outside
through the triangular hole. Yu could smell gunpowder over the scent of hospital
bleach. His father crossed his arms tightly across his chest. His eyes above his face
mask said: *It is Yu’s fault that he was attacked.* Yu had been nosy. Yu wasn’t smart
enough to smell the danger ahead. Yu was never good at smelling dangers apart from
those from his father. Mina’s fingers slipped. The slats on the blind snapped, cracked
and bounced back into position. The sound was alarming. Mina jumped; then their
father exploded.

‘Why the hell did you go talk to that bloody psycho?’ he bellowed. ‘Can’t you
mind your own business? And you’re still asking about him! Are you a psycho too?’

‘I’m sorry, Father,’ said Yu. ‘I thought Pao Ding was your friend.’

‘What, Pao Ding? Do you know him? He was just a butcher from the market!’

‘No, I don’t know him.’ He felt slightly hurt uttering those words as if he was
betraying a friend, though he didn’t understand why he felt that way.

‘Oh, things are fine now. Just don’t make the same mistake next time,’ Yu’s
mother said. She uttered the same mantra after every family fight to ease the tension.
It seldom worked.

‘And why the hell were you at the MTR station at that hour? Weren’t you at
work?’ asked Father.

There it was – the million dollar question. Yu steadied his breath. It was hard with
a freshly stitched wound but he did his best. His father was good at detecting lies just
from the rhythm of Yu’s breathing. Slowly, Yu shaped his mouth to form words.

‘I was …’ Yu began.
A physiotherapist barged in with a pair of crutches in one hand and a ring holder in the other. He interrupted Yu’s lie-to-be. This small man with sleek hair began to brief Yu about rehabilitation in the coming ten days. He turned the handle at the foot of Yu’s bed to put him in a half-lying posture. He lowered the safety rail and instructed Yu to roll onto his side and push himself up with his left elbow. Yu clambered up and sat on the edge of the bed. His legs felt icy. But they seemed to move at their own accord as they dangled above the ground. Then he noticed that his right trouser leg had been rolled up and there was a patch of dried blood on the fold. The stain was brown and brittle. His legs continued to move. He couldn’t steady them. Those weak but strong-willed legs were determined to lead him somewhere and show him something. Something that had happened under the tick-tack-toe ceiling not long ago. A white lily bloomed. A lady in a red gown kicked her feet above the ground – a pair of feet in red embroidered slippers; the side splits on her gown opened at her thighs.

Something dropped.

The vial of White Flower Embrocation spinning on the floor was rescued by Yu’s mother. Yu felt the scent of the embrocation under his nostrils and on his temples. A professional voice repeated, ‘It’s normal. It’s normal.’ Yu saw his backpack open on the floor. Mina squatted to shove Yu’s personal items back into the bag. He saw his radio and earplugs, his towel, his thermos and his Kowloon Funeral Parlour staff diary.

‘It was just a minor blackout. It’s quite common after being unconscious and lying down for a long time,’ said the physiotherapist.

‘Are you sure my son is ready to go?’ Yu’s mother said with fresh tears in her eyes. ‘He has almost fainted again!’
She rubbed more embrocation on Yu’s forehead and below his nostrils. The coolness on his skin prepared him to face the cruel reality again. Yu saw his mother pass the glass vial to Mina who slipped it back into the side pocket of his bag. Mina was trying to hold together Yu’s bag because the zip had broken.

‘What is this?’ Yu’s father bellowed as he threw the schedule booklet from Kowloon Funeral Parlour onto the bed. Waking completely Yu saw what his father had discovered. ‘What is this?’ his father shouted even louder, ignoring the physiotherapist.

In his half-conscious state, Yu’s intended lie had flown away. ‘I’ve been working in Kowloon Funeral Parlour,’ he finally confessed.

‘Bastard!’ Yu’s father lifted his hand and slapped him across the face. It was not a full-strength slap but his mother screamed. Mina jumped again. The physiotherapist seemed to want to depart until the domestic drama had settled, but decided to stay.

‘Do you have no shame?’ Yu’s father yelled at him. Yu wanted to remind his father it was a hospital but desisted. ‘I saved thousands to send you to university and what do I get? A coffin man? Look at you now! You mess with the filthy ghostly shit and bring yourself bad luck. On top of that you lied!’

Father’s face was contorted by anger. His wrinkled skin was the colour of the brown paper cover of Yu’s staff diary.

‘Father …’ Yu wasn’t sure what he wanted to say.

‘I disown anyone like you as a son. Go! Do whatever you want! Touch dead bodies! Useless bum!’ Father continued to shout. If Yu hadn’t been injured, his father would have beaten him with a folding chair, slashed him with a belt or caned him with a stick. It was indeed Wong Tai Sin’s blessing.
‘Oh, so you’ve been working in Kowloon Funeral Parlour!’ said the mother, picking up the schedule from Yu’s lap and suddenly registering the cause of Father’s anger.

‘Wong Yu, are you ready to try the crutches again?’ asked the physiotherapist as he assisted Yu to sit on the side of the bed again.

Yu turned to look at his fuming father as two crutches were being pushed under his armpits. Father pointed a finger at Mother and yelled, ‘You always tolerated whatever he did. See what he has become now! Kind mothers raise bad sons!’ Father pounded a fist onto the table on wheels at the foot of Yu’s bed. The table clattered against the steel bed frame. Then Father stormed out through the curtain.

‘Ai-yah. This time we’re all dead,’ Mother sighed and wiped her eyes again.

The physiotherapist assisted Yu to move about along the aisle in the emergency room. When he was sure Yu could manage to get home he disappeared behind another curtained cubicle to assist other patients. Yu’s stitched shin was bandaged in an awkward curved guard, hanging in midair. They were ready to go.

‘You should have told me that you’ve been working in the funeral parlour, at least I would have bought you pomelo leaves to wash away your bad luck. Then you could have avoided this danger,’ Mother said softly.

‘It was a coincidence,’ Yu said as he hobbled along the green arrows on the floor that would lead them to the exit.

_Pao Ding’s attack was a coincidence, as was the breaking of the zip on my bag when Mina dropped it, and the exposure of my funeral parlour staff diary. They have nothing to do with any danger or bad luck because of where I’ve been working._ Yu hobbled past rows of orange plastic seats on which people sat waiting for emergency services. There were elderly people coughing, babies wailing and children with
wounded arms, legs or foreheads. Policemen in navy blue uniforms guarded handcuffed violent looking men in blood-soaked black blazers. *They could be from Sea and Land Riches.*

Mother went to pay Yu’s bill at the cashier’s desk while he and Mina waited to the side. The glass sliding door of the hospital opened and closed. It reflected a desolate young man in a yellow T-shirt, whose hair looked like a bird’s nest, perching single-legged over a line of green arrows. Mina in the reflection was hugging Yu’s half-open backpack. She was tracing the shape of an arrow with the tip of her black leather shoe. Yu could smell exhaust fumes from the taxi queue outside, mixed with the scent of hospital bleach. His forehead felt icy with White Flower Embrocation. Would he appear in newspapers tomorrow as an innocent victim in the Wong Tai Sin MTR station bloodshed? Would the journalists find out Yu was a funeral parlour apprentice and attribute the incident to ghosts or bad feng shui? *They might say a ghost had been following me from the funeral parlour and has induced the bloodshed.* Some journalists were so skilled at interpreting accidents that they might as well have been sorcerers.

It was eight o’clock in the evening when Yu, Mina and their mother finally arrived home. Father wasn’t there and he didn’t appear for dinner. Yu didn’t see him before they switched off the light and he lay awake in bed with his stiff leg. Yellow streetlights filtered through the plastic film on the window and cast soft shadows over his university textbooks. He had hidden his black-and-white salary envelope between the books. He felt for his open bag on the floor and took out his staff diary. Chung’s handwriting reminded him that he had evening shifts coming up. *Can I not quit my job? But Father’s big word slogans will be everywhere tomorrow. What to do?* He placed the little brown book back in his bag and groped for the vial. The liquid
sparkled. The white flowers on the blue label bloomed wide as usual; they never wilted. Yu needed to think of words with which to confront his father, but he fell asleep.

Then, between one dream and another, he heard someone tear paper from a ring-bound calendar. An angry hand was scribbling ferociously.
At first, it was the same tinkle in the wind. Yu in his dreamy state announced that he knew Pao Ding, the butcher from Lok Fu.

Then Yu felt light. For some reason he couldn’t feel his legs. Neither the injured one nor the healthy one. He didn’t know where his torso and arms had gone. He tried to raise a finger to get his father’s attention. It was moving, though he seemed to sense it as if by remote control. The sound of little windmill bells was receding, as was his memory of yesterday – the purchasing excursion to Auntie Phoenix’s place, the fable of Pao Ding, Father’s outburst … scenes flashed across his retinas and faded one after another. Does dying feel like this?

He felt lighter and lighter until he began to drift along the air currents like a feather. He landed on the top level of a pagoda with roofs of pink, blue, peach, purple and green. A gush of wind attacked. He slid down a flaring corner of the uppermost roof and was borne away by the draft. At the foot of the pagoda, he saw an old lady in a red lily gown.
She had a bamboo cup in her hands. The cup held one hundred bamboo slips. She clutched the cup tightly in front of her chest. She kneeled down. Her red embroidered slippers squeaked as they bent. Her white powdered forearm was dotted with freckles. She tossed the slips inside the cup once; the slips jumped and fell tidily to one side. She continued to toss the cup in a steady rhythm; the slips vibrated and re-arranged themselves. One among the one hundred slips would fall out. The slip bore a number that pointed to a script; the script hinted at the future. The old lady closed her eyes. She rested her chin on the stiff collar and her tangerine mouth curved slightly downwards. The skirt of her gown crinkled under her knees. The slips in the cup gradually formed an arrow shape. The old lady doubled the pace of her tossing until the slip at the tip of the arrow fell onto the ground soundlessly.

Yu folded down the corner of his blanket so he could extend his arm to pick up the phone. It was chilly. He covered himself again fast. Dust floated airily around in soft morning sunlight filtered by the semi-transparent window.

‘Hello?’ Yu said.

‘Hey, I saw your name on Yahoo!’ It was Daniel in Taiwan. His voice crackled through the long-distance. ‘Are you all right, my friend?’

‘Hey,’ Yu said hoarsely and sneezed twice. He jerked and felt the stiffness in his right leg. The limb felt like a block of plaster. ‘I’m still alive. I had a few stitches in my leg. That’s all. So the journalists wrote about me?’

‘Yes. It says, “The only victim in the incident, Wong Yu, who works in a funeral parlour, was slightly injured in the leg and was discharged from Kowloon Hospital after treatment.”’

‘Damn! Now everybody knows I’m working in the funeral parlour,’ Yu said.
His father might already be receiving commiserating phone calls from relatives and friends of the family and from those ‘uncles’ Yu had greeted. Father’s reputation would be damaged – a further complication.

‘I know. The paper’s not helping,’ Daniel said. ‘So your father knows about your job now.’

Yu sighed.

‘So, what are you going to do?’ asked Daniel.

‘I’m still thinking it through,’ Yu yawned. ‘I really shouldn’t have talked to that Pao Ding, should I? I was even tempted to go to Wong Tai Sin Temple to see what fate would reveal to me, as you had suggested with your usual genius. That wasn’t successful, by the way. Did they report that in the paper too?’

‘No, they didn’t,’ Daniel laughed. ‘But Yu, I have another suggestion now.’

‘What is it?’ Yu asked. ‘How else do you think we should approach the enigma of my birth?’

‘It’s not about that,’ Daniel’s voice turned serious. ‘A few days ago, my uncle mentioned that the bank might recruit some new trainees soon. There seem to be some positions in computer programming. I think I can try to say a few good words about you to my uncle. Nothing is certain, but who knows? This can be a lifesaver for you in case things don’t work out well. What do you think?’

‘Are you feeling guilty over what you suggested before about going to the temple?’ Yu teased.

‘No, I don’t feel guilty,’ Daniel laughed.

‘You don’t?’ Yu said. ‘Still, it’s very kind of you to offer help, but I’ll manage.’

‘Come on. It won’t hurt to try,’ Daniel insisted.

‘No …’ Yu said.
‘Hey, Yu, I know you. I’ll try to talk to my uncle whatever you say,’ Daniel laughed. ‘I’m not a job-hunting agent so you won’t owe me any commission.’

‘In that case, okay then,’ Yu laughed. ‘We’ll have a go. And thank you.’

‘Don’t thank me yet,’ Daniel said. ‘Meanwhile, just imagine you and me strolling down Taipei streets chewing a piece of fried chicken and sipping iced bubble tea. That’ll be fun!’

It would definitely be fun to work in Taipei with Daniel. That would lead Yu back to a proper career path with reasonably good prospects, though he continued to insist that there was nothing wrong with working in Kowloon Funeral Parlour. Yu didn’t dislike his current job. It was just different. But his father did, as did many other people. Father’s resentment of the job was mostly out of fear. He is afraid that I would bring bad luck to the whole family, that we would all suffer accidents. His fear-generated resentment was not new; in a similar way, most Wong Tai Sin residents resented the crazies in the district out of fear. Yu clambered out of his bed and fetched his crutches, which were leaning against the wardrobe. Daniel was cunning at times, but Yu wouldn’t put too much hope on their plan right now. I need to confront Father. He slipped the crutches under his armpits and hobbled out of his cubicle. It felt like stepping from the fridge into the freezer.

He shivered in his thread-bare pyjamas. His mother came out from the kitchen and threw a navy blue silk cotton jacket over his shoulders.

‘I’ve bought you pomelo leaves, Yu. They are in a basin in the bathroom,’ she said. ‘You put hot water in, let them brew for a while and dab yourself with it. All right?’ She patted him gently on the shoulders and returned to the kitchen.

‘Why?’ Yu called out. His mother didn’t reply. She could not hear him over the kitchen’s noisy extractor fan. ‘All right,’ Yu called again.
The pomelo leaves would supposedly wash away his bad luck and all traces of ghosts from the funeral parlour. He didn’t believe in that. Even if the pomelo water was magical, he didn’t need it. *I’m not being followed by a ghost. It was just an accident! But let’s not argue. I’ll do it for Mother; after all, she has also suffered because of me.* The sitting room looked grim. All the windows were shut and the plastic film prevented the sun’s rays from entering. Something caught his eye. A sheet was taped on the door of the cupboard above the television set, where Yu had searched for his eiderdown jacket some time ago. The sheet fluttered. Its ragged punctured edge hinted at anger – it had been torn from an old calendar. Words had been angrily etched in black ink: *Educated rubbish. Reflect on yourself.* A chill wind came through a gap in the window; the corner of the sheet curled up to reveal the calendar of last July on the reverse side.

As Yu had expected, Father’s big word slogans had appeared throughout the flat overnight like mushrooms. Yu found another sheet attached by a wooden peg to the pull-string of the electric fan on the wall. It said: *Liar.* Yu hobbled into the bathroom. Another sheet taped on the mirror read: *Find a Proper Job.* Yu closed the door. Another sheet on the back of the bathroom door said: *You mess with dirt outside and bring it home. Shame on you.*

He set his crutches aside and leaned against the icy sink. He placed the red plastic basin with pomelo leaves that his mother had prepared under the hot tap. The hot stream hit the bunch of pomelo leaves. He threw his face washer into the concoction, soaked and stirred it around excessively. The green leaves in the red basin swirled in a whirlpool. Steam rose above the basin like a mini tornado. He inhaled the citrus scent deeply. It soothed his nerves. He supposed his father always kept old calendars for big word slogans. Yu last saw them was three years ago when he had opened a credit.
account at Daniel’s promotion booth in Wai Chai. Daniel had taken a summer job as a credit card street promoter. The card had been posted home and Father had cut it up immediately, as if he were trying to curb a second outbreak of SARS. The big word slogans then had accused Yu of bringing debts to the house; now they accused him of bringing dirt – death.

Chlorophyll dissolved into the water. Dark green appeared dirty brown in the red basin. More fruity vapour filled the bathroom as Yu stirred. He might have been a sorcerer too! He twisted his washer over the fragrant water and wiped his face. His sin in bringing bad luck into the family was supposedly washed away. He looked at himself in the mirror; the calendar sheet with uneven handwriting covered his forehead. A sorcerer controlled a zombie by sticking yellow curse slips with red ink calligraphy onto the zombie’s forehead so that it would hop as instructed by the sorcerer. Yu might as well take the sheet off the mirror, he thought, dip it in the pomelo water and stick it onto his own forehead. He was hopping too, albeit on crutches. Yu wiped his face again. Water dripped and hit the surface of the pomelo pond. Ripples spread. He held his face over the basin and let water droplets fall. One ripple overlapped another. He didn’t know what he was waiting for. His bruised head felt heavy; the seven stitches on his shin tingled. He felt droplets falling from his eyes. He couldn’t see his future in the water – just a blurry reflection of the bathroom ceiling from which flakes of white paint were hanging.

Then a sliver of white paint that had broken free fell into the pomelo pond. A single ripple spread outwards. The paint floated in the centre of the red basin like a white flower with five petals. It split. Each petal drifted along a different path. They swerved around without obstructing one another, as if guided by a satellite or Pao Ding’s blade. There should be a way to avoid a confrontation with Father. The white
petals paused at the edge of the red basin. Yu remembered his dream from last night. He saw the old lady in the morgue again. She wore the same vermillion gown with a white lily on it. She was tossing bamboo slips. But there was something else at the beginning of the dream – the sound of lucky windmills. He had seen windmills while unconscious. They had twirled around a red envelope in the middle. Yu paused. The Genius of Asia tapped him on the shoulder. If Father thinks that I’ve brought death, I should be able to neutralise the inauspicious air with a lucky red packet – a lucky red packet filled with the auspicious money that Sorcerer Chiu Chow cares about so much.

Yu hobbled from the bathroom into his room. He felt for his white salary envelope between his old university textbooks and searched his desk for a red envelope from last Lunar New Year. He started to count his wad of cash. How much should he give? Yu wished he had Sorcerer Chiu Chow’s number so he could call to ask him. Four thousand five hundred was half of his monthly salary. He could give four thousand, but ‘four’ sounded similar to ‘death’. If he made it five thousand, there wouldn’t be much money left for himself. Yet ‘five’ was sometimes represented by the character ‘proper’. Yu supposed it was a decent amount to pay his father for jeopardising the family with his ‘improper’ job.

He went into the living room with his stuffed red envelope. His mother came from the kitchen holding a tray of fried cashews spread on a piece of red paper – something she did only on Lunar New Year. She placed the tray on the mah-jong/dining table; Yu slipped the top edge of his lucky envelope underneath the tray when his mother wasn’t looking. He could feel Lunar New Year was happening in the Wong family’s apartment. He perched at the table and gazed. He leaned over to adjust the angle of the envelope and took one step back to gauge its visibility again. New Year blessings sparkled in gold on the red envelope. He might have to pay another round of
auspicious money next month if he continued to work in the funeral parlour. He had planned to give his mother a portion of his wages, but the money was going to his father now. The sideboard next to the table was littered with unused calendar sheets. Shreds of paper were strewn around lifelessly.

‘Who’s going to substitute for you then?’ Uncle Bong was angry when Yu called to report his situation. It was the first time they had talked since the incident in the back alley. The old man’s voice crackled as Daniel’s had in his last phone call, but Daniel’s was a long-distance call. ‘We don’t have any extra workers in the funeral parlour. So no holidays, no sick leave!’

‘What?’ Yu was surprised. How could that be? Uncle Bong had just come back from a week’s holiday. He had been to his cousin’s funeral. The old man is intimidating me again. ‘But I’m immobile,’ Yu said calmly. He didn’t want to start another argument with the old receptionist before their last one was settled.

‘Didn’t you hear me? No holidays! I don’t care if you are mobile or not,’ Uncle Bong shouted. Yu could hear the old man’s voice echo in the Hall of Clouds. Then he heard Chung’s voice in the background. He said something to the old man and picked up the phone.

‘Hey, boy, are you all right?’ he inquired cheerfully. ‘I read about you in the paper.’

‘Chung. I’m okay. I just need to take a few days off to allow my leg to heal,’ Yu explained. He didn’t bother to quote Uncle Bong’s response.

‘That can be done,’ Chung said. ‘But you know we’ll struggle with our roster without you. Why don’t you work half a shift for one week? I can arrange some lighter tasks for you. How does that sound?’
So Uncle Bong was right after all; no holidays, no sick leave for Yu. He would even have to limp and struggle to take public transport. But he supposed that was the best he could hope for, even given Chung’s kind nature. ‘Okay,’ said Yu.

‘Good,’ said Chung. ‘As for your accident, you know something like this can happen anytime, anywhere.’

‘Yes,’ Yu said.

‘And you know it can be just a coincidence that you met a madman on your way home,’ Chung said.

‘Yes, I know,’ Yu said.

‘Whether you were returning from work or not,’ Chung said.

‘Yes?’ Yu was curious where the conversation was going.

‘Do you have an Eight Hanger at home?’ asked Chung.

‘No,’ Yu answered.

Chung meant the palm-sized round mirror with an octagonal frame that was usually placed on top of a door. The mirror reflected ‘evil substances’ and could trap or ward off ghosts attempting to enter the house. A human being shouldn’t look directly into the mirror, but Yu had done so as a small boy. Yu had seen a shrunken, upside-down image of himself in the mirror as if he had been sucked into the tiny octagonal well.

‘Come to the funeral parlour tomorrow, I’ll give you one. Put it above the door of your flat,’ said Chung.

‘Why?’ Yu asked. The Wongs had never had an Eight Hanger outside their door. It was too mystical for Father. Even Yu found the ghost trap device too much. ‘We don’t put one of those up. And what does it have to do with my injury? I’m not being followed by a ghost, am I?’
‘Just do as you are told,’ Chung said dismissively.

Yu said nothing. Is it true then? Chung knows best on these matters. If he tells me to put up a trap for ghosts, there must be one following me! If that is the case, the encounter with Pao Ding under Wong Tai Sin Temple wasn’t a coincidence; neither was it arbitrary when I dreamt of the old lady in a lily gown from the morgue. Yu felt his head sway; he looked over his shoulder. He was sitting on his unmade bed and his tangled off-white blanket suddenly resembled a human shape. Like a body wrapped in a shroud.
Yu found Chung in funeral hall no. 12 the next day. Chung cut off a length of white muslin with a pair of tailor’s shears. The chubby middle-aged man was sitting at the head of a chanting bench with a bolt of muslin spread out in front of him – one of the many items they had purchased at Auntie Phoenix’s Textiles. Chung folded the cloth he had cut out and threw it on top of a stack of the same material that had been folded identically. The layers rose a little and subsided. Yu raised a hand towards Chung in greeting.

‘Hey, Yu, have a seat,’ Chung said breezily and rolled up the excess muslin with his deft fingers.

Yu found Chung’s permanent smile comforting – it always was. Yu hobbled along the green carpet that led from the door to the altar across the centre of the hall. He leaned sideways and sat down at the other end of the chanting bench. The black upholstery of the folding chair let out a sigh under his weight. He sighed too. The short trip from home to the funeral parlour had worn him out, though he had allowed
himself a luxurious taxi ride, realising there was no way he could hop on and off mini-buses with notoriously impatient drivers at the wheel. Yu positioned his bad leg to one side. It extended rigidly.

‘Poor you,’ Chung studied Yu’s crooked leg. ‘Does it hurt?’

‘Not after drugging myself with painkillers,’ Yu yawned.

‘And that’s why you are drowsy?’ Chung grinned. ‘But you’ll recover fast. Young people survive everything.’

‘I have no doubt about it,’ Yu agreed and yawned again.

He would survive, but his drowsiness wasn’t caused by drugs. Yu hadn’t slept well last night. He was troubled by Chung’s insidious suggestion about the Eight Hanger. While Yu had been lying awake, he had recalled the first day he stepped through the Cloud Gate. There must have been hints that signalled something mysterious was happening if I’ve been followed by a ghost. Chung hadn’t mentioned anything about ghosts, at least not explicitly. But Yu had skimmed through past incidents and conversations in search of clues all night. A tabloid journalist might be able to relate anything to ghosts but Yu couldn’t find one connection.

‘Chung …’ said Yu.

‘Can you lift these over to the sideboard behind you?’ Chung said pointing to the pile of muslin on the bench. ‘They are headscarves for daughters-in-law.’

‘Okay,’ Yu said. He slipped his hands under the airy garment and turned towards the sideboard behind him. He could do it without moving the lower half of his body. The stack of headscarves was as light as a feather.

‘See, I promised to give you light tasks and I’ve kept my word,’ Chung chuckled. He put down the shears and flexed his fingers.

‘It is light indeed,’ said Yu. ‘Chung …’
Chung stooped to grope for something under the chanting bench. ‘We need to prepare some wardrobe items for the Grateful Sons and Obedient Grandchildren,’ Chung said. ‘I’m going to do some head flowers, which can be another light task for you.’

‘Grateful Sons and Obedient Grandchildren’ was the name for the mourning family members as a unit, assuming they were all younger than the deceased.

‘Chung, I want to talk to you about something,’ Yu said.

‘Yes?’ Chung answered breathlessly from underneath the table.

‘It’s very important.’ Yu wanted Chung to resurface. He didn’t like to appear to be talking to himself in a funeral hall.

‘I’ve been thinking about it all night.’

‘What is it that is troubling you?’ Chung re-emerged with four balls of knitting wool which they had also bought from Auntie Phoenix’s place. A few strands of hair on the right side of his head had arched over to the left side. He lined the balls up on the bench: white, red, blue and green.

‘It’s about the Eight Hanger that you mentioned yesterday,’ said Yu. Then he took a breath and continued. ‘I don’t think I’ll need that.’

‘Why is that?’ Chung asked casually as he tore off the paper rings around the balls of wool.

‘Because I’m not being followed by a ghost,’ Yu said.

‘How do you know?’ asked Chung.

‘Because I haven’t seen a trace of any ghost in the last month – since I started to work here,’ replied Yu.

‘Not a trace?’ asked Chung. His smile broadened.
Yu was taken aback by Chung’s question and his light-heartedness. Yu’s voice faltered, ‘Not a trace.’

Chung said nothing but his smile lingered. He tuck his thumbs and forefingers into both ends of the ball of red wool and pulled out a tangle of yarn from the centre. He picked out the end of the yarn and tucked the rest back into the red ball. ‘Can you do one for me please?’ asked Chung passing Yu the white ball across the bench.

‘Okay.’ Yu slipped his fingers into the centre of the ball and fumbled around. He pulled out a large tangle of yarn. It didn’t look like what Chung had done with his. Yu couldn’t find the end; he saw nothing but a total mess. ‘Crap!’ he muttered.

‘That’s not how you do it.’ Chung held out his palm and Yu handed over the woollen mess. ‘You need to sense the core. Feel the coil of wool inside with your fingers until you find the end.’ Chung loosened the tangle of yarn and picked out the end as painlessly as Pao Ding would have swerved his cleaver around a cow’s tendons.

‘Like this.’ Chung put the white ball on the bench.

‘I see,’ Yu nodded.

‘I know you see. But there are things you also need to sense with your heart,’ said Chung. ‘If you’re just looking for traces of a ghost in your proximity, you won’t find any. The problem is you see everything, but you don’t sense things.’

‘So you sense that I’m being followed by a ghost?’ asked Yu.

‘I didn’t say that,’ Chung laughed.

‘But you suggested me to put an Eight Hanger above the door of my home,’ said Yu. ‘The device traps ghosts, doesn’t it?’

‘It is believed to,’ Chung said, laughing more heartily. ‘Hey, I only work in a funeral parlour. I’m not a Hell guard. It isn’t my job to check the Eight Hangers every day to see if they have trapped anything and capture them back.’
‘What do you mean?’ asked Yu. He was utterly lost.

‘I mean it all depends on you,’ said Chung. ‘It’s pointless for me to tell you that you’re being followed by a ghost that steers you towards danger and you need an Eight Hanger to trap it in order to restore your luck. It is what I believe, but you probably don’t believe in those things – or perhaps you are in denial.’

‘I’m not in denial,’ Yu replied. ‘I don’t …’ He wanted to say he didn’t believe in ghosts, but that wasn’t completely true either.

‘You are,’ said Chung. ‘I’m sure you have sensed something weird around you – you wouldn’t have spent the whole of last night contemplating the Eight Hanger if you haven’t – but you are not ready to admit it. That’s why you haven’t found any trace. I know you’re not used to regarding ghosts as part of our lives. I don’t want to impose anything on you. That’s why I didn’t mention ghosts to you in the first place. You can ignore what I have said if you please. But it is for your own good to note how flimsy is the boundary between the ghost and human worlds, the dark and bright sides on a Tai Chi symbol, so to speak.’

‘Why is it for my own good?’ asked Yu.

‘Because only then can you have peace of mind,’ said Chung. ‘Don’t you often wonder if there is ghost in the funeral parlour and get scared sometimes?’

*That is true. ‘But what will happen if I don’t put an Eight Hanger?’ asked Yu. Would the ghost strangle me in my sleep? Would I bring bad luck to the whole family as Father claimed?*

‘Nobody knows,’ Chung shrugged. ‘Maybe nothing would happen.’

‘So it all depends on me,’ said Yu.

‘Correct,’ said Chung.

‘And it’s for my peace of mind,’ said Yu.
'Exactly,’ said Chung.

Many people put Eight Hangers on their doors not because they believed there were ghosts, but just for peace of mind. Better to be safe than sorry. Yu could do the same, though he was unsure about the ghost, the two sides of the universe, the lot. Would Sorcerer Chiu Chow know better? Would he be able to affirm the presence of a ghost and carry out appropriate rituals for me and bring the threat to an end?

‘Help me with the head flowers, can you?’ said Chung who had abandoned the conversation to lay out a packet of black hairpins and four paper cartons on the bench. ‘We shouldn’t be idle.’

‘Okay,’ said Yu. He too dropped the conversation. He needed to clear his mind a bit before probing the matter of ghosts again.

‘Look. You hold the end of the yarn and spin it around your index and middle fingers twelve times and then clip it with a hairpin right in the middle,’ Chung explained as he demonstrated with the red wool. The coil of yarn at the end of the hairpin fanned out like a red chrysanthemum.

‘Okay,’ said Yu. He began with the white woollen ball. He circled a yarn around his fingers and counted to twelve. He felt as though he was mooring a white woollen boat that was floating on the bench. The lines on the wooden tabletop made brown waves; like contour lines on an old brown map. Not a map for hidden treasures; just one that showed everything so Yu could see. I haven’t sensed anything weird. There was a brown ellipse on the bench next to Yu’s right elbow; it embedded a few smaller ellipses. A brown circle sat in the middle like an eye; cracks flashed out from the ‘pupil’ like bolts of lightening.

Who is angry? Yu’s father’s big word slogans still played on Yu’s mind. Uncle Bong hadn’t asked about Yu’s leg today. The lucky packet containing half of Yu’s
wages had vanished from under the cashew tray. The silence during dinner time last night with Father at the table had been blacker than ever. He has ignored Yu totally. Yu clipped the white flower and cut off the yarn. He placed the finished product in one of the paper cartons on Chung’s side of the long bench. He hoped he still had some luck left. He spun the white yarn around his fingers to start forming another white flower, and counted to twelve again.

‘Head flowers are for female mourners only,’ Chung instructed. ‘Red ones are for the great-granddaughters of the deceased. Blue is for the granddaughters whose grandparents on their father’s side have died. Green is for the granddaughters whose maternal grandparents have died. White is for the wives, daughters and daughters-in-law.’

‘Mourners who are older than the deceased do not wear head flowers,’ a female voice added, ‘because the flowers represent the Grateful Sons’ – daughters in this case – and Obedient Grandchildren’s tribute to the elders.’

Chung stood up. ‘Ms Kim Siu,’ he greeted and bowed to her. His strands of hair flopped back to their usual side as he bowed.

Yu removed the yarn from his fingers so he could fetch his crutches.

‘No need to stand up, Yu,’ Ms Kim Siu smiled. She was wearing a white laboratory coat with the name of the funeral parlour sewn on the left front. She wore a black trouser suit underneath the coat and a pair of flat heeled shoes. She looked professional. With a stethoscope hanging around her neck, she might have been a colleague of Dr Lee. S.B. Hong came into funeral hall no. 12 following Ms Kim Siu. He bowed to Chung and smiled to Yu. Yu smiled back; S.B. Hong didn’t have his handcart with him.

‘I heard of your accident. How’s your wound?’ Ms Kim Siu asked.
‘It’s not too serious. Thank you for asking, Ms Kim Siu,’ Yu said.

S.B. Hong listened attentively and tapped his chest with his hand. He was relieved to know that Yu’s injury was not too serious.

‘That’s good to hear,’ said Ms Kim Siu putting her hands into the front pockets of her laboratory coat. ‘You know accidents do happen, don’t you?’

‘Yes, they do,’ Yu replied.

‘Wherever you are,’ said Ms Kim Siu.

‘Yes,’ said Yu.

‘Doesn’t matter what you’re doing,’ said Ms Kim Siu.

‘Yes?’ The pattern of this conversation reminded Yu of the one with Chung on the phone yesterday. So Ms Kim Siu is also hinting at ghosts but doesn’t want to impose the idea on me. Does everyone who works at Kowloon Funeral Parlour believe in the same thing?!

‘Chung, do you have an Eight Hanger for Yu?’ asked Ms Kim Siu.

‘I’ve arranged one,’ said Chung. ‘It is with Uncle Bong.’

‘What?’ Yu asked a little louder than he should have. He was surprised to hear the name of his old adversary. What does Uncle Bong have to do with my ghost?

‘Uncle Bong knows what to do,’ said Ms Kim Siu, gently disregarding Yu’s awestruck look. ‘And why don’t you make Uncle Bong a pot of tea since you are going to him?’

‘Okay,’ said Yu. That was the apologetic pot of tea to the old man he had promised to offer. He would be able to do two things with Uncle Bong in one meeting – not a happy coincidence. ‘Now?’

‘Yes, if you can,’ Ms Kim Siu said. ‘S.B. Hong can help you since you are not very mobile.’ She then turned to S.B. Hong: ‘Come back to the morgue afterwards.’
S.B. Hong nodded obligingly.

‘Yes, Ms Kim Siu,’ said Yu.

‘Thank you, Ms Kim Siu,’ said Chung.

The manager sauntered along the green carpet and left the hall. Yu turned to Chung for explanation.

‘Ms Kim Siu is the embalmer of the funeral parlour, in case you didn’t know,’ said Chung pouring out some jasmine tea from his thermos. Hot steam rising from his cap cup was blown off by a draft from the growling air-conditioner. ‘You’ll also assist her in the morgue after you have recovered.’

‘Okay,’ said Yu. That was yet another piece of new information; but Ms Kim Siu’s dual function was not his concern right now. ‘Why do I have to go to Uncle Bong for the Eight Hanger? Besides, we haven’t even finished discussing the matter.’

Yu felt a little betrayed as he uttered those words.

‘I’ve already said all I have to say to you. Uncle Bong has lots of experience in dealing with difficulties new employees tend to encounter,’ said Chung. ‘He will help you.’

S.B. Hong nodded. So he had encountered difficulties too. He pointed to himself and stroked his right arm as if to say he had had hurt his arm early on. S.B. Hong went on to narrate the incident, but his hand gestures were so fast that Yu couldn’t follow him. S.B. Hong just wanted to assure Yu that he was not the only one.

‘But how is Uncle Bong going to help?’ asked Yu. His voice broke into a falsetto imagining the grumpy old receptionist counselling him about ghosts.

‘Don’t panic. You’ll be fine,’ Chung winked. ‘You go pour Uncle Bong a cup of tea. I can finish the head flowers on my own.’
S.B. Hong patted Yu on the shoulder and fetched his crutches. Yu stood up obediently since S.B. Hong was in a hurry to return to the morgue. Chung lifted the bolt of muslin from the bench and leaned it against the wall. The brown contour lines on the bench top convinced Yu that the funeral parlour was a strange land where the denizens believed in the interference of ghosts in their daily lives. Chung said it all depends on me. It is for my benefit to acknowledge the presence of ghosts and their boundary because it would give me peace of mind. But can’t my injury simply be an accident? It involves no ghost that steers me towards danger! If I want, I can throw away the Eight Hanger that Uncle Bong’s going to give me. So what? Nobody knows how it’s going to affect my life anyway. Yet, even then, he wouldn’t stop worrying about ghosts once and for all. He was scared of ghosts sometimes. It all depends on you, the Genius of Asia repeated.

‘What is Uncle Bong going to do?’ Yu asked S.B. Hong. They were waiting for the lift. ‘Did you get an Eight Hanger from him too when you were injured?’

S.B. Hong nodded. He drew an octagon in the air with his forefingers. The lift door opened. S.B. Hong held the door, in Chung’s style, for Yu to enter. The light in the lift was dim and the exhaust fan overhead wheezed. S.B. Hong pressed ‘G’. He described with his hands what seemed to be a complicated ritual performed with the Eight Hanger. S.B. Hong’s bony hands flipped, wrote, pointed and moved an invisible object from left to right. Yu gave up; he didn’t have the patience to interpret hand gestures today. Whatever comes. Yu nodded to S.B. Hong and smiled. S.B. Hong pointed to Yu, patted his own heart, imitated a fast heartbeat, and shook his head. This Yu understood: S.B. Hong was telling him not to be nervous.

‘Thank you,’ said Yu.
The lift descended slowly. The wood pattern wallpaper that curled up at the corners resembled another old brown map. Yu wanted to pin a red tack on the wall and draw a balloon next to it saying: ‘You are here’ in case he was lost again. Yu’s gaze wandered to the button panel. The one with the letter B stood for the basement where the morgue was, where S.B. Hong was helping Ms Kim Siu the embalmer today. *Anything has changed in the morgue? I haven’t been downstairs for a while.* The old lady in a red lily gown won’t be there any more for sure. *She must have been cremated or buried long ago – cremated probably, unless she was very rich.* Yu felt for the White Flower Embrocation in his pocket and rubbed some on his temples.

‘By the way,’ Yu said. ‘What have you been doing down there today?’

S.B. Hong craned his head, not understanding.

Yu pointed to the ‘B’ on the button panel. S.B. Hong nodded. He smoothed down his hair and straightened out his uniform. He touched his closed eyelids, his nose and mouth. He stiffened his body like a corpse and threw an invisible blanket over his shoulders.

‘I see,’ Yu said. S.B. Hong had been dressing dead bodies and fixing their appearance. ‘Let’s make tea.’

In the Hall of Clouds, Yu tilted his thermos, which had been thoroughly washed to get rid of any traces of Milo, and poured out a pure stream of *pu-erh* tea that jingled into the Wongs’ New Year china. The amber-coloured liquid glowed against the white teacup, sitting within the tinted rim of the cup like a mirror. Hot steam wafted. Tiny vapours accumulated on the golden rim. Yu lifted the tea by its saucer; three water droplets collided and slid along the inside of the cup. S.B. Hong held Yu’s crutches; Yu held the tea over the counter with both hands. He stood on one leg. The cup
jostled and more vapours collided. S.B. Hong caught Yu’s elbows in time to steady the shake.

‘Have some tea, Uncle Bong,’ Yu said. ‘I apologise for my earlier behaviour. I sincerely beg forgiveness from your big heart.’

Yu was not sure if those were the right words; he had adopted a line he often heard in TV dramas with historical settings, such as *Peking Mansion*. Uncle Bong, who had been filling in his book with snaky calligraphy, stopped writing. Although Yu had been improvising the tea ceremony in front of him, the old man acted as if he had just noticed the young man. S.B. Hong held Yu’s elbows tighter as Yu leaned forwards and lowered his head in a respectful manner. If it were Lunar New Year, he would utter some lucky slogans and he would receive red envelopes in return. He didn’t expect that from Uncle Bong. Besides, the lucky envelope that contained half of his wages had gone to his father. Standing between the white marble stone pillars, He just hoped the ill-tempered elderly man wouldn’t throw the hot tea right into his face.

*Pu-erh* caffeine rose and infiltrated the air above the desk. It smelt nutty bittersweet. S.B. Hong held Yu; Yu held his respectful posture. He saw Uncle Bong’s reflection in the tea. The old man rested the bristles of his brush at the edge of his ink pot. He took his long sleeve in his right hand and steadily held the saucer in his left. His fingers looked like branches of an old maple tree, old but strong. He took the tea as if he had ordered it in a restaurant and a waiter had brought it.

Yu – and S.B. Hong at his side – watched Uncle Bong as his forefinger hooked into the vine-like handle of the teacup and raised it to his nose. The steam fogged the lenses of his spectacles. The old man’s nose wrinkled and his eyebrows rose. He took
a small sip and blinked. The lump in his throat throbbed under the creased skin of his neck.

‘How many days of sick leave did Chung give you?’ asked Uncle Bong. His breath smelt nutty bittersweet.

‘I’m doing half a shift for one week,’ Yu answered.

Uncle Bong put the tea down on the marble counter and cleared his throat. The old man had accepted his apology. He wouldn’t be talking to him if he hadn’t. Yu knew he could count on the Wong festival tea. And since the topic of sick leave was raised, he wanted to ask Uncle Bong for a proper day off or two. That would ease the hardship of having to commute daily. He realised his request could be seen as ill mannered and it wasn’t included in the agenda of this meeting. Would the festival tea be powerful enough to make Uncle Bong adjust Yu’s schedule? A few amber ripples bounced back and forth in the teacup as the old man lifted it for a second sip. The ripples redoubled. The old man put down the cup.

‘Uncle Bong, I wonder if I can have my schedule rearranged,’ Yu ventured, ‘just for this week.’

S.B. Hong looked at Yu, shocked by his effrontery. Uncle Bong didn’t yell; in fact, he didn’t display any reaction at all. He was gazing at the cup of tea. A big circle enclosed a small circle in which ripples opened and closed, reflecting the marble clouds in the lobby. The clouds didn’t flow. There were amber dimples on the lenses of Uncle Bong’s spectacles. He was completely still save for air drifting in and out of his nostrils. Cold drafts from the air-conditioner disturbed the curve of the rising tea steam. A vision was yet to open up in the teacup.

Yu believed the old man was studying an amber vision in the cup of tea, not his sick leave request. S.B. Hong stood and observed with ample patience. Yu, feeling a
little distressed about his failed attempt to ask for days off, pressed the button on the top of his thermos to close it. It made a loud pop, which reverberated in the lobby. He held his finger knowing he must have disturbed the old man and that the button would pop again when it came up. But still the old man didn’t move. A young couple came through the Cloud Gate with a little boy. Grateful Sons and Obedient Grandchildren were starting to arrive to get ready for funerals. The little boy, being dragged along by his mother’s hand, couldn’t walk properly. He tripped and fell. A cry burst out and echoed on the marble stones, shaking Uncle Bong from his passive state. Yu released his finger from the flask; the button popped.

‘The universe bears Yin and Yang. The two extremes give birth to four seasons and four seasons divide into eight directions,’ Uncle Bong said.

*Uncle Bong must double as a sorcerer, just like Ms Kim Siu does as an embalmer.*

‘You do realise a young man like you is a strong Yang, don’t you?’ Uncle Bong continued.

‘Yes,’ Yu hesitated. The initial meaning of the word ‘Yang’ was ‘male’; he just hadn’t thought about himself that way.

‘The brightness you carry as a male gives you power to counter the Yin atmosphere of the funeral parlour. However,’ Uncle Bong picked up his tea and took a sip, ‘your youth also makes you stand out as a vulnerable target.’

‘The target of whom?’ asked Yu.

‘Of the Yin,’ Uncle Bong exhaled. His breath smelt nutty bittersweet.

‘Of the Yin?’ asked Yu. ‘Yin’ meant ‘female’.

‘Forces from the shady side of our universe,’ Uncle Bong explained.
‘You mean ghosts?’ asked Yu. ‘You mean I’m being troubled by ghosts?’ He felt a cold draft as soon as he had asked the questions. The scent of White Flower Embrocation wafted from his temples.

Uncle Bong cleared his throat. ‘I mean Yin,’ he said. His tone was adamant.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Yu, and repeated with extra firmness in his voice, ‘Yin.’

The old man’s refusal to say whether there was a ghost troubling Yu was not surprising. Chung and Ms Kim Siu hadn’t either. But they all believe it is the case.

‘Here,’ said Uncle Bong. He slipped his hand into his wide sleeve and pulled out an Eight Hanger. The octagon was about the size of the old man’s palm. Yu immediately saw an upside-down reflection of himself in the small round mirror in the middle. Streaks of marble clouds were also trapped in it. Uncle Bong put the Eight Hanger on the counter with the mirror facing down. On the back of the octagonal plate, long and short strokes were engraved along the edge. A circle was mounted in the middle. It was divided into black and white. There was one white dot on the dark side and one black dot on the bright side. It was Tai Chi, the universe.

Uncle Bong dipped his index and middle fingers into the tea. The surface ruffled, then calmed. He ran his fingers along the inverted ‘S’ boundary on the Tai Chi that divided black and white and dotted the white dot on the dark side and the black dot on the bright side. The tea droplets sparkled.

‘You must have sensed something lately,’ said Uncle Bong languidly, ‘things that seem unusual.’

‘I haven’t found any, Uncle Bong,’ said Yu. ‘Well, Chung said I see but don’t sense.’

‘That’s because you match explanations to unusual happenings reflectively,’ said Uncle Bong.
‘I don’t understand,’ said Yu. He felt he was about to get lost again.

‘When something unusual happens,’ said Uncle Bong, ‘you may say “It was just a dream” or “It was just an accident” and immediately you rationalise the strangeness of the incident. It can be useful to ignore the existence of the other half of the universe, but it doesn’t work well in a funeral parlour.’

Uncle Bong paused. A team of four women and two men strode the Cloud Gate debating among themselves. A plump woman in a white windcheater was complaining about money issues. A tall, stick-thin man insisted that so-and-so should pay a bigger portion of the funeral expenses. The other man, in an argyle sweater, and a small woman in a plaid jacket disagreed. They stopped in front of the index board to check the location of their expensive funeral. Uncle Bong, Yu and S.B. Hong in their navy blue uniforms must have blended in with the cloudy background because none of the Grateful Sons and Obedient Grandchildren paid them any attention.

Yu looked at the Eight Hanger on the counter. The drop of tea on the dark side sparkled. ‘Why doesn’t it work well here?’ he asked.

‘Because here you’re too close to the other side to ignore it,’ said Uncle Bong. ‘Think about the funeral parlour as a departure hall where souls leave for the other side. We work at the border.’

‘Oh,’ said Yu. The comparison of the funeral parlour to customs was striking. S.B. Hong nodded; he agreed they were all customs officers.

‘You can continue to ignore the other side, but you have to try harder,’ Uncle Bong added, tapping the Eight Hanger with his nicotine-stained fingernail. ‘When you look at the Tai Chi, you see the Way – a perfect balance between light and shade. For us, it was the Way to straddle our living world and the world of the dead. You can’t
do that without acknowledging the existence of the other side and the ghosts that we balance the universe together.’

‘How to acknowledge them?’ asked Yu.

‘By letting your heart sense what is around you. As I said, you must have sensed something unusual already,’ said Uncle Bong. He pulled out a drawer from behind the counter to look for something. ‘Let your feeling guide you, and you’ll find the Way.’

Uncle Bong took a piece of vermilion paper out from the drawer. He flipped the sheet over – the other side was white – and placed it on the counter. He put the Eight Hanger in the middle, still with the mirror facing down, and folded the four corners of the paper over it. The streaks of puh-er on the Tai Chi wet the paper and its redness deepened.

‘Put this in your pocket. Carry it home carefully. Open it just before you hang it above your door,’ said Uncle Bong and handed Yu the red parcel.

‘Thank you, Uncle Bong,’ said Yu and took it in both hands. The thin wrapping crinkled; the Eight Hanger within was thick and heavy.

‘It all depends on you. Tao never forces anybody to follow it. That is the genius of this culture,’ said Uncle Bong.

‘The Genius of what?’ asked Yu. He missed the last few words when the air-conditioner suddenly rumbled.

‘The Genius of Tao, the Way,’ Uncle Bong said and finished what was left in the cup in one gulp. He pushed the cup aside as any grandpa might in a restaurant. The old man had forgotten that the turquoise and white bone china teacup with tinted edges had indicated Yu’s good will. He didn’t mention anything about Yu’s sick leave request. Uncle Bong took up his brush and dipped it into the ink pot. He skimmed off
the excess ink at the side of the pot and resumed his calligraphy without another glance at Yu. Yu supposed he was dismissed.

He pushed the Eight Hanger into the side pocket of his trousers – the one without the White Flower Embrocation – and positioned his crutches. The chunky octagon barely fitted into his snug pocket. He heard a soft click along the seam; a stitch must have snapped. Yu wasn’t sure what he had understood about the Genius of Tao, though he now realised Uncle Bong wasn’t that hard to talk to when the elderly man wasn’t angry. An amber droplet and a few black dots were swishing around at the bottom of Uncle Bong’s cup. S.B. Hong removed the thermos and the empty teacup like a good waiter at the Lotus Scent Chamber. A ring lingered on the marble counter. Yu wiped it away with his palm. He adjusted the object in his pocket and made his way to the hub. Not until later would he realise his hand had been dyed red.
At first it was a tumbling sea of clouds. Through a small round window, Yu saw rolling waves in marble shades travelling from right to left. It was like gazing out of an aeroplane scything through cumulonimbus. Thick cotton balls floated onwards for a very long while before the grey slowly lightened into eggshell. Clouds unfurled into a film of fog, translucent as white muslin. Yu stretched out his hand to reach it. Fine muslin slipped past the back of his hand. He threw the windy curtain aside and gasped. Golden rays sparkled on the aluminium roofs of a five-level pagoda: pink, blue, peach, purple and green. Little bells hung down from every flaring corner of the roofs. They jingled in the distant air. At the foot of the pagoda, Yu found the old lady in a vermillion gown. She was sitting on a round mahogany stool at a round mahogany table. She didn’t have the bamboo cup with her. Her hands rested on her lap where a white lily bloomed. The centre of the table was inlaid with circular marble slate. The sculptured edge of the table formed a wooden frame like a window onto floating clouds.
‘Finally,’ the old lady said without parting her lips – her lips were painted tangerine and curved slightly downwards. Her voice was husky but soft. It echoed. The calla lily on her gown rolled. The metallic bells on the pentagon roofs overhead chimed a little louder.

‘Finally?’ Yu’s voice pulsed. A cold draft reached him and he shivered.

‘You caught me,’ the old lady said slowly.

She fixed her gaze on him. Her powdered face was white and expressionless. But Yu sensed that she was smiling. A grandmotherly smile. Her grey hair bun, the stiff collar of her qi-pao, or the red embroidered slippers on her bony feet all exuded warm feeling.

‘No, I didn’t catch you,’ Yu answered.

‘You did,’ said the old lady. ‘Yu, look at your hands.’

Yu pulled his hands out of the pockets of his navy blue trousers, on the left pocket of which was sewn ‘YU’. His hands turned icy. He thought the old lady with her grandmotherly smile was joking, until he saw blood dripping from his fingertips. He held his palms up. Blood trickled down from his fingers towards his wrists. Horrified, he pointed his fingers down again. Blood poured down in a gush. It wasn’t his blood; he didn’t feel any pain at all. So, what is this? Did I kill someone?

‘Don’t be afraid. It’s normal,’ said the old lady elegantly. ‘Sit with me.’

She pointed to a round mahogany stool next to Yu. He didn’t know how he had been drawn to the table, but he manoeuvred to the front of the stool holding his dripping hands carefully away from his sides and sat down opposite the old lady. In the shade of the pagoda, she looked very pale, as always. Yet there was a bluish complexion to her face now. She was dead but she hadn’t looked sickly. Another cold draft blew. A wisp of hair escaped from her bun and straggled around her ear.
‘Let me show you something,’ said the old lady.

She lifted her right hand from her lap. Her elbow, wrapped in the tight sleeve of her gown, bent like an old twig, but without sound. There were taupe freckles on the crinkled skin of her forearm peeping through a film of powder. Slowly she moved her right hand to the wooden edge of the table and paused. Her fingers were crooked, stiff and scrawny, but her fingernails were manicured into perfect ovals that shone like pearls. Yu rested his elbow on the edge of the table. Red droplets continued to ooze from his fingers, but more slowly than before. As he bled, he waited.

The old lady raised her head to look him in the eye, then turned to fix her gaze on the marble inlay on the table. Yu too gazed at the marble. There was a film of something on its surface – something like vapour, frost or dust that fogged the grey, blue and yellow streaks in the stone. The old lady sat very still. She might have been creating suspense or gathering energy from her stringy body to perform an action. For a moment, even the jingle bells on the pagoda stopped clanking. Yu noticed that the red droplets made no sound as they dripped onto the ground. Then the old lady swiped her palm, crooked fingers, pearl fingernails and all, across the tabletop in one confident gesture. Some of the substance on the marble stone was wiped away. Yu hardly had time to admire the old lady’s achievement before another cold draft hit and blew away the rest of the fog on the marble. Dust, or snowflakes, floated in the air.

Then the cloud started to swirl. It started with the rim of the marble slate where grey, blue and yellow streaks flowed along the circumference. Slowly at first, then faster. Before long, the streaks were chasing one another. When enough kinetic energy had built up, the second track of clouds began to race. As if the old lady’s gesture had unhinged a secret joint inside the table, the slate of marble divided into seven racecourses along which clouds circulated at mesmerising speed.
Yu’s mouth formed an ‘O’. He was awed by the happening in front of him. The old lady hadn’t changed her posture. Her right hand was still stretched out in front of her. Her crooked fingers and freckled forearm rested on the wooden edge of the table. Her dilated pupils focused on the whirlpool of clouds. Realising that his mouth was open, Yu closed it. But a sparkling fluid ‘O’ no bigger than the round base of his thermos emerged gradually from the hollow centre of the marble swirl. It soared like the lost halo of an angel and shone like a splash of water frozen in the air. Yu stared into the centre of the cumulonimbus; a vision was opening up. He saw a hand wipe away a ring from a marble counter. The hand, still damp, groped for a red parcel. The powdery red dye on the wrapping cracked. Crevices shot through the chalky red surface and the colour pigment melted, dissolving into perspiration and seeping into circular contour lines on the person’s fingertips. It saturated the flesh underneath his or her fingernails. Now the other hand emerged, smudging the intense red. Red dust drifted in clouds. The hands took out an octagonal trap. Light reflected on the round mirror and made it visible through the red smog. Then the hands and the trap faded from the picture, only the paper wrapping was left. A draft. The red paper glided along an alley. It stumbled past many broken flowers and avoided the gutters on the two sides. It rubbed a little red dye on the concrete every time it scratched against the ground.

Yu looked up at the old lady in the red lily gown. A few more strands of her hair had been freed by the wind. They rested their curvy tips on her thin shoulders. On her forehead, just below her hairline, face powder had fallen off to reveal a band of beige skin underneath. It looked as if the edge of a papier-mâché mask had chipped. The blood on Yu’s hand had stopped dripping; it clotted around his fingernails like
terracotta. He knew he had just seen in the whirlpool of clouds how he had caught her: with his Eight Hanger.

‘Now you understand,’ said the old lady with the same elegance, but her voice was weaker.

‘I just did what I was told!’ Yu protested. It was Chung who had suggested Yu put up an Eight Hanger, Ms Kim Siu had seconded the suggestion and Uncle Bong had wrapped the thing up. Now it was Yu who had been caught red-handed. He was the murderer. *Oh. Hang on. The old lady has been long dead.*

‘Don’t panic. I don’t blame you,’ the old lady comforted him. ‘I just blame myself. I should have left long ago. There’s just something I can’t leave behind.’

The old lady’s right elbow jerked and her extended arm started to retreat from the edge of the table. The whirlpool of clouds was still spinning, though more slowly, but the old lady didn’t touch it again. She lifted her freckled forearm off the table, then her wrist, her palm and her spindly fingers with their pearls-like nails. She let her arm drop at her side in slow motion; her elbow crooked at an awkward angle. Creases appeared on her red gown. She paused. She was concentrating on contorting another muscle in her body. Yu anxiously clenched and unclenched his fists. Scabs on his hands peeled away. Finally, the old lady managed to free a tendon in her right shoulder on which her arm pivoted. Her arm swung towards Yu. Her palm was holding something. Her head, her dilated pupils and her white-powdered chin followed the trajectory until a white and blue vial stood at the edge of the table. The top of the vial was stuffed with a ball of red gauze. The old lady loosened her grip. The round body of the vial sparkled. The bright rays made Yu giddy.

‘This is for you. I’ve meant to keep it for my grandson but he didn’t come to my funeral,’ the old lady said. ‘You look a lot like him. He is the same age as you. He
was born when a rare bamboo slip dropped onto the ground of the temple – no. 77 – like you.’

‘Really?’ asked Yu.

‘Yes,’ said the old lady as she turned her head towards the vial on the table, which seemed to be dematerialising among flashes. ‘Open it.’

‘It is for me?’ asked Yu, still surprised by the old lady’s ungrateful grandson who shared his time of birth.

‘For you,’ the old lady said. Her voice was fading.

Yu pulled out the lump of red gauze and tipped the vial. He heard something tumble through the long neck of the vial and a shiny brown ball rolled into the centre of his palm. His instincts told him it was a Malteser.

‘It’s a Six Majesties Pill,’ the old lady said. ‘It cures injuries, eases pains, strengthens health and balances the Yin and Yang of your body.’

The chocolate-coloured pellet rolled around Yu’s palm. He tipped his hand and was about to drop the ball back into the vial.

‘Take it,’ the old lady said.

‘Well, I’m not sure …’ Yu didn’t feel it was right to take medication so casually.

‘Take it,’ the old lady mouthed. Her voice faltered.

Yu looked at the old lady. Her papier-mâché mask was cracking fast. Her loose skin bulged above the stiff collar of her gown. Her tangerine lips looked parched. Yu didn’t know how he had become the substitute for the old lady’s ungrateful grandson. Now he knew, deep down, that she was the ghost who had been following him! But he could not hate her for that. At that moment he felt pity for her. He didn’t want to disappoint her.
‘Does this melt in your mouth?’ asked Yu moving the little brown ball around in his hand. He dreaded pills that stuck to his tongue.

The old lady said nothing.

‘All right,’ said Yu popping the pill into his mouth. It melted immediately. A mixture of bitter herbs and bark clung to his tongue as the ball disintegrated into a mushy mass that he tried to prevent touching other parts of his mouth. A strong scent of citrus peel rushed up his nostrils. He wanted to spit it out, but as when he was force-fed herbal medicines by his mother, he swallowed it fast. An intense bitter-sweetness lingered in his mouth. He didn’t faint, glow, or die on the spot clutching his throat. But the old lady in front of him was showing signs of discomfort. She clutched the wooden edge of the table with one hand – the marble whirlpool in the middle of the table had stopped circulating – and her other hand was on her stomach. She didn’t wince, but Yu sensed her ribcage contort and her stomach cramp.

Then, not sure if it was him or her, he felt a crack. The crack triggered an implosion that swept along his spine like electricity. It opened up a chasm in his upper back and sent a vibration through his chest. He shut his eyes. The heat was so unpleasant that if he could just open his mouth and flame would burst forth.

There was no flame; Yu opened his eyes. He didn’t see the old lady sitting in front of him. A slender woman in a vermilion gown was walking towards an archway at the foot of the pagoda. He saw her from afar. Her long black hair draped over her shoulders, the snug gown creased at her waist, the splits at the sides flew, a pair of red velvet embroidered slippers flapped against her soles at each step. She looked ravishing. She was approaching the arched entrance of the pagoda.

‘Wait!’ Yu called out.
The woman held her step. Her face turned to one side but was still shielded by her hair. Suddenly, Yu heard the tossing of bamboo slips nearby. A northern wind blew, swirling many twigs and dead leaves. The red gauze stopper of the vial was caught by a twig and dragged along. Yu needed to catch the red gauze. He jumped to his feet, but felt a piercing pain in his right shin and fell to the ground. A spasm underneath the crisscross stitches sparked teaming neurons on the right side of his body. Tears rushed to his eyes; he inhaled a big gulp of air and held it.

In his watery vision, Yu saw the red gauze cartwheel to the ankle of the woman, who bent down to pick it up. Her snug gown stretched. Her long hair was draped over her profile like a drawn black curtain. The red gauze between her fingers bloomed into a red lily.

‘Did you kill yourself?’ Yu called out to the woman.

The words leaped from his tongue and pulsated in the open air. The woman straightened up and turned to go. Yu, with one hand on a stool and the other hand on his right knee, pulled himself up. He grabbed the wooden edge of the table, taking care not to tip over the vial. Then, a bamboo slip dropped in the distance. The sound of tossing stopped. The wind subsided. The bells on the pagoda ceased their chimes. It was very quiet. Yu felt as light as a feather; the lady in the lily gown had vanished.

A lorry thundered down the Dragon Runway and disrupted the quiet of another early morning. Yu pulled his blanket over his head. His stitched leg was numb from lack of movement. He rolled to the left to ease the pressure from the right side of his body and felt something beneath his thigh. He dipped his hand inside his cocoon of blanket to find it. He felt a vial in his pocket and his eyes opened immediately. He sensed a bittersweet aftertaste in his mouth. He pulled the object out. It was his mother’s vial
of White Flower Embrocation. The blue label on the glass featured two blooming white flowers that looked like lilies. They never wilted.
‘Chung,’ said Yu softly.

‘Yes?’ said Chung.

‘Is it an old woman ghost?’ asked Yu.

‘What?’ Chung looked up at Yu.

‘Is it an old woman ghost that has been following me?’ Yu repeated.

‘You know?’ Chung asked.

‘I had a weird dream last night. I was talking to the old woman I had stayed the night with in the morgue. She was dead, of course. Actually, I’ve seen her in another weird dream before. I think she had never been out of my mind since that night in the morgue,’ said Yu rubbing some White Flower Embrocation on his temple. ‘Is it possible that I have trapped her with the Eight Hanger?’

‘Could be,’ said Chung with his perennial smile.

Chung’s neutral response was frustrating. They were waiting for the lift to go down to the morgue. Chung thought it was time to familiarise Yu with the routine
downstairs. Uncle Bong was cleaning information off the glass notice board with a rag dampened with white petroleum. Chung took out a stack of pink receipts from his shirt pocket and flipped through them. It didn’t seem like he was going to comment on Yu’s dream or the old woman at all. It was still hard for Yu to believe he had met a ghost. It sounds odd to call the old woman a ghost. But what else to call her if not a ghost? Before any of this has happened, I thought that to bump into a ghost would mean screaming, struggling, hiding or running for my life, but this is not how it has been. He slipped the vial into his pocket. For the first time since the idea of working in a funeral parlour had occurred to him, he didn’t feel worried. But will the same thing happen again? Was that a one-off? Should I expect to meet more ghosts because dead souls are always there sharing the universe?

‘So, Chung,’ said Yu.

‘Yes?’ Chung said and they entered the lift.

‘What to do next?’ Yu asked tentatively.

‘About what?’ Chung asked and pressed B for the basement.

‘Ghosts,’ said Yu.

‘Nothing,’ Chung replied.

‘Nothing?’ said Yu. ‘What if they come and trouble me again? Uncle Bong said I’m a strong Yang, which makes me a vulnerable target of the Yin.’

Yu couldn’t believe he was reciting Uncle Bong’s words as if they were his own, as if he really believed in them.

‘Well, I can’t guarantee it won’t happen again. Nothing is definite,’ said Chung.

‘But you don’t need to worry about trampling on ghostly territory as long you do the right thing at the right time.’

‘But I don’t know when the right time is,’ said Yu.
‘We sense as we go,’ Chung said. ‘You know on the Tai Chi symbol there is a white dot in the black domain and a black dot in the white domain. The border in between is fluid. The border changes all the time, but the two sides are always balanced. Uncle Bong must have told you that we funeral parlour people walk the border between our world and that of the dead souls. That is the Way for us and we navigate by our senses. And such flexibility is the genius …’

‘Of Tao,’ Yu finished Chung’s sentence.

‘Correct,’ Chung grinned.

‘But …’ Yu still didn’t know how to sense such things, but Chung put away his pink receipts and held the lift door for Yu to make his way out. They had arrived at the morgue.

Chung pushed open the swing door to reveal a familiar sight of beds, filing cabinets and a penumbra-dappled aisle. But this time Yu saw five well-groomed corpses lying on the beds. There were two old men, two old women and one middle-aged man. They were laid with their feet against the wall and heads next to the aisle. Under the yellow light shining from the tick-tack-toe ceiling, four bodies were covered in blue and red silk blankets, which signalled they had died aged sixty or older. The middle-aged man was in a black suit and tie. He was almost bald. Yu breathed in the chilliness of the morgue, and exhaled steadily.

‘Ms Kim Siu is a top embalmer,’ Chung whispered to Yu as they headed down the aisle. ‘Her skill is amazing. Her delicate strokes make all the corpses look as if they’re just asleep.’

Yet to Yu their ‘sleep’ seemed quite unnatural. He moved past the corpses as gently as he could, making minimal noise as his crutches tapped on the vinyl floor. His mind was foggy; he wondered if he would ever sense anything regarding the Way,
or the genius of Tao. He followed Chung to the end of the aisle and they stopped outside the inner room. Chung stared through the window in the door and knocked. From where he stood Yu couldn’t see what was inside. Chung pushed the door open. A strong smell of formaldehyde rushed out.

Ms Kim Siu in her laboratory coat was standing behind the head of a young male corpse. Ah Tai next to the manager was holding a stainless steel tray containing forceps and syringes. He wasn’t wearing a white coat but there is a steel cart loaded with surgical apparatus next to him. On the bed, the young man wasn’t sleeping – he was staring at Ms Kim Siu with a pair of lifeless eyes. He had been dressed in a crisp pair of khaki trousers, a striped pale blue shirt and brown leather shoes. The clothes were new. There were many wounds on his grey face; deep cuts had been cleaned and were now free of blood. It was a young face, more or less of Yu’s age, with dark eyes and spiky hair.

‘Good afternoon,’ a female voice said.

‘Good afternoon, Ms Kim Siu,’ Yu bowed to her. He had been so absorbed in studying the corpse that he had forgotten to greet her.

‘This is Chan Man Hung, aged twenty,’ Ms Kim Siu indicated.

He had even been younger than Yu.

‘What did he die of?’ asked Yu.

‘Car accident,’ Ms Kim Siu answered.

She picked up the syringe with her gloved hands and drew into it some clear liquid from a steel bowl on Ah Tai’s tray. She closed one of the young man’s eyes with her fingers and injected liquid into his eyelid. First the left eye, and then the right one. She removed her fingers slowly; his eyes didn’t open again. He was now asleep.

‘The water injection weighs down the eyelids,’ Chung explained to Yu.
Yu nodded, then shivered even before a cold draft swept by. Yes, the water did the job. But at the same time, Yu thought he had just witnessed a death – the death of a guy who had been aghast at his early death, who hadn’t even lived as long as Yu. In that backroom of the morgue, Yu smelt his White Flower Embrocation musing with alcohol in the air. The young male on the bed should be a strong Yang like Yu, but deathliness was written starkly on his face. Why? Something is wrong. Over the last two months in the funeral parlour, I’ve got used to the presence of the older generations. I’ve seen funerals held for old people. The sorcerers are old men; all my colleagues are older than me. I thought we – the young, healthy and energetic ones – don’t belong here and funerals are for older people only. But here is this guy, aged twenty, lying on the white bed, dead. He could have attended the same schools as me; I could have had died under the blade of Pao Ding a few days ago. Death was never far away, the Genius of Asia now told him. What about ghosts then? And sorcerers? And rituals? Maybe they are part of me?

At that moment, Yu sensed a reconnection with a part of him that had long been ignored. He wasn’t wearing Sorcerer Chiu Chow’s robe but he could imagine a Tai Chi symbol on his back. He sensed his body fluid flowing from the bright side towards the dark side. Water became murky but was purified and returned to the bright side again. He inhaled a gulp of morgue air and savoured the circulation, the tide, the flexibility. Uncle Bong was right; Yu, a strong Yang, had been blind to the shady side of the universe. And his ignorance had generated fear. That was what it meant to be a vulnerable target of the Yin. The air-conditioner emitted another draft. Yu felt supple and light with his sudden realisation. He was a yellow feather. He flew between light and shade. His senses were his pilot, guiding him along the right path.
The same image of flying would reappear to Yu when he was on the plane leaving for Taipei three months later. He would rejoin Daniel, his ‘brother’, for a computer programming position in a bank, a proper job that would meet Yu’s father’s expectations. Sorcerer Chiu Chow had said Yu’s character was as impressive as the stature of Tai Mountain, that he would achieve something big. Ms Kim Siu sewed up a cut on the right cheekbone of the dead young man’s face with thread and needle; the stitches on Yu’s right shin itched. Ah Tai handed her a tub of ointment and she applied it thickly on the broken skin to conceal the wound.

‘The ointment is for clogging the pores to prevent condensation from forming and marring the make-up,’ Chung explained.

‘But he may not want any make-up,’ Yu said. ‘I think he cares about his hair more.’

‘He certainly cares about his hair.’ Ms Kim Siu looked up from the young man on the bed. ‘As a matter of fact, his parents gave us a tub of clay that he used to style his hair with. Yu, I’ll let you do his hair, after I’ve put a thin layer of foundation on his face.’

‘Me?’ Yu asked.

‘You. I want to let you try,’ Ms Kim Siu said. She pointed to a tube of liquid foundation on Ah Tai’s steel cart; Ah Tai found a wedge of sponge and squeezed some skin-coloured cream on it. He peeped at Yu as he placed the sponge on the steel tray and handed it to Ms Kim Siu. She held the sponge in her hand and turned to Yu.

‘Are you afraid?’ she asked mildly.

Ah Tai peeped at Yu a second time; Chung on the other side didn’t look at Yu but his smile broadened. Ms Kim Siu smeared the cream on the young man’s grey face in delicate strokes as if he were a painted plaster statue that had just come out of its
mould. Yu had never touched a corpse and Chung had reminded him repeatedly not to touch anything last time Yu had stepped into this room. So Ms Kim Siu’s suggestion came to him as a surprise. But Yu felt calmer than he had ever been.

‘No, I’m not scared,’ Yu answered.

‘Good. Come over here,’ Ms Kim Siu said. She had finished applying the foundation. ‘Be gentle. Hair on dead bodies falls out easily.’

‘Okay,’ Yu said and moved over to the head of the bed.

Ms Kim Siu stepped aside. Ah Tai took Yu’s crutches and passed him a pair of surgical gloves and a tub of Gatsby hair-styling clay on the stainless steel tray. The Gatsby hair clay was packaged in a short black tub of octagonal shape, the same shape as an Eight Hanger. Yu put the gloves on, took a little clay, and rolled it between his thumbs and forefingers. The young man on the bed, colour now returned to his face, looked asleep. The bed on which he was sleeping was white like the hospital bed Yu had woken up in after Pao Ding’s attack. Under the tick-tack-toe fake ceiling composed of white foam boards and aluminium bars, Yu was a sorcerer performing a welcome-back-to-reality ritual. He stretched out his hands towards the cadaver’s head. Through the plastic membrane of the gloves he felt strands of hard fibres brushing across his fingertips. The hair was cool, as the body had been refrigerated, and rough with residues of hair products that the deceased had used. Particles of dust were trapped among the hair – dust from the car accident that had killed him. Was it just an accident? Or was it a ghostly sign like Yu’s accident with Pao Ding? Yu heard the voice of the Genius of Asia: it was part of the universe, it said. Yu pinched the strands of hair slightly – taking extra care not to pull too hard – so they pointed upwards like a ball of flame shooting up from the top of the young head. Satisfied with his hair styling, Yu pulled off his gloves and put them on Ah Tai’s tray. Chung and Ms Kim
Siu came close to examine his work. He took a step back. Now the young man wouldn’t feel embarrassed by messy hair when he got up from the bed. But this young person wasn’t going to wake up.

A yellow florescent light tube on the ceiling flickered. Yu imagined the young man rolled onto his side and pushed himself up with his left elbow. His feet, with broken bones perhaps, dangled in the icy air. Then something dropped. Ah Tai stooped to pick up from the floor the octagonal lid of the tub of Gatsby hair clay. The twenty-year-old car accident victim hadn’t twitched a muscle. He couldn’t open his eyes to check his hairstyle.

That evening, Yu stood in front of the bathroom mirror in awe. It had been a few days since he had seen his reflection in full. The old calendar sheet with furious handwriting that had been stuck on his forehead was removed; the zombie was released from the sorcerer’s control. He hobbled out of the bathroom on his crutches and surveyed the apartment. Father’s big word slogans had disappeared from the walls, cupboard doors and the electric fan. His mother was sitting on the sofa folding clothes and watching a TV drama. She hadn’t interfered in the conflict between Yu and his father; neither did she show any sign of relief now that the slogans had been removed. The characters on the screen delivered a funny dialogue and she chuckled. He moved over to Mina’s cubicle. She was writing out a poem with an ink brush. He recognised it was a classical poem written by Li Bai, a poet from Tang dynasty.

‘Did Father say anything to you?’ he asked his sister.

He didn’t mean to disturb her calligraphy practice but sometimes when their father was too angry to talk to Yu, he would entrust Mina to convey messages.

‘Li Bai was a genius, wasn’t he?’ said Mina.
Her response came from nowhere; Yu heaved a sigh. ‘Well, he certainly was,’ he said. Li Bai was an alcoholic. He was mostly drunk when he composed his great poems. Yu remembered having been forced to recite and dictate Li Bai’s poems at school, the same way he had dictated the fable of Pao Ding.

‘Did Father …’ Yu questioned again but stopped. ‘Doesn’t matter.’

There was no point talking to Mina when she was in her artistic dreamland. Their father would arrive home any moment now. *Now that Father’s rage has died down, should I venture a conversation with him?* Yu didn’t normally do that; he used to let his father’s anger fade with time and say nothing. He supposed Pao Ding had boosted his courage. Pao Ding’s butchery had guided Yu to avoid a direct confrontation with his father, using a red envelope that seemed to have bought acceptance. It had opened up a space for Yu to seek a compromise with his father. He needed his father to agree to tolerate his job in the funeral parlour until he found another more presentable one. He didn’t know how long it would take but he wasn’t going to pursue a career in Kowloon Funeral Parlour. He was certain about that. *Why not?* asked that inner voice, the Genius of Asia. *Because it isn’t on my agenda. Because it doesn’t match what I studied at university. Because it shames the family. Because it is not proper. Hang on. What if I stay to develop a career in the funeral parlour? How wrong can that be?*

Mina skimmed off excess ink from her brush on the side of her ink pot like Uncle Bong did.

‘Father left you a red packet,’ she said suddenly.

‘Red packet?’ Yu was shocked by this belated information.

‘It’s over there,’ said Mina looking towards the pile of old newspapers on the other side of her desk.
Yu followed her gaze and found a familiar red envelope sitting on top of the newspapers. Mina put down her brush, took the lucky envelope and handed it to Yu over Li Bai’s poem. Golden New Year blessings on the envelope shone under Mina’s bright reading lamp. Yu saw the top left corner of the envelope had been cut off. His heart palpitated. It was a courtesy he had seen his father perform among the ‘uncle’ clan and people outside the family. They cut off the corners of red envelopes to signal their auspiciousness had been received and that the money inside was returned in full. His father did that to save the embarrassment of receiving gifts from people who were very close to or very distant from him. Or from people he knew who were poor. Yu clutched at the envelope and felt a familiar thickness between his fingers. Such courtesy was so odd within the four walls of the Wongs’ apartment that Yu was simply astounded.

*What is Father’s motivation? What does he want from me? Does this mean he will accept me even if I decide to remain at the funeral parlour? Or has Father given up on me totally?* The wad of cash in Yu’s hand could imply better or worse.

Mina resumed writing out Li Bai’s poem. Li Bai the genius said we shouldn’t harbour grudges because nothing would last – all matters ended when we died. Now Yu was confused; he wasn’t sure about his next step but already he heard keys clink and the iron grill hinge open. The doorknob turned and his father stepped in.

‘Father,’ Yu and Mina greeted him together.

Their father looked straight at Yu – an event as rare as the return of a lucky packet. Mina removed herself from the scene to continue her calligraphy. Yu, who was clutching the red packet, felt a tension headache coming on. His facial muscles throbbed and he didn’t know where to look. He needed his White Flower Embrocation. He needed some time. But he had neither of them in his pocket.
Flexibility, he recalled, was the genius of Tao. Yu repeated Uncle Bong’s words. Pao Ding’s cleaver cut around the skeleton of a cow; his knife moved in a trajectory like an inverted ‘S’. The border separating the ghost and human worlds wavered. But Yu’s father’s gaze was unwavering. It exuded displeasure. *Shouldn’t keep any grudge because we are all doomed to die one day.* Yu turned to face his father. He adjusted his balance on his crutches.

‘I’m sorry, Father,’ said Yu.

‘So, did you touch any dead body today?’ his father asked caustically.

‘Yes, I did,’ Yu answered truthfully.

‘So do you think a red packet will work if I have someone who deals with corpses everyday living under my roof?’ his father asked and shot a glance at the red envelope in Yu’s hand. ‘Don’t try to be smart!’

*So is that why his father has returned the red packet? Because it is useless.* Now his father marched past Yu and placed his backpack on his seat at the head of the mah-jong/dining table. The game show was on TV. His mother looked at Yu sympathetically. She had been listening to their conversation. Mina in her cubicle was finishing Li Bai’s poem. Her tranquillity contrasted with a growing rage inside Yu. It crept up from nowhere and clutched at his heart. He felt humiliated and helpless. His father’s stubbornness was unbending. *What is so scary about a funeral parlour? Even if I come into contact with ghosts, which I’ve done, so what? We are all part of the universe.* His father needed to be educated about the genius of Tao. But this was not as urgent as Yu’s situation right now. *Forget about developing a career in the funeral parlour.* He could see what he had fantasised about a moment ago was unachievable as long as he was still living under his father’s roof. Yu put his hand into his pocket for the White Flower Embrocation, but remembered it wasn’t there. What else had he
wanted before his father came in? His father took off his watch and put it on the sideboard. Yu shrugged his anger off.

‘Give me three months, Father,’ Yu suggested.

‘For what?’ Father asked bluntly.

‘I need to work in the funeral parlour for three months,’ Yu said. ‘I need time to find another job before I quit.’

He had set himself a time frame without realising it. A period of three months was arbitrary. He said that only because it sounded short enough for his father to tolerate. It might or might not be enough time for him to secure another job. He was taking a chance. He tore open the red envelope, folded the wad of cash in half and turned to his mother. He handed it to her; she looked up, surprised.

‘Here is some money I’ve earned, Mother,’ said Yu. ‘It’s for housekeeping.’

‘For me?’ exclaimed his elated mother. ‘Oh, Yu, you’re such a good boy. Giving money to your mother. You’ve really grown up.’

She took the money and patted Yu on the arm, and then went into Mina’s cubicle with a stack of folded clothes. Mother’s exclamation had eased the tension between Yu and his father, who made no comment on what his son had just done. He arched his back to extend the sofa into his bed. He concentrated on spreading out his blanket and putting his pillow in place. With his back to the flashing TV screen, his face was divided into light and shade, ridges and valleys. Bags bulged below his eyes and creases cut into his forehead. His back was bent like the dome of a low hill. Yu’s father was not Tai Mountain.

The semi-transparent plastic film over the windows shut out the chill of the night. The pattern on the plastic looked like dancing fans. I will leave Father’s roof as soon as I can. Did Daniel manage to find me a position in Taiwan? Mina in her cubicle
stowed away her ink pot and brush and put aside her calligraphy. Li Bai said people came and went just as the moon changed its forms. Friends could sense one another even though they were thousands of kilometres apart. Li Bai didn’t observe that members of a family could feel as if they were thousands of kilometres apart even though they were living under the same roof.

Li Bai was a genius.

‘Father,’ Yu said again. ‘Three months and I’ll leave.’

Yu’s father sat on his bedspread to untie his shoelaces. ‘If you say three months, I’ll give you three months,’ he said and then he looked up. ‘Behave yourself.’

‘Okay,’ said Yu.
Yu lost the White Flower Embrocation.

His mother must have taken it when she sewed a new zip onto his backpack. It felt odd not to have the nutmeg, mint and liquorice smell trailing behind him, which it had done over the last two months. How could I have picked up the habit of dabbing the scented oil on my forehead and under my nostrils like old ladies do? Perhaps that has also been a sign of the presence of the old lady in a vermillion gown?

He walked out of Kowloon Hospital with a rolling gait, not used to having no crutches to hold onto. Dr Lee had removed the stitches efficiently. He had been satisfied with his recovery. The wound had healed well. The doctor had said ten days was more than enough to enable a healthy young man like Yu to recover. Yu had met the doctor’s expectation, but Yu felt more than just recovered. Yu sensed an improvement in his general health. He had slept better at night and felt more energetic during the day. He felt less cold in the funeral parlour. He believed something beyond the doctor’s medical explanation had happened. What was the name of the medicine
that looked like a Malteser the old lady had given him to take? The Six Majesties pill.
The bittersweet aftertaste didn't come back to his mouth. This pill cured injuries,
eased pain, strengthened health and would balance the Yin and Yang of Yu’s body,
the old lady had said.

Wong Tai Sin was largely forgotten during good times of the year but was always
there when people needed to ask him questions regarding the future. Yu still hadn’t
been inside the temple to see what would be revealed to him, as Daniel had put it,
about his birth and bamboo slip no. 77, but Yu felt he no longer needed to ask. Fate
could reveal itself wherever Yu was and whatever he was doing. He climbed down
from the bus carefully blocking the way of a few fellow Wong Tai Sin residents, who
were anxious to go home. It was six o’clock and the evening was deepening fast. The
Genius of Asia was always there at the bus stop but no one ever asked him anything.

‘Have you got the post?’ asked the Genius, who had worn a zip jacket on top of his
T-shirt to counter the cold draft sweeping down the Dragon Runway. His white-and-
orange jacket didn’t look very thick; it wasn’t even fastened. Underneath, his bare
legs in tight shorts were exposed.

Yu stopped next to the Genius to give way to a crowd that had just emerged from
the MTR exit.

‘Have you got the post?’ asked the Genius of Asia again.

‘No, I haven’t,’ Yu replied.

Yu too was waiting. He was waiting for the crowd to pass; he was waiting for news
from Daniel, his employment agent in Taiwan. The Genius didn’t look at him; he
didn’t look at anyone but stared ahead. The air smelt of dinner. The scent of rice, stir-
fried greens, pork ribs and fish wafted in from Lower Wong Tai Sin Estate opposite.
Yu had never seen the Genius cross the road. He wondered when the Genius left after a long day of waiting.

‘Have you got …’ asked the Genius of Asia.

‘The Genius of Asia,’ Yu read on a bus stopped in front of them. It seemed the bus company kept overlooking this old advertisement – they should have changed it long time ago.

‘I’m the Genius of Tao,’ Yu said and laughed at his own joke.

The Genius didn’t respond to Yu’s humour; he continued to stare ahead and ignore his presence. Yu stopped laughing and stood next to the young man in silence. He didn’t know how long he had stood there and how many buses had passed. The chilliness of that particular winter evening was soothing. Then, between one bus and another, Yu heard a soft jingle like metal tubes clanging against a disc. Is that the pagoda wind chimes Mina said she heard? He turned towards the temple down the road. All the stores next to the temple were closed by now, but Yu definitely heard metal clinking. It was light but clear, floating by the breeze. Where did the music come from?

A bus stopped to discharge passengers. The light was now too dim to see the advertisements on the buses. The door of the bus opened; a familiar figure in school uniform with a head of shoulder-length hair, bangs and rimless glasses hopped off. It was Mina.

‘Brother?’ Mina stood in front of Yu and the Genius of Asia. ‘What’re you doing here?’

‘Just standing,’ Yu shrugged. ‘Let’s go home.’

Mina nodded. She had been staying late after school recently to paint the backdrop for the annual school musical. She had participated in the school production for the
last six years. Yu had never seen any of her backdrops because he wasn’t interested in attending musicals; their mother and father hadn’t seen them either because the musicals were in English. Mina didn’t seem to care. *Why don’t I put aside a hundred dollars this month to buy a ticket to her school musical and to see the backdrop?* He would go to the show if he didn’t have to leave for Taiwan before that.

The streetlights on the sides of the Dragon Runway flicked on as Yu and Mina strolled down the pavement. In the suddenly bright scene, Yu saw the Genius of Asia dash past him. His hands dangled at his sides and the metal zip on his unfastened jacket chimed in the wind. The Genius hurried down an entrance of Wong Tai Sin MTR station; he would come up in one of the twenty other exits. He could choose the one closest to his home, or he might just roam underground for a while before resurfacing at midnight, when the station closed.
EXEGESIS

Investigation of Estrangement in Maxine Hong Kingston’s

The Woman Warrior
CHAPTER 1

Introduction: On Estrangement

My exegesis explores the ‘estrangement effect’ in *The Woman Warrior*, a collection of autobiographical stories written by Maxine Hong Kingston in 1976. There are five stories in *The Woman Warrior*, and they are entitled as follows: ‘No Name Woman’, ‘White Tigers’, ‘Shaman’, ‘At the Western Palace’ and ‘A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe’. These stories portray Kingston’s personal struggle between Chinese and American culture when she was growing up in Stockton, California, around the 1950’s. The overarching theme of the stories concerns the protagonist Maxine (the author herself?) and her defiance of the Chinese traditional and customary practices imposed on her by her family. The collection of stories portrays her acceptance of western (feminist) standards and the way she negotiates her Chinese-American identity. The narratives are imbued with many translated Chinese cultural and linguistic materials. Such characteristics, which are common in cross-cultural literary texts that are written by authors whose first language is not English, often occasion what is described in literary circles as ‘estrangement’ – an effect which renders a familiar object unfamiliar.

The idea of ‘estrangement’ began to crystallise in the works of the Russian literary critic Viktor Shklovsky and the German playwright Bertolt Brecht. The term refers to a stylistic effect that makes the object appear strange to the reader, thus awakening a new understanding of a hitherto familiar object. Such an effect is virtually inherent in the stories that comprise *The Woman Warrior*. I think that

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2 The ‘objects’ that can be estranged are not limited to physical objects. Scenes that capture human behaviours and snippets of dialogue can also be presented in an estranging manner.
Kingston’s work achieves estrangement effects in two ways. First, she translates and adapts Chinese linguistic and cultural elements – myths and talk-stories in particular – into her English writing. Her translation creates a literary fusion of Chinese and American cultural ideologies, thus creating a hybridity that estranges culture-oriented readings. Second, Kingston’s narratives employ the forms of Chinese oral storytelling which, as a performance art, estranges the audience in the same way Chinese operas do. Thus, her style resembles Brecht’s estrangement theory and practice in theatre.

In this exegesis, I will discuss two aspects of Kingston’s estrangement effect in chapter 2 and 3 respectively. Although these aspects are discussed separately, it will become evident that the second aspect is associated with, and indeed integral to, the first, in that Kingston’s oral storytelling narrative style is also a translation and adaptation of Chinese linguistic and cultural material. But I still separate the second aspect from the first because I intend to explore Kingston’s stylistic arrangement in detail. I have undertaken a close reading of Kingston’s collection of stories, focusing on a stylistic analysis of selected sections, in the belief that it will inform and assist my development as an aspiring writer. Further, the above-mentioned two literary aspects of Kingston’s work can be regarded as macro- and micro- approaches to the same question: how is estrangement engendered from translation and adaptation in *The Woman Warrior*?

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3 Kingston describes ‘talk-story’ as ‘an oral tradition of history, mythology, genealogy, bedtime stories, and how-to stories that have been passed down through generations, an essential part of family and community life’. ‘Maxine Hong Kingston,’ in *Modern American Woman Writers*, ed. Elaine Showalter, Lea Baechler, and A. Walton Litz. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1991), 257.

4 On Homi K. Bhabha’s notion of hybridity see discussion in chapter 2.

5 Although ‘close reading’ pertains to American New Critics, here it suggests a pedagogical approach to creative writing favoured by Francine Prose: ‘a close-reading course should at least be a companion, if not an alternative, to the writing workshop’. F. Prose, *Reading Like a Writer* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 11.
Chapter 4 of this exegesis is my reflection on the creative component of this thesis, a novel entitled *The Genius of Asia*. While I will discuss the estrangement effects in my work, I will also explore an element closely related to cross-cultural estrangement effects: the readership of cross-cultural literary works. Insofar as English is a *lingua franca*, English literary works – regardless of the cultures being portrayed – reach a heterogeneous readership. In her writing Kingston borrows Chinese cultural materials; yet her readership possesses various levels of understanding of Chinese culture and diverse literary sensitivities. This makes the assessment and measurement of estrangement effects a complex and highly challenging matter. In the final section of my exegesis I will discuss how various estrangement effects influence reader responses. In particular, I will be dealing with the following question: what role can a cultural hybrid writer, who addresses a culturally diverse audience, play in a globalised age?

**Translation of Culture**

The Chinese-born writer Ha Jin provocatively suggests that migrant writers’ ‘ultimate betrayal’ of their country – in addition to being physically absent, a fact which is conventionally viewed by some of their countrymen as ‘desertion’ – is to choose to write in a language other than their native tongue.⁶ Kingston was born in the United States to a first generation Chinese immigrant family. In this sense she cannot be considered a migrant-writer who is actually estranged from her host country, either socially or linguistically. On the contrary, she is a cultural hybrid writer who is at home in both English and Chinese languages and at the same time is very much influenced by both Chinese and American cultural elements. Nevertheless, Ha Jin’s

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comment on migrant writers’ ‘linguistic betrayal’ is relevant to her alienation from her mother tongue and her Chinese culture. Ha Jin, who is a migrant writer himself, rejects the proposition that migrant writers should write for their countrymen, arguing that they have no responsibility to serve either their home or host countries with their writing. He argues that when migrant writers write in languages other than their native tongue, they should incorporate characteristics from their mother tongues to create a unique style in their adopted language:

\[\text{he [the writer] must do everything to find his place in his adopted language, including cracking jokes that are not translatable for his native people. In such a case, he may have to sacrifice his mother tongue, while borrowing its strength and resources, in order to accomplish a style in his adopted tongue.}\]

Ha Jin’s sketch of how migrant writers borrow different elements from their cultures and languages in order to conjure their voices in the adopted languages is very relevant to Kingston’s literary achievement in *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston borrows well-known myths and oral stories from Chinese folktales and composes in a style that imitates Chinese oral storytelling performance. As a result, she creates her place in the English language – a hybridity – which is estranged from, and at the same time estranging with respect to, both her Chinese and Anglo-American languages and cultures.

Translation is then essential to a cross-cultural writer’s creative process, according to Ha Jin. It is obvious that if writers from non-English speaking countries want to depict aspects of their home cultures, they have to translate the subject matter for their target languages. A subtler aspect of translation is to adapt literary tropes and

\[\text{7 Ha Jin was born in Liaoning, China in 1956. He left for the United States in 1985.}\]

\[\text{8 Ha Jin, *The Writer as Migrant*, 60.}\]

\[\text{9 On this type of performance see discussion in chapter 3.}\]
narrative styles that are culturally specific. The process of translation into another language tends to bring about, however unintentionally, a transformation of the literary material and, consequently, of its original cultural context. Louise Ho, a Hong Kong poet and scholar, describes how ‘a writer using English to write about Hong Kong sensibilities is, in effect, translating them into English sensibilities: they become transformed as they surface through the writing.’\textsuperscript{10} However, she argues that such transformations do not necessarily result in losses: the burgeoning literary culture of Hong Kong is becoming ‘more problematic as well as more exciting’ through translation.\textsuperscript{11} Such a positive transformation is not hard to find in works produced by Hong Kong writers, for instance, Timothy Mo, Xu Xi and Agnes Lam. The same view is expressed by the Indian-born novelist, Salman Rushdie. In his essay, ‘Imaginary Homelands’, Rushdie says that ‘it is normally supposed that something always get lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.’\textsuperscript{12} As I will show, Kingston’s translation of many of the Chinese cultural and linguistic elements into English in \textit{The Woman Warrior} does in fact enrichingly transform the way they are habitually perceived and represented in the Chinese language and its cultural context. Similarly, the usage of English as a medium for representing Chinese cultural elements helps enrichingly transform customary English language practices. I perceive what is in effect this \textit{double-estrangement effect} as translation gain – one which is central to her unique narrative style.

Before I proceed further, let me review the concept of estrangement as theorised by Shklovsky and Brecht.

\textsuperscript{10} Louise Ho, ‘Hong Kong writing and writing Hong Kong,’ in \textit{Hong Kong English: Autonomy and Creativity}, ed. Kingsley Bolton (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2002), 175.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.

‘Estrangement effect’ in literary writing was first theorised by Viktor Shklovsky’s seminal essay ‘Art as Technique’ (1917). In this essay Shklovsky argues that the main purpose of the technique of literary art is to make objects unfamiliar. The name of his theory is translated as defamiliarisation from the Russian word ostranenie, which means ‘making strange’. Shklovsky’s concept of ostranenie or defamiliarisation postulates that art exists in order to help one recover the vivid sensation of life; it is achieved by changing an object’s form – but not its nature – in a way that removes the object from the automatism of habitual perception. In other words, a writer should present an ordinary object as if it is being encountered for the first time; an artist’s job is ‘to make the stone stony’:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.

Shklovsky explicates how Tolstoy extensively deploys defamiliarization in his writing. For example, Tolstoy describes in his short fiction ‘Shame’ the act of flogging as if he sees it happening for the first time: ‘to strip the people who have

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15 Shklovsky, ‘Art as Technique,’ 20.
broken the law, to hurl them to the floor, and to rap on their bottom with switches.'

Tolstoy’s exhaustive descriptions of the act of flogging, which do not call it by its usual name, ‘flogging’, estranges this familiar event.

According to Shklovsky, the oppositional force to defamiliarisation is habitualisation. Actions and perceptions that have become habitual in our lives go on unnoticed. The contrast between defamiliarisation and habitualisation marks the difference between poetry and prose. Shklovsky’s argument on defamiliarisation is framed by his initial question: ‘What makes poetry poetic?’ He alludes to Aristotle, and argues that:

Poetic language must appear strange and wonderful; and, in fact, it is often actually foreign: the Sumerian used by the Assyrians, the Latin of Europe during the Middle Ages, the Arabisms of the Persians, the Old Bulgarian of Russian literature, or, the elevated, almost literary languages of folk songs.

Foreign languages are strange to those who do not speak them natively. Seen in an Aristotelian way, the use of foreign languages for poetry defamiliarises poetry for its audience. Shklovsky goes on to explain that ‘Poetic speech is formed speech. Prose is ordinary speech – economical, easy, proper, the goddess of prose [des prosae] is a goddess of the accurate, facile type, of the “direct” expression of a child.’ Ordinary speech is part of our habituation, while ‘formed speech’, which is highly artificial, estranges us. Foreign languages enhance the strangeness of poetic language. In our contemporary context, when cultural hybrid writers integrate into their works translated foreign elements, it heightens the estranging quality of literary writing.

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16 Ibid., 21.
17 Ibid., 27.
18 Ibid., 28.
The other key figure in estrangement theory is Bertolt Brecht who examines the concept in theatrical terms. Brecht’s *verfremdungseffekt*, commonly translated as ‘alienation effect’ or ‘A-effect’, was inspired by a Peking opera performance delivered by the actor Mei Lanfang in Moscow in 1935. Brecht used the German term *verfremdungseffekt* for the first time in his essay ‘On Chinese Acting’ to describe an alienation technique he observed in the performance. The meaning of alienation in the essay is rather vague, but it is pointedly anti-Aristotelian with respect to the theatrical arts. For Brecht, acting technique should prevent spectators from feeling their way into the characters. Acting should not arouse empathy but rather promote the audience’s critical appreciation. He writes: ‘Acceptance or rejection of the characters’ words is thus placed in the conscious realm, not, as hitherto, in the spectator’s subconscious.’ The most frequently quoted definition of Brecht’s alienation theory is from his essay ‘A Short Organon for the Theatre’, written in 1948: ‘An alienating (*verfremdend*) depiction is one that enables the object to be clearly recognised but at the same time to appear alien (*fremd*).’ A few years after this definition was put forward, Brecht amplified it into a more comprehensive definition: ‘Alienating an event or a character means first of all simply stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them.’

Brecht’s definitions of *verfremdungseffekt* echo Shklovsky’s *ostrandenie*. In fact, the two concepts are so similar that there is debate as to whether Brecht borrowed his

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20 Ibid., 130.
22 Ibid.
idea from Shklovsky.\textsuperscript{23} It is not my focus here to investigate the origin of Brecht’s idea; rather my interest lies in his description of the practice of alienation in Chinese acting.\textsuperscript{24} He describes how the Peking opera actor Mei Lanfang ‘makes it clear that he knows he is being looked at’ during the performance. Thus the audience is prevented from experiencing ‘the illusion of being unseen spectators at an event which is really taking place.’\textsuperscript{25} Such acting technique in Chinese theatre contrasts with the European stage where actors tend to act as if there is a fourth wall between the stage and the audience, in addition to the three walls around them. Further, the Chinese actor, unlike the western performers, does not ‘transform’ completely when he acts out the role, but rather ‘confines himself at the outset to merely quoting the character.’\textsuperscript{26} In this respect, Brecht writes:

At moments when the presented character is deeply excited, the performer takes a strand of hair between his lips and bites it. That is pretty much a rite; there is nothing eruptive about it. Clearly it is a matter of the repetition of an event by another man, a rendering (artistic, certainly). The performer shows that \textit{this man is beside himself} and he indicates the outward signs of such a state of mind.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{23} John Willett is generally considered the first to assert Brecht’s debt to Shklovsky. He argues for a methodological parallel between the two in \textit{The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht}. His initial argument is supported by Stanley Mitchell, who draws on a memoir by the East German theatre director Bernhard Reich published in 1970. This reports that he was present in Sergey Tret’yakov’s apartment for a discussion with Brecht about an estranging theatre experience they had had. Reich assumes that Brecht became aware of the term ‘estrangement’ at that time (Douglas Robinson. \textit{Estrangement and the Somatic of Literature: Tolstoy, Shklovsky, Brecht}. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, 169). The credibility of this recollection has been challenged: for example, Douglas Robinson doubts whether the idea of estrangement Brecht received at that time was either originally Shklovskyan or reshaped by Reich. Robinson, \textit{op.cit.}, 171.

\textsuperscript{24} In the following pages, I will review Brecht’s observation of alienation in Chinese opera at length because his concept resembles Kingston’s oral storytelling (which I elucidate in chapter 3).

\textsuperscript{25} Brecht, ‘On Chinese Acting,’ 130.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 132.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 131.
The actor’s unimpassioned performance of passionate events involves a distancing of the actor from his role. Brecht gives this further example of ‘quoting the character’: the actor is ‘looking at himself’ while presenting a cloud on stage:

from time to time he looks at the spectators as if to say: Isn’t it just like that? But he also looks at his own arms and legs, guiding them, examining them, in the end, perhaps praising them. If he glances at the floor or measures the space available for his act, he sees nothing in this procedure that could disturb the illusion.28

The performer observes and presents the role at the same time. Brecht views the distance that the performer creates from the role as an artful and artistic act of self-estrangement which generates an alienation effect between the audience and the character and cultivates in the audience an observing, or watching, attitude. The spectators experience a degree of empathy;29 yet ‘any empathy on the spectator’s part is thereby prevented from becoming total, that is, from being a complete self-surrender. An admirable distance from the events portrayed is achieved.’30

Brecht’s observation of alienation in Chinese acting is suggestive yet much-debated. He suggests: ‘The spectator can feel joy at the sight of sorrow, disgust at the sight of anger.’31 Such an emotional response surpasses mere critical appreciation. He describes how a spectator cries out at Mei Lanfang’s gestures while Mei is playing the

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28 Ibid.
29 In traditional Western naturalistic theatre, performers are supposed to promote empathy in the spectators so that the latter feel that they become the characters and experience the characters’ attitudes, feelings and predicaments. I distinguish ‘empathy’ from the related theatrical notions of ‘sympathy’ and ‘identification’. For me, ‘sympathy’ refers to the way spectators feel for the characters whilst maintaining their own perspectives, and ‘identification’ refers to the way spectators understand the characters’ situations in relation to their own. I use ‘empathy’ in this discussion because it is most pertinent to Brecht’s theory. Yet I acknowledge other scholars, such as Martin Esslin, who employs both ‘identification’ and ‘empathy’ in discussing Brecht. Esslin’s argument will be elaborated shortly.
31 Ibid., 133.
death of a girl and several spectators turn around to silence the spectator. Brecht contends that the alienation effect has ‘misfired’ in this case.32

The Hungarian-born English dramatist and scholar Martin Esslin disagrees with Brecht. He reminds us that in traditional theatre from Greek tragedy to the productions of Gerhart Hauptmann and Henrik Ibsen, the audience is supposed to be ‘moved’ by what is presented on the stage, feel pity with the actors and identify themselves with the experience of the hero. Whether the audience believes in the play as being real or artificial, and whether they regard the actors as skilful mimics or suffering human beings, does not affect the ability of the drama enacted on stage to engender identification.33 That is why Esslin rejects Brecht’s idea of marginalising emotions:

In his rejection of identification between audience and characters Brecht comes into conflict with the fundamental concept of psychology that regards processes of identification as the basic mechanisms by which one human being communicates with another.34

For Esslin, identification and empathy come naturally in interpersonal communication; even sport spectators identify themselves with the contestants. It is psychologically impossible for a spectator not to empathise with the dying girl while watching the death being acted out on stage. Esslin concedes that Brecht’s alienation device of rendering only outwards signs of emotion may reduce the audience’s emotional identification to some degree; however, since the audience nevertheless goes on being moved to terror and to pity, he argues that Brecht never succeeded in demonstrating or evoking the unemotional critical attitude he postulated. Esslin speculates that,

32 Ibid., 134.
34 Ibid.
rather than attenuating empathy, Brechtian theatre derives its effects from the
ccontradiction between the author’s and director’s intentions and the audience’s natural
tendency to respond emotionally. It is ‘the conflict between head and heart in the
actors and in the spectators’, as well as ‘the ambiguity between the intended and the
actual reaction of the audience’, that constitute the alienation experience.\textsuperscript{35}

Min Tian, a Chinese-born drama scholar, argues that Chinese acting does not
generate the Brechtian alienation effect at all. The audience in the Chinese theatre,
whilst having no illusion of being unseen spectators, is invited into an illusion
‘primarily of poetic and emotional atmosphere and artistic realm (\textit{yijing}).\textsuperscript{36} This kind
of illusion is different from the one described by Brecht: it is not based on objective
verisimilitude in physical form, but on ‘subjective likeness in emotion and spirit
(\textit{shensi}).\textsuperscript{37} Thus it is false to say that the Chinese theatre arouses no empathy in the
audience. Tian supports his argument with reference to Mei Lanfang’s explanation of
the ‘aesthetic basis’ of the Chinese classical opera. Mei writes:

\begin{quote}
The beautiful dance movements created by past artists are all based on
gestures in real life, synthesised and accentuated to become art. And so the
performing artist has this twofold task: apart from acting his role according
to the development of the story, he must also remember that his job is to
express himself through beautiful dance movements. If he fails to do this, he
cannot produce good art. Whether the character in the play is truly mad or is
just feigning madness, the artist must see to it that all the movements on the
stage are beautiful.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 149.
\textsuperscript{36} Min Tian, ‘Alienation-Effect’ for Whom? Brecht’s (Mis)interpretation of the Classical Chinese
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Lanfang Mei, ‘Reflections on My Stage Life,’ in \textit{Peking Opera and Mei Lanfang: A Guide to
China’s Traditional Theatre and the Art of Its Great Master}, ed. Zuguang Wu, Zuolin Huang, and
Mei points out that Chinese opera actors’ gestures are not simply ‘outer signs of emotions’, as Brecht suggests. Rather, the gestures are developed from actors’ observation and experience in real life, and are then ‘condensed and sublimated into an art of expression in which content and form cannot be separated from each other.’\(^{39}\) Since the actors’ gestures carry references to the actions and emotions in ordinary lives, Tian asserts that the actors who deliver the gestures do not alienate themselves from the characters. Likewise, the spectators who perceive the gestures are not alienated from feeling empathy during the performance. Nevertheless, I think that the beautification of real life gestures in Chinese operas echoes Shklovsky’s notion of estrangement in poetry. Shklovsky suggests that poetic language is a *formed* language which is estranged from ordinary language. He also points out that poetry is designed to prolong the audience/reader’s attention because appreciation is the main aim of art. Mei’s claim that the operatic gestures are beautified actions in ordinary lives, and that an actor’s twofold artistic aim is to present the story and produce sublime dance movements for appreciation, means that both beautification and estrangement involve a deviation from the ordinary. In this sense, while Tian proposes that the beautified gestures, with their references to real-life actions and emotions, do not alienate the actor and audience in the Brechtian sense, I think that these same gestures, with their elevated forms, are estranged from their real-life counterparts in the Shklovskyan sense.

**On Terminology**

So far I have recapitulated Shklovsky’s and Brecht’s estrangement/alienation theories. Although their theories share the idea of rendering a familiar object unfamiliar to the

\(^{39}\) Tian, ““Alienation-Effect””, 208.
reader or audience, the relevant keywords in their theories are translated into English in various ways. Peter Brooker notes that Brecht’s verfremdung has been translated as ‘alienation’, ‘estrangement’, ‘éloignement’, ‘distanciation’ and ‘defamiliarisation’.40 This nomenclature reflects different interpretations of Brecht’s and Shklovsky’s theories. Brecht’s verfremdungseffekt was first translated by John Willett in 1964 as ‘alienation effect’ – or, abbreviated, ‘A-effect’. Willett translates the opening line of Brecht’s article on Chinese acting thus: ‘The following is intended to refer briefly to the use of the alienation effect in traditional Chinese acting.’41 The translation is an odd choice because, since Willett believes that Brecht has borrowed Shklovsky’s idea, it would be more logical for him to translate the term as ‘making-strange effect’ or ‘estrangement effect’ to echo Shklovsky’s theory. Willett renders Shklovsky’s term as ‘device for making strange.’42 Shklovsky’s priyom ostraneniya is translated as ‘defamiliarisation device’ by Lee T. Lemon and Marion Reiss.43 The translation coincidentally echoes the semantic register of the first English translation of Brecht’s term in 1936, where verfremdungseffekt is rendered as ‘the effect of disillusion’; for both ‘disillusion’ and ‘defamiliarisation’ indicate how the artist attempts ‘to break through the anesthetising or illusory effects of familiarisation, conventionalisation and automatisation.44

Among the various translations, ‘estrangement’ and ‘alienation’, despite being the most commonly used, are also the most controversial. According to Robinson, part of the confusion arising in using ‘alienation’ and ‘estrangement’ is that the two

40 Peter Brooker, Bertolt Brecht: Dialectics, Poetry, Politics (London: Croom Helm, 1988), 62. I use ‘estrangement’ for Shklovsky’s theory and ‘alienation’ for Brecht’s because they are well-established translations for the respective theories. As for my discussion of Kingston’s work, I use ‘estrangement’ to refer to the effect of her narrative style on the reader.
42 Robinson, Estrangement and the Somatic of Literature, 173.
43 See above fn.13.
44 Robinson, op.cit., 174.
terms have come to mean two opposite things in Brecht’s and Shklovsky’s theories. On the one hand, it means a passive isolation from the collective sentiment; on the other hand, it is an active, transformative, re-engagement with the communal feeling. The two terms, ‘alienation’ and ‘estrangement’, embed double meanings. Robinson observes that the estrangement effect functions like a Moebius strip:

The purpose of the artistic alienation or estrangement that Shklovsky and later Bertolt Brecht preach and practice is to dealienate and deestrange, to render things more alien and strange in order to push audiences to break out of their alienated and estranged state. Robinson explains how an appropriate amount of estrangement/alienation should be imposed on the reader in order to arouse in him or her a new perspective on the object. If the reader’s ‘emotional-becoming-mental’ perception is divided into two parts, the familiar and the strange, estrangement is effected by contaminating the former with the latter, and perhaps the latter with the former. The premise here is that whilst excessive familiarity is numbing and deadening, too much strangeness is disturbing and makes the experience unreal. By regulating the two extremes, the writer revives the reader’s sensation towards an over-familiar subject. It is a process of returning from alienation to de-alienation, from estrangement to de-estrangement. For this reason, Robinson prefers ‘defamiliarisation’ and ‘disillusion’ to ‘estrangement’ and ‘alienation’. The former are neater because they can be divided into binary notions of familiarisation/de-familiarisation and illusion/disillusion, while the pair ‘estrangement’ and ‘alienation’ entails semantic overlaps. In Robinson’s words, ‘the

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46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 99.
estrangement of estrangement and the alienation of alienation are steeped – mired, some would say – in dialectical strange/familiar and alien/own complication.⁴⁸

Peter Brooker argues against the translation of *verfremdung* as ‘alienation device’ because of the political implications of the term. He points out that ‘alienation’ in Marxism describes ‘the condition of dehumanised labour and social relations under capitalism’ – the very condition that Brecht wished to transcend.⁴⁹ The artistic device of *verfremdung* is the essence of Brecht’s ‘epic’ theatre.⁵⁰ The narrative content signalled by Brecht’s ‘epic’ is to be communicated in a ‘dialectical, non-illusionist and non-linear manner, declaring its own artifice as it hoped also to reveal the workings of ideology.’⁵¹ *Verfremdung* in Brecht’s ‘epic’ is a weapon working to disclose and critique alienation in a Marxist sense. This artistic device is supposedly consistent with the operations of dialectical materialism: the desired effect is to trigger change in the material world by promoting non-habitual ‘interpretations’ in the analogous, experimental world of the theatre.⁵² Brooker suggests that ‘de-familiarisation’ or ‘estrangement’, understood as more than purely formal devices, are more accurate terminological reflections of Brecht’s intentions, and that an even better translation is ‘de-alienation’.⁵³

The similarity between Brooker and Robinson’s ideas about translating Brecht’s concepts, and Robinson’s views about translating Shklovsky’s, is that they all focus on the presence of alienation/estrangement in the audience and/or reader’s perception, before the influence of the artist’s rendition takes effect. If the aim of the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 174.
⁵⁰ Brecht wrote in his *A Short Organum for the Theatre*, ‘The exposition of the story and its communication by suitable means of alienation constitute the main business of the theatre.’ (Willett, *Brecht on Theatre*, 202)
⁵¹ Booker, op.cit., 191.
⁵² Ibid., 186. An entry in Brecht’s *Arbeitsjournal* stated that ‘it is clear that a theatre of *Verfremdung* is a dialectical theatre.’ (Ibid., 193)
⁵³ Ibid., 193.
artistic device is to revive human sensations, to name it ‘alienation’ or ‘estrangement’ is unsuitable. In order to revive human sensations, the artist first needs to estrange the object in a way that leaves it still recognisable to the audience and reader. Thus it can be seen that the nomenclature of Brecht’s and Shklovky’s theories is a complex issue indeed.

Robinson’s reading of estrangement theory raises some practical issues. According to Robinson’s somatic comparison, a right ‘dosage’ (his metaphor) of strangeness should be injected to the estranged readers in order to re-familiarise them with the object. The question is: how much estrangement is the right amount? Robinson points out that while too small a dose has no effect, too large a dose will alienate the audience further. He elaborates his view with reference to the same flogging description from Tolstoy’s ‘Shame’ that Shklovsky quoted in ‘Art as Technique’. Tolstoy estranges the action of flogging by constructing vivid images of it. Robinson argues that the reader may thus be so removed from the ordinary way of seeing things as to find the description realistic and hilarious, or so habitualised to the ordinary as to find the description unrealistic and frightening. Both depersonalisation (removal) and habitualisation occur when the perception of things is automatised – that is, when the reader is estranged. The estranging description of flogging may push the estranged reader either to de-automatise, as intended in Shklovsky’s theory, or to automatise further. Such are the unpredictable dynamics of the estrangement technique. Thus, Robinson explains that a precise regulation of estranging dosage is impossible, given the complexity of the somatics of literary

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54 Robinson, *Estrangement and the Somatic of Literature*, 97
55 Ibid.
57 Depersonalisation is a recognised medical condition characterised by a pervasive sense of strangeness, foreignness, unreality, not-rightness (Robinson, *op.cit.*, 45). Vadim Rudnev suggests that because Tolstoy was trapped in the literary and social conventions which he hated, estrangement in his work became a depersonalising strategy for making the semiotic liveable (Robinson, *op.cit.*, 47).
response. He writes: ‘What is just right for some readers or viewers will alienate others; what is just right for those ideal readers or viewers today may alienate them tomorrow.’ But Shklovsky does not raise the problem of predicting the reader’s responses in his estrangement theory. This unresolved problem shows that however artful the writers’ and actors’ techniques in conjuring an estranging style of expression, its effect also depends upon the audience’s habits of reception.

In sum, Shklovsky’s theory suggests that estrangement is a quality that requires artfulness in poetic language. Brecht’s notion of alienation in theatre is a style of performing that distances the audience with the intention of stimulating critical response in them. Shklovsky and Brecht laid the foundations of estrangement theory. In practice, as I will show, the execution of estrangement effects depends upon the reader/audience’s initial familiarity with the object.

In the next chapter, I will discuss The Woman Warrior as a cultural hybrid text that produces estrangement effects, and review the reception of the text among literary critics.

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58 Ibid., 97.
59 Ibid., 99.
CHAPTER 2

Translation and Estrangement Effect in *The Woman Warrior*

*The Woman Warrior* is a rich literary repository which contains an unusual amalgam of various Chinese and Western materials. In each of her well-crafted stories Kingston skilfully weaves in many distinctive Chinese cultural materials – well-known myths, folk stories, even prominent features of the (Chinese) language itself (such as, lexica and tropes) – along with standard features and techniques that are necessary for creating a story in the English language. The result can be partially likened to a patterned cloth or tapestry. In her discursive movement and free-form she creates an asymmetrical design which is more like Classical music than familiar symmetrical literary patterns. Indeed, Kingston’s strategy for designing a collection of stories that encompasses two different sets of cultural ideologies resembles the Western musical concepts of Polyphony and Counterpoint. In postcolonial literature such fusion of elements of different cultures and identities is normally referred to as hybridity – or, the rhetoric of hybridity.

I believe that the effect of mixing different cultural elements and, thus, aspects of ethnic identity, helps to produce the ‘estrangement’ effect discussed in the previous chapter. Hybridity transforms cultures and identities; it imparts new dimensions and meanings to ethnic-cultural materials when they become integral constituents of the hybrid text. To put it another way: the hybrid text ‘estranges’ such materials from their original cultural context. Consequently, these materials have an estranging impact on the reader, who must now work hard to interpret them.

In the following pages I will examine how Kingston’s translation of Chinese materials in *The Woman Warrior* creates a textual condition of cultural hybridity. I
will first present previous scholarly arguments regarding translation and cultural hybridisation in Kingston’s work. Then I will look at literary critics’ responses to The Woman Warrior and the way they experience estrangement within Kingston’s text.

Let me begin by defining and clarifying the notion of cultural hybridity in more detail. The term ‘hybridity’ in the context of post-colonial studies refers to an interstitial state between fixed identifications which entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.¹ Post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha proposes that ‘all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity’.² He further suggests that cultures constantly represent and reproduce themselves in the act of cultural translation.³ The unceasing hybridising process of cultures suggests that the ‘original’ culture is never complete in and of itself, and that there is no traceable moment when a new culture emerges from two ‘original’ cultures. That is why all forms of culture are continually in a state of re-assimilation and collaboration. Such is the condition of hybridity. For Bhabha, the importance of hybridity is that it bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it, just like a translation, so that hybridity puts together the traces of certain other meanings or discourses […] The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.⁴

It is important to note that a hybrid space, as well as combining aspects of different cultures, contains a productive capacity to bring about newness – a new form of

¹ Homi K. Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994), 4.
³ ‘Translation’ in this regard does not refer to literary translation that involves two texts from different languages and cultures. Rather, it refers to the ‘movement of meaning, the principle and practice of a communication.’ Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 228.
⁴ See Bhabha, ‘The Third Space’, 211.
‘culture’ that can articulate its condition of hybridity. In this sense, the state of hybridity is an alien territory; it estranges existing forms of culture.\[^5\]

The notion of estrangement in the context of cultural hybridity has much in common with estrangement as a literary technique.\[^6\] In the process of cultural hybridising, estrangement can function as a subversive force that challenges the normalised distribution of cultural and political power as reflected and expressed through representation: ‘The strategies of hybridisation reveal an estranging movement in the “authoritative”, even “authoritarian” inscription of the cultural sign’.\[^7\] It opens up a new space for renegotiating and reconstructing familiar cultural phenomena. Such intrinsic estranging movement in cultural hybridity resembles, and can utilise, the defamiliarising mechanism of estrangement as a narrative technique. Where it is intentional, the aim of estranging movement in a hybrid space is to create a new form of culture – one that eliminates conventional cultural divisions and encompasses disparate cultural groups. This is initially achieved by estranging the habitualised assumptions of cultural supremacy. As a result, this estranging process also revitalises the existing cultures with new meanings and new possible interpretive understandings.

The concept of cultural hybridity in a literary context describes the composition of literary texts written by authors who use non-native languages to write about their home cultures.\[^8\] Chinese materials, such as myths and oral stories, are fundamental constituents of *The Woman Warrior*. Nevertheless, these materials have undergone a major transformation as a result of being translated into English. They have been

\[^5\] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 38.

\[^6\] The concept of estrangement as a literary technique is theorised by Shklovsky and Brecht; see discussion in chapter 1.


\[^8\] Bhabha (*The Location of Culture*, 225-7) considers Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* a good example of cultural hybridity.
rephrased, reshaped and adapted in the light of Kingston’s literary needs and intentions. The result, which is deeply inflected with Kingston’s hybrid Chinese-American identity, seems to relate only obliquely, and with marked distortion, to the original culture they purport to represent and explain. Since hybridity naturally estranges, Kingston’s translation and integration of Chinese materials in fact estranges aspects of both Chinese and American culture. In a case like this, as I have already noted, estrangement is also shaped by artistic intention. In particular, as I will discuss in chapter 3, Kingston’s stylistic choice of adapting Chinese oral storytelling narrative techniques creates estrangement. In other words, such conscious strategic literary arrangement contributes to the overall estrangement effect in her text – in addition to the intrinsically estranging quality of her cultural hybrid situation.

In terms of reader reception, Kingston’s hybrid text will have an estranging effect for all readers – regardless of whether their ideologies are conditioned by Chinese (source) or American (target) cultural contexts. I will further elaborate on this point in the later section of this chapter by examining literary reviewers’ responses to the text.

Hybridity in The Woman Warrior

The formation of hybridity in Kingston’s text is particularly obvious in her translation of Chinese myths and oral stories (which she calls talk-stories). For example, in ‘White Tiger’ she weaves into the narrative the myths of the warriors Ngak Fei and Fa Mulan; similarly, she weaves the story of the poetess Ts’ai Yen into ‘A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe’. Kingston also translates and retells her mother’s talk-stories in her narratives. For instance, she adapts her mother’s ghost-combating story ‘Shaman’ and the story about a drowned woman in the family in ‘No Name Woman’.
Kingston’s translation and adaptation of Chinese myths has been branded by some as inaccurate and distorting. She replies:

Sinologists have criticised me for not knowing myths and for distorting them, pirates correct my myths, revising them to make them conform to some traditional Chinese version. They don’t understand that myths have to change, be useful or be forgotten. Like the people who carry them across oceans, the myths become American. The myths I write are new, American.9

For Kingston myths are malleable and elastic; as they travel across regions and cultures they can be changed and adapted to suit different purposes and diverse contexts. When she translates the myths to English and adapts them to depict her Chinese American life, the myths transform as they are borne across social, cultural and linguistic boundaries. The myths that she borrows had been borne by her parents from China to America and passed on to her mostly through oral storytelling. In this sense, the translation and transformation process of the original Chinese myths started before Kingston picked up the pen:

China narrative in *The Woman Warrior* is, first of all, translated from personal experience into a narrative of recollection. Her mother’s China narrative, based on the recollection of her direct experience of China, is transfigured into a ‘historical’ text. That text is further reconfigured in the American context into her daughter’s bicultural text that consists of recapitulation of her mother’s talk-stories.10

Kingston’s knowledge of China and Chinese myths is informed by her mother’s narratives about China. When Kingston translates and adapts her mother’s China

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narratives to recount her Chinese American childhood, her narrative becomes ‘a translation of a translation – in fact, a cultural reconstruction’. In this process of narrative ‘reconstruction’, Kingston is forced to conjure up her own vision of Chinese culture based largely on her mother’s recollection of China narratives, whilst simultaneously integrating them into a new cultural context which reflects her American experience. The reconstruction can also be seen as a ‘creative fusion’ that is indebted to the ‘original’ Chinese culture which in its turn is reinvigorated by interacting with another culture.

An interesting example of this process of cultural reconstitution occurs in ‘No Name Woman’, where Kingston retells the story of a nameless aunt who allegedly committed adultery and, out of shame, put an end to her life. In this instance, Kingston strips the no-name woman of her traditional Chinese persona and presents her in a western aspect. In one version of the retelling, she portrays her aunt as a latent feminist who plays a subtle but active part to fulfil her sexual desire. Kingston describes how the no-name woman puts on beautiful clothes and sits in front of the mirror for hours to arrange her hair in order to attract the attention of the man she desires. Such behaviour is contrary to that of traditional Chinese women who are expected to be passive, subordinate to men, and reserved in matters of sexual desire.

Such ‘Americanisation’ of a Chinese female character typifies one variety of hybridity in Kingston’s text, and is part of a conscious attempt at cultural re-imagINATION and re-evaluation. The revision of myths brought about by her process of cultural translation should not be regarded as distortion or betrayal. On the contrary, such an act of translation is actually a major component of ‘formation’ as I have described it above. Such revisioning of myth is best described as a process of

11 Ibid.
12 Stella Bolaki, “‘It translated well’: The Promise and the Perils of Translation in Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior,” MELUS 34 no. 4 (2009): 40.
displacement, which creates spaces, especially insofar as such a process is heavily informed by authorial awareness of cultural interactions and linguistic challenges. We might even describe Kingston’s oeuvre as a movement of de-formed consciousness towards the restoration of something that has been lost. Such a lost-and-found process is the basis of Martha J. Cutter’s reading of The Woman Warrior.

Cutter describes translation and its concomitant reconstruction in ethnic-American writing as a ‘lost-and-found space’ that ‘allows for loss, recuperation and recovery, and finally the continual exchange and reformulation of diverse and often divergent cultural and linguistic entities’. 13 Cutter believes that Maxine the protagonist progresses from a ‘literal’ to a ‘metaphorical’ understanding of translation – or, as she puts it, towards ‘writerly’ translation. 14 Such changes in Maxine’s understanding of translation are prominent in the last story of the collection ‘A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe’. In the earlier section of the story, Maxine experiences the impossibility of translating Chinese culture into English. She is reluctant to explain to the pharmacist the Chinese custom of using candy to redeem the error of sending medicines to the wrong family. Note the following exchange:

‘You get reparation candy,’ she [Maxine’s mother] said. ‘You say, “You have tainted my house with sick medicine and must remove the curse with sweetness.” He’ll understand.’

‘He didn’t do it on purpose. And no, he won’t, Mother. They don’t understand stuff like that. I [Maxine] won’t be able to say it right. He’ll call us beggars.’

14 Willis Barnstones speaks of ‘writerly’ translation as creative and imaginative, rather than passive, literal and constrained. Writerly translation might also suggest the notion of coauthorship (Ibid., 32).
‘You just translate.’ She searched me to make sure I wasn’t hiding any money.15

Maxine soon opens up a new horizon for translating her dual cultural heritage and values in a creative manner. The story of Ts’ai Yen that she re-tells (from what she heard from her mother) at the end of ‘A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe’ concerns a Chinese poetess. The poetess matches Chinese lyrics to the sound of the barbarians’ reed pipe weapons, which she mistakes for their music. Later, she brings her ‘songs’ back to China and they are sung with Chinese instrumental musical accompaniment. Ts’ai Yen’s songs are products of hybridity: the poetess transcribes the noise of the barbarian’s reed pipe into musical notes and then matches Chinese words to its melody. Finally, the newly created compositions are adapted for performance with Chinese musical instruments. Ts’ai Yen’s hybrid songs are new creations imbued with a unique artistic sensibility. The story of Ts’ai Yen implies protagonist Maxine’s realisation that creativity is necessarily involved in translation:

These characters [in Chinese American texts] finally realise that it is precisely their divergent cultural/linguistic heritages that engender the ability to produce new meanings, new stories, writerly translations that break down the binary opposition between the ethnic and the American, enriching and finally re-creating both cultural terrains.16

What Cutter calls the loss-and-found trajectory in protagonist Maxine’s understanding of translation sheds light on the development of her hybrid self – a self that is essential for her survival within the space created by her incongruent cultural belongings. The protagonist Maxine’s metaphorical/writerly translation resembles

16 Cutter, Lost and Found, 33.
Bhabha’s concepts of cultural translation and hybridisation: her approach highlights the way cultural aspects undergo necessary transformations when they transmigrate to another cultural context.

Moreover, given that *The Woman Warrior* is autobiographical, Maxine’s approach to translation in the narration of her cultural hybrid life reflects Kingston’s situation as a cultural hybrid writer. Cutter pays much attention to the way source language is transformed – or, as I would put it, *estranged* – in translation. In addition, she suggests that the English language in ethnic-American literature is ‘refashioned’ by transmigrated tongues and transcoded ethnicity.\(^{17}\) Accordingly, translation in ethnic-American literary texts should not be taken as an actual lexical practice but as a trope.\(^{18}\) A trope in this sense negotiates ethnic identities, language practices and ways to accommodate other cultures in the English language.\(^{19}\) For instance, throughout *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston’s mother speaks in Chinese, yet her dialogue is represented in English. Kingston’s translation creatively captures the textures and themes of these Chinese dialogues. This means that the writer’s struggle over translation in the text is not represented lexically or linguistically, but rather thematically.\(^{20}\) Thus, translation as a trope is estranging because it not only transcodes ethnicity, but also transcodes the extracted *meaning* of the ethnic tongue.\(^{21}\) The ethnic tongue becomes part of the texture of the target language:

Translation may also create a new mode of speech that exceeds the original dialects or code of which it is comprised. […] A successful translation takes account of the ‘source text’ (the original world and language) but also re-

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 10.
\(^{18}\) Cutter’s comments regarding translation as a trope resemble Bhabha’s notion of cultural translation. See fn. 3.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 5.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 5.
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 7.
creates this sources text so that it admits of a new reality (the ‘target’ world and culture).\textsuperscript{22}

The ‘new mode of speech’ means that target language might be challenged and transformed in translation, and hence \textit{estranged}. Cutter’s notion of translation not only resembles Bhabha’s concept of hybridity; it also resembles Lawrence Venuti’s resistant translation approach and Samia Mehrez’s analysis of post-colonial translations. Their theories, which I discuss next, shed more light on how Kingston’s translation of Chinese cultural materials engenders a hybridity in her text and how it brings about an estranging movement that distances the translation from both the Chinese and American cultural and linguistic contexts.

\textit{Foreignisation and a Language ‘In-Between’}

Lawrence Venuti’s concept of resistant translation – or, foreignisation – is the best place to start when examining the process of creation of a cultural hybrid text. The ‘foreignising’ translation approach emphasises the process of translation and the preservation of the ‘original’ ethnic features presented in the foreign text. Here the translator refuses to eliminate some conspicuous characteristics of the distinctive cultures involved when he or she comes to transcode them into the target language and culture. That is, the translator preserves cultural details which can only be intelligible and coherent in their ‘native’ cultural context, and to those who are familiar with that culture. They cannot be intelligible and coherent within the context of the target culture and language. This idea stands in stark opposition to the theory of Italian translator William Weaver who advocates the ‘invisibility of the translator’, whereby the translator should strive to conceal the fact that the work was originally

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
written in another language. Thus, while Weaver’s translation strategy aims to obliterate the differences between the source and target languages, Venuti believes that the translator’s activity should be transparent, reflecting the differences between the source and target languages. Foregrounding differences in this way produces estrangement – it estranges both the target language and target culture. Venuti argues that the target language is that of the dominant culture; it is the language of hegemony. He writes:

Resistant strategies preserve the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text by producing translations which are strange and estranging, which mark the limits of dominant values in the target-language culture and hinder those values from enacting an imperialistic domestication of a cultural other.

For Venuti, the foreignising translation approach generates the estrangement effect in the dominant target language. A similar approach is advocated by Samia Mehrez. She argues that postcolonial bilingual writers should try to create an ‘in-between’ language in order to occupy the ‘in-between’ space which is created as a result of using the ex-colonizer’s language as their medium of literary expression. She thinks that this can be done by means of challenging the ‘indigenous, conventional models as well as the dominant structures and institutions of the colonizer.’ I find Mehrez’s model of liminal ‘in-between-ness’ very appropriate for Kingston’s cultural hybrid situation even though Kingston is not a postcolonial writer, because the argument remains convincing when the notion of a power struggle between the

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24 Ibid., 13.
25 Bhabha (‘Culture’s In-Between’, 54) uses the phrase ‘in-between’ to describe a partial culture, or hybridity, which is ‘the contaminated yet connective tissue between cultures.’
colonialist and postcolonial writers is transposed to the situation of the host country and immigrant writers. These two axes of connection display the same tension between central and periphery, dominance and subordination. Mehrez contends that when postcolonial writers use the language of their ex-colonisers, they forge a new language – one that subverts the former hierarchical division between the colonizer and the colonised.27 Yet this does not mean that the language of the Other (that is, the language of postcolonial bilingual writers who master both their mother tongue and the ex-colonizer’s language) needs to be unrecognisable or distorted. She explains that the process of forging a new language for post-colonial writers as one where

the language of the Other comes to encode messages which are not readily decoded by the monolingual reader whose referential world continues to exclude, ignore, and deny the existence of other referential worlds that are crucial to a more ‘global’ rather than ‘colonialist’, ‘imperialist’ reading of the text [of the post-colonial writer].28

The effect of postcolonial plurilingual texts on monolingual readers echoes Venuti’s concept of foreignisation. Such writers retain, to some extent, cultural and linguistic characteristics that are not normally seen in the ex-colonizer’s language. As a result, when post-colonial writers come to use the language of the former colonial power, they create a situation in which monolingual readers of the target language cannot readily decode the message that is encoded in their native language. Mehrez does not term this condition as ‘estrangement’ to such a group of readers. Nevertheless, the presence of other cultural and linguistic features in these texts resembles foreignised translation which Venuti regards as ‘strange and estranging’.29 Note that Mehrez’s

27 Ibid., 122.
28 Ibid.
account of the ‘in-between space’ in post-colonial writing closely resembles Bhabha’s concept of ‘hybridity’. Both see translation and integration of different cultural and linguistic elements as a process of creating a new space – one which is distinct from the ‘original’ forms of these cultures and languages. ‘Hybridity’ according to Bhabha contains an integral estranging movement which alienates the original cultural forms. I think that the same estranging effect is found in Mehrez’s ‘in-between’ space. Inevitably, such space estranges monolinguals of the former colonial powers from their native languages.

Mehrez’s concept of ‘in between-ness’ is estranging because Mehrez proposes an interesting solution for native readers of the target language that would enable them to comprehend post-colonial cultural hybrid texts. She suggests that when these readers encounter such texts, they are required to join the writers’ ‘in between-ness’, which is the essence of the writers’ linguistic and cultural estrangement. This means that such readers need to read and translate at the same time; thus translation becomes an integral part of the reading experience of such texts.\(^\text{30}\) This account is relevant to Kingston’s text, insofar as it evinces hybridity and has an estranging power for all readers.

I will return to the readers’ ‘in-between’ positioning when I discuss literary critics’ (estranged?) responses to Kingston’s text. But it is important to note here that Mehrez’s contention that readers engage in an ‘in-between’ space also echoes Bhabha’s notion of the ‘hybrid space’, since for Bhabha hybridity involves the emergence of a new situation which requires the reader to translate, rethink and extend her own cultural orientation.\(^\text{31}\) If the reader does not translate as she reads – that is, if she tries to negotiate the new hybrid space with the same old hermeneutic

\(^{30}\) Mehrez, ‘Translation’, 122.
\(^{31}\) Bhabha, ‘The Third Space’, 216.
practices – she will remain estranged, and thus incapable of participating in the cultural hybrid text fully, productively and creatively.\textsuperscript{32} According to Mehrez, where monolingual readers ignore the writers’ translations, texts will remain ‘semi-readable’ to such readers.\textsuperscript{33}

Mehrez explicates her argument and the term ‘semi-readable’ by referring to Ben Jelloun’s novels \textit{L’Enfant de sable} and \textit{La Nuit sacrée}, where the mechanism of translation and adaptation is similar to that of Kingston’s in \textit{The Woman Warrior}. Jelloun is a Moroccan writer whose first language is Arabic, yet all his literary works are composed in French. Mehrez points out that Jelloun’s language in these novels conforms to the idioms and formulas of the Arabic oral tradition of storytelling, with ‘strings of details’ and ‘chains of stories, which are similar, different, parallel and opposite, orally told and retold in various forms’.\textsuperscript{34} She then argues that the production of Jelloun’s texts involves a twofold translation:

\begin{quote}Not only is this orality transcribed by Ben Jelloun into writing, but it is transcribed into written French. As the text proceeds to transcribe into French the Arabic orality and formulaic idioms that inform it, \textit{La Nuit sacrée} becomes itself its own translation.\textsuperscript{35}\end{quote}

This creative and simultaneous translating process parallels Kingston’s creative process which transcribes Chinese myths and oral stories first into written form and then into written English. Mehrez believes that the Arabic subtext in Jelloun’s works dominates his French language. Ideally, native French readers should employ the so-\textsuperscript{32} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 135.  
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 129.  
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 129.
called ‘in-between’ reader response tradition by being aware of the writer’s embedded translation as they read.\textsuperscript{36}

Mehrez does not elaborate on how a reader may experience the ‘semi-readability’ of a text. However, I speculate that if readers are not able to participate in such a textual state, they are necessarily estranged from the text. Such estranged readers might interpret a hybrid text’s double cultural and linguistic implications from a partial perspective. Such a condition in which a text is rendered ‘semi-readable’ or ‘estranging’ will become clearer in the next section which examines how American and Chinese American reviewers read the cultural hybridity in \textit{The Woman Warrior}. Their interpretations of the work indicate the extent to which Kingston’s translation of Chinese materials precipitates estrangement effects for certain readers.

\textit{Literary Critics’ Responses to The Woman Warrior}

Kingston’s responses to commentary by American reviewers are crouched in words deeply reminiscent of Edward’s Said’s characterization of the attitude of the colonialist Europeans toward the oriental – that is, Orientalism. Kingston believes that about two-thirds of the American reviewers evaluate her book, and even her, with reference to the stereotype of the exotic, inscrutable and mysterious oriental.\textsuperscript{37} She says that it is obvious why Americans nominate ‘The White Tigers’ as their favourite story and believe that it should be the climax of the book – it most reflects their exotic construction of the Oriental. However, they cannot see that the chapter is in fact a

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 135.
parody of a kung fu movie and the protagonist Maxine’s childish reinvention of Chinese myths. In response to these reviews, Kingston writes:

To say we are inscrutable, mysterious, exotic denies us our common humanness, because it says that we are so different from a regular human being that we are by our nature intrinsically unknowable. Thus the stereotyper aggressively defends ignorance. Nor do we want to be called not inscrutable, exotic, mysterious. These are false ways of looking at us. We do not want to be measured by a false standard at all.

These American reviewers’ standard of judgement is, in Mehrez’s terms, ‘imperialistic’ as they exclude, diminish or deny the existence of other cultures. This is why they describe Kingston and her work as ‘exotic’. Their comments also show that they do not understand that Kingston’s writing is inspired by both Chinese and American cultures; in other words, they disregard the cultural hybridity in her work. As I have argued, these reviewers are initially estranged by Kingston’s work because of the unfamiliar translated Chinese cultural elements that compose her texts’ hybridity. However, instead of bringing a ‘global’, ‘in-between’ consciousness to bear on Kingston’s cross-cultural production, these reviewers miss the translation process that the texts encode. Such critics misjudge and misunderstand the adapted Chinese cultural materials to such an extent that they scarcely engage with the actual text at all. When they review the text from their estranged position, their interpretations are based on their western understanding of the Chinese culture without even considering the hybrid meaning of the text – a meaning which, to Kingston, transcends cultural translation. Thus, her text becomes ‘semi-readable’. Since, as I argue above, semi-readability entails estrangement, such responses by

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38 Ibid., 57.
39 Ibid.
American reviewers reveal how native English readers’ understanding of the text might be estranged by the translated cultural elements in Kingston’s work.

This raises an interesting question: do ‘Chinese-American’ critics consider Kingston’s translation and hybridity in a more appropriate manner and thus achieve comprehensive and nuanced readings of the text? We might assume that since these readers possess Chinese cultural background, and at the same time are competent in the English language, they will share, at least to a certain degree, the writer’s cultural hybrid status. If so, they would presumably be aware of the hybridity in Kingston’s text and read it with the ‘in-between’ consciousness that Mehrez identifies. But not so: in fact Chinese-American critics also interpret Kingston’s translation and adaptation of Chinese cultural elements in a rigid and culturally defensive way. They have severely criticised Kingston for allegedly distorting Chinese myths and culture with an intention to appeal to western readers. Frank Chin, for example, rejects Kingston’s work because it does not portray Chinese mores faithfully but rather reinforces existing stereotypes about China and Chinese-American culture:

Kingston and Hwang [a Chinese American playwright] confirm the white fantasy that everything sick and sickening about the white self-image is really Chinese. That is their service to white ego. Reviewers and critics ripe for the cycle of Christian Chinese-American autobiography and Charlie Chan become accomplices to making the fake China and Chinese America of Kingston and Hwang real with the force of history. The source of their vision of Chinese American art and history is white fantasy, not Chinese-American history.

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41 My discussion draws on the Chinese-American critics’ contributions to the debate that took place soon after The Woman Warrior was published in 1976. The debate was later known as the ‘Chinese American pen wars’. For a more extensive discussion of the ‘pen wars’ see Helena Grice, Maxine Hong Kingston (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 18-20.


43 Ibid., 28.
Chin’s charge of inauthenticity in Kingston’s work is supported by Benjamin Tong who berates Kingston for fashioning some of her translations according to American Oriental fantasy in an attempt to promote and sell her book.\footnote{Benjamin R. Tong, ‘Critic of Admirer Sees Dumb Racist,’ \textit{San Francisco Journal}, 11 May 1977, p.6.} For example, frog is called ‘\textit{tien gai}’ in Cantonese, meaning ‘field chicken’, but Kingston translates it as ‘heavenly chicken’. Tong asserts that Kingston’s translation is incorrect and that she deliberately distorts in order to create a ‘familiar exotic tourist flavour’ for Americans.\footnote{Ibid.} Another example that Tong criticizes is her recurring translation of the Cantonese word \textit{gwai} as ‘ghost’. The Chinese word \textit{gwai} has other meanings. It can denote ‘devil/ghost’ or ‘undesirable person’ or ‘a westerner’. Tong notes that in her text Kingston translates \textit{gwai} only as ‘ghost’, regardless of the context in which the word appears. In this respect, he thinks that she ‘uses the word ghost in the popular white Christian sense of the word, and not the Chinese American one, because \textit{gwai} to white ears is always “devil” or “ghost”.’\footnote{Ibid.}

Kingston has also been criticized for her adaptation of well-known Chinese myths. Katheryn Fong,\footnote{See Katheryn M. Fong, ‘An Open Letter/ Review,’ review of \textit{The Woman Warrior}, by Maxine Hong Kingston, \textit{Bulletin for Concerned Asian Scholars} 9 no. 4 (1977): 67-69.} another Chinese-American critic, sees Kingston’s adaptation as an instance of poetic license used to merge the myths of Fa Mulan and Ngak Fei. In the story ‘White Tiger’, Kingston portrays a woman warrior who has revenge tallies carved on her back by her parents. Kingston adapts the woman warrior character from the myth of Fa Mulan, and the carving of the revenge tallies from the myth of Ngak Fei. Fong notes that as a writer of fiction, Kingston has the right to integrate the two myths. However, the myth of Ngak Fei refers to a historical figure – a military general in Southern Song Dynasty (960-1279AD?). Fong resents
Kingston’s distortions of the (mythical) histories of China because she thinks that non-Chinese will read Kingston’s fiction as true accounts of Chinese history.  

I suggest that these Chinese-American critics, obsessed with naive notions of cultural authenticity, are taking Kingston’s work at face value, just as the American reviewers do, without even considering the literary, cultural and existential significance that such translated materials might have. Kingston’s translation liquefies the boundaries between disparate domains and reconstitutes their cultural geography so as to create a new, in-between, hybrid space wherein a dynamic, self-fashioning subject can exist. This vital and active subject – in this case Kingston, who presumably seeks a notion and sentiment of a Self or identity as a Chinese-American – tries to establish existential continuity by forging a critical, though strange, connectivity between discrete identity-cultural domains. The ‘linguistic deformation’ and ‘historical alteration’ alleged by these critics are thus a sign of emergent subjectivity; a subjectivity that has its inception in cultural disorientation and disintegration; a mode of self-loss.

Let us recall that Kingston’s work is a narrative of recollection which is largely based on her mother’s China narrative. In this sense, it is a recapitulation of her mother’s China text. Memory at one remove is pivotal in creating her hybrid text. In a playful mode dominated by linguistic splitting, historical deformation and mythical alteration, it incites a desire for a lost or absent domain which can be re-experienced, as it were, first-hand; one that can partially be recovered in the in-between space of the hybrid text.

The fact that these critics ignore the cultural hybrid nature of *The Woman Warrior* proves that even though they are to some extent familiar with some of the

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48 Fong, *op.cit.*, 67.
text’s Chinese cultural aspects they are very much estranged from the work. If they were to observe the new cultural hybrid text as a three dimensional space comprising the source culture, target culture and the in-between author, they would be able to participate in the hybrid site more sensitively and creatively. If we look at Tong’s criticism of Kingston’s translation of *tien gai* again with an ‘in-between’ consciousness, we can see that her translation of the term as ‘Heavenly chicken’ does indeed reflect Kingston’s hybrid situation. The sound *tien* in Cantonese can be pronounced in one tone to mean ‘field’ and another tone to mean ‘heaven’. Thus, it is possible for the protagonist Maxine, who might have picked up the word from her Chinese speaking parents, to have mistaken one sound for the other. Or, Kingston could have consciously distorted the name in her translation, not in order to fulfil ‘white fantasy’ but to estrange the Chinese word from native Chinese speakers’ common usage. Whatever the explanation, she reveals her own estranged self – a self which is involuntarily distanced from both Chinese language and culture. This disoriented self is even more apparent in the other ‘incorrect’ translation of *gwai* that Tong identifies. To me, Kingston’s translation of *gwai* as ‘ghost’, when *gwai* means ‘foreigners’, is evocative in this context: when the translation is taken literally, the presence of ghosts – such as, ‘Mail Ghost’, ‘Meter Reader Ghost’, ‘Garbage Ghost’, ‘Social Worker Ghost’ and ‘Public Health Nurse Ghost’ – in Kingston’s childhood creates a magic realist mood in her autobiographical stories. This supernatural inflection in her writing reflects her cultural uprootedness and inchoate identity.

To sum up: in this chapter I have looked at the concept of hybridity and how translation of Chinese cultural materials in *The Woman Warrior* hybridises these materials, including linguistic ones. I have discussed how both the Chinese and

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49 Bhabha, ‘Third Space’, 216.
American cultures and languages in Kingston’s text undergo essential transformations in the creation of hybridity. The transformation and hybridisation explain how translation in her text estranges original cultural forms and cultural-oriented readings. I have also argued that some American and Chinese-American reviewers of *The Woman Warrior* are estranged by their rigid cultural identifications, in particular the binary opposition between ‘Chinese’ and ‘American’. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate how Kingston adapts Chinese oral storytelling narrative styles in her work and the estrangement effects that result from this and other stylistic features of her writing.
CHAPTER 3
Talk-story and Estrangement

In the previous chapter I discussed how Kingston’s translation of Chinese culture in *The Woman Warrior* constructs a cultural hybridity – an interstitial state that articulates a fusion of Chinese and American cultural perspectives. I have shown that the hybridised reality in Kingston’s work gives rise to new interpretations of the Chinese language and culture. In particular, her translations produce new versions of Chinese oral and mythical stories which are estranged from the conventional renditions. While my previous discussion examined the estrangement effect of Kingston’s work with a relatively broad focus, looking at the interaction between cultures at various levels, in this chapter I narrow down my focus to her narrative style at textual level.

The way Kingston unfolds her stories in *The Woman Warrior* resembles the stylistic methods of Chinese oral storytelling performance – or, ‘talk-story’ in her translation. In traditional oral storytelling, the performers rely solely on their telling and miming skills to deliver the story. They use hand and body gestures and variable intonations to evoke different characters. Importantly, there is no costume or physical stage setting that would facilitate an amplified communication between the storytellers and the audience. The observer thus becomes a distanced onlooker, not actively engaged with the event on the stage. This rather autonomous way of storytelling segregates the narrative and narrator from the audience, which in turn de-familiarised and estranged from the narrative in Brecht’s theatrical sense.
Kingston’s talk-story narrative style is a translation; it is modelled after certain Chinese storytelling performances and their stylistic techniques, but rendered in English. As I showed in the previous chapter, Kingston’s translation of Chinese cultural and linguistic materials hybridises them for the target language and culture. Thus, her translation and adaptation of a Chinese narrative style into English prose means that the style is potentially estranging in Bhabha’s sense of cultural hybridisation. In the following pages, I will first summarise previous studies that address Kingston’s talk-story narrative style; then I will outline the characteristics and techniques of Chinese oral storytelling which are consciously used by Kingston in order to construct her text. I will compare Kingston’s narrative style with Chinese oral storytelling by applying close reading and stylistic analysis to selected sections from *The Woman Warrior*. I suggest that the similarities between the two forms of art will highlight the estrangement effect in Kingston’s text.

### 3.1 Talk-Story

The term ‘talk-story’ is Kingston’s translation of her mother’s storytelling mode in *The Woman Warrior*. She translates the name of the traditional storytelling art as it is known in Guangdong province in southern China, where her parents’ hometown is located. The storytelling art is called *jianggu*, from the two words ‘jiang’, ‘talk/speak’, and ‘gu’, ‘story’. Vibeke Børdahl, a specialist in Chinese oral literature, uses the term ‘storytelling’ to refer to this practice, but she specifies that the name ‘storytelling’ in China usually refers to a group of professional oral and mimetic art forms. Such art is known in various regions of China by different names and, in some places, takes a

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slightly different form.² Børdahl’s use of the term ‘storytelling’ refers to professional story-telling, and thus does not include Kingston’s mother’s storytelling, which mostly take place within the informal context of the family. Thus in the following discussion, I will use ‘talk-story’ or ‘story-talking’ to refer to *The Woman Warrior*’s stylistic resemblance to traditional oral storytelling.

Børdahl’s study focuses on the stylistic details of Yangzhou storytelling (*Yangzhou pinghua*), a form of professional storytelling in south-eastern China. Most of the stylistic and narrative characteristics that she identifies are not exclusive to Yangzhou storytelling but are ubiquitous in Chinese oral storytelling performances, as I will illustrate with an excerpt from a contemporary Hong Kong oral storytelling performance. Børdahl’s study is an excellent reference for my analysis of Kingston’s narration, since it reveals the hidden logic that underlies most traditional oral stories of the kind on which Kingston’s work is modelled.

In an interview Kingston states that the form of her stories is influenced by the fluidity and flexibility of Chinese talk-stories:

Chinese thinking is very fluid, not like Western thinking, so straight and scientific. I like the way stories like *Monkey King* and the Chinese sagas unfold with episodes that never end. I am influenced by talk-story; today the way you tell a story is different from the way you will tell it tomorrow. In my books I want to capture that fluidity.³

She further elaborates on the fluidity of the talk-story in another interview where she describes oral tradition as having ‘the impact of command, of directly influencing

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² For example, the form of spoken art in Beijing is called ‘crosstalk’ (*xiangsheng*), a jocular entertainment kept within the limits of only one telling session. It is shorter than Yangzhou storytelling in which the storytellers tell long serialised tales that can last for months. (Børdahl, *Oral Tradition*, 4)

action’. She notes that these stories change according to the needs of the listener, the needs of the day, the interest of the time.\(^4\) Her creative process is guided by a conscious attempt to reproduce the effects of talk-story. Indeed she says that she aims to transpose all the strengths of the oral story, such as its changeability and different voices, to her written text so that it will have the status of ‘an oral piece of art and not just text’.\(^5\) Although she is fascinated by the pervasive fluidity of oral stories, she concedes that this quality can be confusing: ‘It is difficult for the children of Chinese immigrants to distinguish whether a story is part of traditional Chinese culture, particular to their village, or created by a family member’.\(^6\) Since oral stories were somewhat confusing to Kingston as a child, it is not surprising that her narrative style is sometimes described as being ambiguous and is likened to a stream of improvised thoughts. Lai San Acón Chan characterises Kingston’s use of talk-story intertextuality in *The Woman Warrior* thus:

> a conscious attempt at creating ambiguity and multiplicity in her texts to produce a dialogue with other texts [old Chinese myths and folklores], and strategies she employs to blur the distinction between past and present, reality and fantasy, fact and fiction.\(^7\)

Kingston channels her autobiographical stories by interweaving strands of narratives which the protagonist Maxine learns from her mother’s talk-stories with her childhood experience in an American social milieu.

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As we have seen, talk-story in the work draws directly on Maxine’s mother, Brave Orchid, who is a superb storyteller. Chan suggests that Kingston uses the intertextual characteristic of talk-story to integrate stories about women, both in her family and in myths, from different time periods. Such integration, she argues, foregrounds a female prototype who undergoes transformations in order to become a real warrior in life. Kingston re-organises and presents a collage of talk-stories that she has heard from her mother (such as, ‘No Name Woman’), about her mother (such as, ‘Shaman’) and those from traditional sources (such as, Fa Mulan and Ts’ai Yen). Her retelling of talk-story reveals the psychological trajectory of a female character whose life mirrors the protagonist Maxine’s aspiration to attain familial and social recognition.

The protagonist Maxine’s psychological progress towards asserting her status as a Chinese woman is a significant theme that is closely connected to the talk-story style in the text. Elpida Morfetas interprets Kingston’s narrative style in terms of a subversive feminist motif. For her, talk-story is ‘a means of affirming alternative interpretations to dominant narratives’.⁸ Kingston’s retelling and reinterpretation of her mother’s past symbolise and facilitate her empowerment, her defiance of conventional cultural notions and gender roles that function as determinants of female identity. Morfetas discusses Kingston’s use of the ghost as metaphor borrowed from Chinese talk-stories. Since ghosts have long been associated with women in Chinese culture, and given that ghosts are considered liminal figures straddling the living and the dead worlds, Morfetas interprets them as women who transgress the traditional Chinese definition of the feminine. These unconventional female characters are portrayed in Kingston’s renditions of her mother’s talk-stories in the figures of the No-Name Woman (the narrator’s aunt), Brave Orchid (the narrator’s mother), Moon

Orchid (Brave Orchid’s sister), Fa Mulan (a Warrior Woman from Chinese legend) and Ts’ai Yen (a renowned Chinese poetess). Morfetas suggests that each of these female characters is, each in her own way, a woman warrior.9

Morfetas notes that as well as highlighting feminist themes in *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston’s malleable talk-story style represents the protagonist Maxine’s pressing need to invent and reinvent stories that she learnt from her mother in order to compensate for her lack of memory of China.10 For Maxine, like other American-born Chinese children, has had no direct contact with her ancestors’ land and culture. Kingston’s talk-stories invent memory and Chinese identity for Maxine and, in the process, help constitute her ambiguous autobiographical form in which fact and fiction conjoin.

Other scholars also associate Kingston’s talk-story style with feminist praxis. Helena Grice thinks that the mode of discourse in *The Woman Warrior* is a ‘woman-to-woman intimacy, a telling and (re)telling that steps back and forth across the line that divides public and private, subjectivity and intersubjectivity liaison’.11 Lauren Rusk suggests that ‘Kingston’s talk-stories bespeak a female collectivity that extends both horizontally, across geographical space, and vertically, through time’.12 Maxine’s talk-story style allows her memoir to travel from Brave Orchid’s past as a medical student in China, where she is a member of a group of women who share this aspiration, to the fantasy story of Fa Mulan and her woman army. Various female characters seem to coalesce until the final chapter of the book, ‘A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe’, in which the reader glimpses a clearer image of Maxine – whom we then understand to be the central figure in the memoir. Rusk observes that

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9 Ibid., 30.
10 Ibid., 48.
this arrangement ‘portrays the difficult emergence of her [the narrator Maxine’s] “I” out of the ancestral “we”.'\(^{13}\) In this sense, Kingston’s talk-stories reflect the development of Maxine’s awareness of her individuality and her urge to distinguish herself from traditional Chinese women.

Similarly, Wendy Ho sees Kingston’s narrative style as portraying her mother-daughter relationship, a persistent woman-to-woman bond in the work. Ho calls Kingston’s narration ‘autobiographical self talking-story’, a term that creates a psychosocial and aesthetic distance between ‘daughter-writer Kingston’ and ‘daughter-narrator Maxine’. The distance allows Kingston to present her reconstructed childhood through the voice of Maxine.\(^{14}\) Through self-talking story Kingston is also able to explore her intense relationship with her mother. That is why Ho says that ‘Kingston’s mother-daughter pair can begin to discover their complicated sites of conflict as well as opportunity for connection and alliance as women’.\(^{15}\)

While previous studies of Kingston’s talk-story narration mainly analyse the thematic significance of her style, Chan and Morfetas focus on the function of talk-story narration in delivering Kingston’s ethnic identity-seeking theme. Grice, Rusk and Ho see talk-story within a feminist framework. While these studies are insightful in showing the implications and significance of Kingston’s style, they do not take into account the similarity between Kingston’s stylistic arrangement and traditional oral storytelling methods.

In the following, I will first map the stylistic features in traditional oral storytelling with reference to Børdahl’s study. Then I will analyse stylistic details in

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 79.
\(^{14}\) Wendy Ho, *In Her Mother’s House: The Politics of Asian American Mother-Daughter Writing* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 1999), 118.
\(^{15}\) Ibid.
The Woman Warrior and juxtapose these with the oral storytelling features identified by Børdahl. This will enable me to elucidate Kingston’s talk-story style and how it engenders estrangement.

3.2 Kingston’s Chinese Oral storytelling features

Børdahl categorises the stylistic characteristics in Yangzhou storytelling under three headings: prosody, parallelism and repetition. She shows that storytellers employ a wide spectrum of versification techniques which includes rhythm, rhyme, assonance, alliteration, grammatical and semantic parallelism, as well as reduplication and repetition. While these features seem to be important in many kinds of literature, not only oral poetry and prose, Børdahl sees them as ‘mnemonic’ for the oral storytelling performer, ‘musical’ or ‘easy to grasp’ for the audience, and ‘aesthetic’ when the oral story is encountered in the form of a written text. The orality of the art is reflected by the overarching principle of repetition which, to a high degree, governs the phenomena of prosody and parallelism. The prosodic features are based on repetition of sound elements, while parallelism is a repetition of the same grammatical and semantic structures. The repetitive quality in prosodic and parallel features generates regularity and stability in the oral texts; indeed they function both as artful embroidery and mnemonic aids. Børdahl divides the phenomenon of repetition into repetition within the words, that is, morphologic repetition or reduplication; repetition of words/phrases within the same phrase and sentence, that is, syntactic repetition; and repetition of phrases, sentences and passages longer than a sentence, that is, macro-syntactic repetition.  

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16 Børdahl, Oral Tradition, 138.
17 Ibid., 164-5.
The three categories – repetition, prosody, and parallelism – constitute the ‘linguistic situation’ of oral storytelling. On the other hand, Børdahl categorises the storyteller’s performing techniques as the ‘narrative communication situation’. The two situations together ostensibly represent a full picture of the stylistic characteristics of oral storytelling. Børdahl suggests that a storyteller is both the storyteller-narrator and the impersonator in the performance. As a storyteller-narrator, he or she functions as ‘an incarnation of the “eternal” storyteller of age-old tradition in China, and an individual occasion of narration of a specific story or cycle of stories’.\(^{18}\) Since a storyteller’s stories come from a set of well-known repertoires, the performer bears the historical role as an agent of ‘the fictive universe’; yet he or she is still close to his or her own voice as a living performer.\(^{19}\) The narrative voice of a storyteller-narrator is largely ‘omniscient’. Adopting Gérard Genette’s terms, Børdahl describes the storyteller as an ‘extradiegetic’ and ‘heterodiegetic’ type:\(^{20}\) whilst the storyteller-narrator assumes a stance ‘above’ the story, he or she can occasionally refer to himself or herself in first-person as ‘I’ or ‘I, the storyteller’, and comment on the plot or characters. At the same time, the storyteller impersonates and speaks in the characters’ voices or inner voices. A storyteller can switch between the narrator voice and the impersonator voice, often imperceptibly. Børdahl notes that the dialogue passages in an oral story seem to strive for an effect of pure mimesis: because the remarks of each character are adduced without any introductory verb of speech, such as ‘he said’, it is sometimes unclear whether the voice belongs to the narrator or the character.\(^{21}\)

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\(^{18}\) Ibid., 181.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 181.
\(^{21}\) Børdahl, *op. cit.*, 199.
While Børdahl identifies the multiple roles of an oral storytelling performer – *storyteller-narrator, narrator* and *impersonator* – in Yangzhou storytelling, this is in fact a generic narrative feature of Chinese oral stories. Let me illustrate these three narrative roles – or, what I will describe as narrative levels in my analysis of Kingston’s text – with reference to an excerpt from a Cantonese oral storytelling performance (*Guangdong Jianggu*). The story is called ‘The Painted Skin’ (*‘Hua Pi’*), which is one of the short stories from the classic collection of ghost tales titled *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio* (*Liaozhai Zhi Yi*), written by Pu Songling.\(^{22}\) The performer’s different narrative roles can be seen in the following excerpt taken from the beginning of the performance:

Thank you for listening to *Liaozhai*. Today I will tell you a story called ‘The Painted Skin’. This story is set in Taiyuan in Shanxi province. There is a student called Wang Sheng who inherited many farmlands from his ancestors and lives comfortably on rent. However, this person is a philanderer. He plays around with women even though he is married.

Yesterday, he just went drinking with his friends in a brothel. He headed home only when the sky started to turn white in the east. He was staggering home.

‘We should drink when we have money … don’t wait until we have nothing but the moon … I was born with some talent … we spent thousands but the money will soon come back.’

It was still early and the road was quiet. Wang Sheng took three steps to the left, three steps to the right. He plodded on and on. Suddenly, he saw another person on the road walking in front of him.

*Who is that so early in the morning? Judging from the person’s body shape… That seems to be a woman.*

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Wang Sheng saw that the woman paused every two steps as if she had no more energy to walk. He hurried forwards. Now he could see. She was indeed a young woman about seventeen or eighteen years old. She looked pale, but still beautiful.

‘Miss, the sky is not yet bright, how come you are not scared to be on the road alone?’

The young woman continued walking but turned to look at him.

‘I walk my way; you walk yours. We are just acquaintances. Even though I have problems, I’m embarrassed to trouble you.’

The first paragraph in the above excerpt is delivered in the voice of the *storyteller-narrator*. He speaks with the first-person ‘I’ and introduces the general background of the story. The second paragraph begins with a specific time setting (‘yesterday’) which signals the beginning of the main event of the narrative. The narrative voice here switches to that of the *narrator*. In the third paragraph, the performer takes up the role of the *impersonator* and speaks in the protagonist Wang Sheng’s voice. The performer in fact alternates frequently between the roles of narrator and impersonator.

In the fifth paragraph he impersonates Wang Sheng by voicing the character’s inner thoughts and in the last paragraph he impersonates the female character who turns out to be a demon as the story unfolds.

Børdahl observes that a storyteller often switches between narrative roles almost imperceptibly. We can see in this excerpt that the performer does not use ‘he/she said’ to introduce the characters’ speech; rather he depends on varying tones and registers to distinguish his roles as narrator and impersonator. In terms of Genette’s categorisation of narrative levels to which Børdahl refers, both the first and second paragraphs in this excerpt belong to the first level – or, *extradiagetic* – narration. The

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storyteller-narrator speaks in first-person ‘I’ in the first paragraph, while the narrator speaks in third-person singular ‘he’ in the second paragraph. In each case they are heterodiegetic narrators who assume a position outside of the story. As for the instances of impersonations in the above excerpt, they are second level – or, intradiegetic – narrations, because these characters’ utterances are channelled through the storyteller-narrator’s voice at the first narrative level.

It is important to note that a storyteller’s digressions from narrating the plot to impersonating characters do not prevent the audience from understanding the story because the audience is expected to be familiar with the basic storyline anyway. Børdahl illustrates such ‘assumed familiarity’ with reference to the narrative performance of the story Wu Song Fights the Tiger (Wu Song Da Hu) in which the storyteller begins by giving the name, origin and whereabouts of the main character, Wu Song. Wu Song is only given the attribute ‘hero’ (yingxiong) after a few sentences because the audience is presumed already to be aware of Wu Song’s heroic role. Thus, the word ‘hero’ is used like a simple third-person pronoun for him.24 Børdahl also observes a ‘slow motion’ technique that allows room for storytellers to insert specific ‘detail’ into the basic plot. Since the basic storyline is assumed to be known to the public, the enjoyment in listening to oral stories lies in the storyteller’s additional and novel dialogues, comments and descriptions:25

The charm of the storyteller’s narrative lies very much in the way he is able to spin a yarn, ‘adding twigs and leaves’ (tian zhi tian ye) to the story line, the outline of which often belongs to the common knowledge of the society.26

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24 Ibid., 190.
25 Ibid., 206.
26 Ibid.
The audience, as I have said, is presumed to know the convention of oral storytelling performance. For instance, the storyteller tends to comment on the story in the form of simulated dialogue – by asking questions and answering them (zī wen zī da). When such storytellers raise questions, they do not expect an answer from the audience. Likewise, the audience members are not expected to enter into a dialogue; they are assumed to be familiar with their social role. If a spectator were to raise his or her voice and answer the storyteller’s question, the narration would be brought to ‘a complete break from the normal situation’. As well as conducting a dialogue with himself or herself, a storyteller employs a narrative communication technique called ‘bargaining the crisis’ (mai guanzi). ‘A crisis’ is the Yangzhou storyteller’s term for ‘all kinds of exciting episodes narrated during a session of storytelling’. To ‘bargain’ a crisis means that the storyteller finishes a session on a note of suspense before the ‘crisis’ is resolved. The ‘obvious’ effect of such a practice is to make the audience return the following day to hear the remainder of the story. However, since the Chinese public is familiar with the story and knows what follows, Børđahl construes the ending note as nothing more than ‘a shared joke’. In other words, it is just another storytelling convention that both the narrator and audience are expected to recognise.

Børđahl’s analysis provides a framework for identifying the talk-story characteristics in The Woman Warrior. In terms of the linguistic situation, oral storytelling emphasises repetition. Similar repetition can be found in Kingston’s style, which displays repetitions of phrases, sentences and passages – that is, macro-syntactic repetition. But unlike oral performances, Kingston does not need to use repetition for mnemonic purposes. Instead, repetition here serves as a pseudo-

\[27\] Ibid., 181.
\[28\] Ibid., 212.
\[29\] Ibid., 213.
mnemonic backbone along which she builds her narrative. This means that the motif persists as the story develops but also varies slightly at each iteration. This prominent stylistic feature in Kingston’s text resembles oral storytelling. The following examples from the last story of *The Woman Warrior*, ‘A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe’, illustrates her narrative methods of construction with reference to the ‘tongue-cutting’ imagery.

### 3.2.1 Repetition – Tongue-cutting

At the beginning of the story, the protagonist Maxine mentions that her mother once cut off her tongue. She says:

**Example 1** Maybe that’s why my mother cut my tongue. She pushed my tongue up and sliced the frenum. Or maybe she snipped it with a pair of nail scissors (*WW* 163, *emphasis added*).\(^{30}\)

The so-called ‘tongue-cutting’ incident is in fact a minor surgery called ‘frenotomy’, defined as ‘cutting the frenum (frenulum) especially for release of ankyloglossia (tongue-tie)’.\(^{31}\) It involves a simple procedure of making a slit on the infant’s frenum. In the old days, it was quite common among Chinese parents to perform the surgery on their children. Maxine’s mother explains:

I cut it so that you won’t be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language. You’ll be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another. You’ll be able to pronounce anything. Your frenum looked too tight to do those things, so I cut it (*WW* 164).

\(^{30}\) In section 3.2.1 and 3.2.2, the abbreviation *WW* is used to indicate citations from Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*.

Though Maxine’s mother’s statement is complicated by metaphor (tongue-tied), this utterance explains why she performs ‘frenotomy’ on Maxine. The procedure was still common, even in the Chinese-American community in 1940, when Kingston was born. Thus, this first reference to ‘tongue-cutting’, despite its eerie designation, has a pragmatic tone and rationale. However, the initial logic is lost when Maxine refers to the same image a second time:

**Example 2** Maybe because I was the one with the *tongue cut loose*, I had grown inside me a *list of over two hundred things* that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me and to stop the *pain in my throat*. [...] If the telling got excruciating and her anger too bad, I’d tell five items once a week like the Catholic girls, and I’d still be through in a year, maybe ten months (*WW* 197, *emphasis added*).

Here, the image of ‘tongue-cutting’ does not refer to the physical surgery which aims at easing tongue-tie. Rather, Maxine uses ‘tongue-cutting’ metaphorically to represent the release of her desire to express her thoughts. Moreover, she says that two new events – the growth of a list and throat pain – are also the consequences of the metaphoric ‘tongue-cutting’. The logic connecting the new to the old events is vague, but the list and throat pain can be seen as symbolising the hitherto repressed repository of speech inside her: she has been bound by the traditional image of a silent Chinese woman and thus prohibited from voicing her opinions. Whilst these new events are initially conveyed only in metaphorical images, Maxine goes on to describe them in ample detail. Indeed, as the following examples illustrate, the ‘list’ and ‘throat pain’ gradually gain texture, becoming believable and finally independent of their symbolic function. At the same time, while these images are becoming more tangible, the illogicality that links the new events to tongue-cutting (as the physical
surgery) also slowly attenuates and fades from the reader’s attention. In example 2, Maxine gives a rough estimate of the amount of time it will take to tell the entire list to her mother. In the following examples (3-5) the image of the list recurs and continues to develop. As Maxine repeats the event time and again, her mathematics become precise and the telling list itself acquires a meticulous sense of order:

Example 3 I had decided to start with the earliest item—when I had smashed a spider against the white side of the house: It was the first thing I killed. […] I moved carefully all the next day so as not to do anything or have anything happen to me that would make me go back to two hundred and seven again (WW 198-199, emphasis added).

Example 4 So I told the hardest ten or twelve things on my list all in one outburst (WW 202, emphasis added).

Example 5 My telling list was scrambled out of order. When I said them out loud I saw that some of the items were ten years old already, and I had outgrown them. But they kept pouring out anyway in the voice like Chinese opera. I could hear the drums and the cymbals and the gongs and brass horns (WW 203, emphasis added).

In example 3, Maxine’s counting is impeccable. In example 2 Maxine says that the list has ‘over two hundred things’, but here in example 3 she gives a precise number: ‘two hundred and seven’. Example 4 shows that Kingston as author ranks the items according to their level of difficulty; example 5 shows that she also sorts things according to time. The listing system in Maxine’s head is as complex as a computer program. It illustrates how the repetition of the ‘tongue-cutting’ motif introduces the image of a ‘telling list’, and how the list develops from being a metaphor to an actual entity which is described in literal terms. In this sense, the pattern of Maxine’s
narration resembles the way oral storytellers employ repetition as a mnemonic device. They unfold the story by repeating, elaborating and expanding the same motif.

Kingston’s talk-story style is also seen in the repetition of the ‘throat pain’, the other outcome of ‘tongue-cutting’, and in a general discomfort in her throat:

Example 6 And suddenly the duck voice came out, which I did not use with the family (WW 199, emphasis added).

Example 7 I shut my mouth, but I felt something alive tearing at my throat, bite by bite, from the inside. Soon there would be three hundred things, and too late to get them out before my mother grew old and died (WW 200, emphasis added).

Example 8 My throat hurt constantly, vocal cords taut to snapping (WW 200, emphasis added).

Example 9 One night when the laundry was so busy that the whole family was eating dinner there, crowded around the little round table, my throat burst open. I stood up, talking and burbling (WW 201, emphasis added).

Example 10 The throat pain always returns, though, unless I tell what I really think, whether or not I lose my job, or spit out gaucheries all over a party (WW 205, emphasis added).

Example 6 is taken from the scene where Maxine attempts to tell her mother about an item on her list that is hard to name and which causes her voice to crack when she attempts to do so. Example 7 describes the discomfort in Maxine’s throat when her telling process stops abruptly after her mother has snapped at her. The sentence ‘Soon there would be three hundred things’ in example 7 again echoes Maxine’s ‘telling list’ mathematics, as in example 3. Example 8 is taken from an incident before the
outburst in which she itemises her list at the dinner table, and example 9 describes the actual outburst. Though these descriptions of Maxine’s throat derive from the tongue-cutting imagery, it seems that they are now more closely connected to the telling list – an event also inspired by tongue-cutting. Nevertheless, examples 1 to 9 seen altogether reveal a trajectory or evolution in the repetition of the tongue-cutting motif. As I have said, this resembles the way oral storytellers apply repetitions as prompts; but this trajectory also reflects how such repetition has estranging effects in Kingston’s text.

Note that ‘tongue-cutting’ is itself a hyperbolic name for Maxine’s domestic frenum surgery. Unlike the term ‘frenum-cutting’, ‘tongue-cutting’ by implication extends the partial surgical adjustment to the whole of the organ, suggesting a gratuitously brutal image of chopping off the whole tongue, as opposed to just making a slit on the ligament. This exaggeration is frightening – and estranging; it estranges the simple surgical process of ‘frenum-cutting’ and figuratively turns it into ‘tongue-cutting’. Further, by hyperbolising the act of cutting as ‘tongue-cutting’, Maxine achieves an additional meaning – one opposite to the original intention of the surgery: the main aim of the surgery is to facilitate Maxine’s speech, but to cut one’s tongue is to take away the ability to talk. The double meaning inflects the action with an intriguing, ironic quality. It also lays the foundation for Maxine to further manipulate and estrange the event when she repeats it again later in her narration.

Yet after the name ‘tongue-cutting’ has estranged the event, Kingston’s narration attempts to recuperate the already ‘strange’ event as ‘normal’. In the first example, Maxine starts with an easy speculative ‘maybe’, the aim of the statement being to discover the reason for the ‘tongue-cutting’ surgery. Considering the fact that this is the first time the reader is introduced to Kingston’s provocative name for
frenum surgery, her sentence presupposes the normality of the event. Thus Kingston first amplifies an ordinary happening to make it strange, describing the minor frenum surgery in the shocking language of cutting her tongue, then deliberately understates it, referring to it as if it were familiar. Note however that the latter attempt to normalise the estranged event does not actually weaken the former estrangement effect. On the contrary, the protagonist Maxine’s ironic tone is heightened by first estranging and then normalising the event. It draws attention to the sentence structure (‘Maybe that’s why my mother cut my tongue’) as well to the shocking notion of ‘tongue-cutting’. Examples like this show that normalising semantic activity in Maxine’s narration can in fact be an indirect method of intensifying the strangeness of an event.

Second, the repetition of tongue-cutting in its metaphoric register in examples 2 to 5 precipitates reference to the telling list and throat pain. I have pointed out that Maxine does not provide any clear logical reason why textual references to the frenum surgery inaugurate the list. As for the throat pain, it is not mentioned earlier in the text, but in example 2 Maxine assumes that the articulation of the list is the remedy for the pain. Such implied connection is estranging. Somehow, as the severity of the throat pain intensifies, it seems that her throat is beyond her control. Examples 6 to 9 give the impression that there is another, quite autonomous, force that tears apart and makes her throat burst open. Just as the telling list as a metaphor, so, I suggest, the independent and uncontrollable force in her throat is a symbolic image – it symbolises Maxine’s rebellious consciousness; in particular her determination to defy the traditional stereotypical image of Chinese female. Thus, this force is not external but rather a latent capacity that drives her to speak out. The throat pain is a metaphor for the urgency of self-expression. Nevertheless, as Maxine keeps repeating
references to the pain – its properties and its recurrences – she turns the supposed symbolic image into a real perpetual physical irritation.

In addition to the throat pain’s increasingly realistic, and even visceral, quality, Maxine reinforces the pain’s abnormal intensity by referring to its absurd autonomy from her powers of physical control. Some of the other descriptions also reinforce this autonomy of her pain. We can see that in more than one example ‘my throat’ and the abnormal feeling there act as an independent subject/agent of the sentence, performing an active action. For instance: ‘my throat burst open’ (example 9) and ‘the duck voice came out’ (example 6). Here Maxine’s repeated description of her throat condition highlights the throat’s autonomy by avoiding sentence patterns which feature participation by Maxine herself in a first-person singular, as in the sentences ‘I felt as if my throat burst open’ or ‘I spoke in a duck-like voice’. As we have seen, the ‘throat pain’ and the ‘telling list’ are basically metaphorical images for the protagonist’s flowering outspokenness which is obliquely linked to the original tongue-cutting event. The importance of the actual, physical act of tongue-cutting has greatly attenuated in the course of Maxine’s repetition; instead, the exaggerated and estranged metaphors of ‘telling list’ and later ‘throat pain’ become the central foci of her narration.

Finally, in example 10, Maxine’s narration leaps forward in time to speak about her forthright attitude as an adult. She says that the throat pain always returns unless she says what she thinks, even if it may forfeit her employment or ruin a party. Here it seems that the image of throat pain has achieved independence: no longer an unexplained outcome of tongue-cutting, it has taken root in Maxine’s real-life context. We have said that the throat pain in the previous examples is largely presented as a metaphorical image which symbolises her emerging personality, and that even though
the image has been gaining concrete contours and becoming more and more realistic, Maxine does not offer any straightforward explanation of it. It is not until the last example (10), that she describes the pain in terms of her current, real-life situation. Maxine has now completed the process of making the throat pain metaphor a physical irritation and further expanded it into an existential fact by using an oral storyteller’s repetition device. Maxine’s narrative pattern is heavily based on such storytelling’s perpetual repetition and expansion. The final example may even hint at the emergence of more remotely connected events deriving from the already-existing actual throat pain.

3.2.2 Multiple Narrative Voices – ‘Shaman’

Another significant oral storytelling characteristic in Børdahl’s study that I shall discuss in relation to Kingston’s style in The Woman Warrior is the storyteller’s performing technique or, in Børdahl’s terms, the narrative communicatory situation. Børdahl observes that a storyteller bears the historical role of a narrative agent, defined as the storyteller-narrator. This text-immanent voice is divided as the voice of the narrator – ‘the voice telling the narrative passages of the performance’ – and the voices of the dramatis personae – ‘the voices impersonating the various characters of the story in dialogue passages’. In The Woman Warrior Kingston uses more than one narrative voice. And as in the arrangement found in oral storytelling, the different narrative voices in Kingston’s work alternate discreetly and in sometimes confusing ways. I shall demonstrate Kingston’s arrangement of multiple narrative voices with reference to the first nineteen pages (pp.57-75) of ‘Shaman’, the third story in The Woman Warrior. A full list of categorised examples from ‘Shaman’

is presented in Table 3.2.\textsuperscript{33} I choose this section because changes in narrative voice here appear to be particularly frequent and influential. I shall analyse the section using Gérard Genette’s narratological theory and focus on the narrators’ statuses in relation to the story and narrative levels.

Genette defines the differences between narrative levels thus: ‘any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed’.\textsuperscript{34} As we have seen, the first narrative level is called \textit{extradiegetic}; the second narrative inside the first level is \textit{(intra)diegetic}. As for the narrator’s status in relation to the story, Genette distinguishes two types of narrative: one where the narrator is absent from the story he or she tells \textit{(heterodiegetic)}, the other where the narrator presents as a character in the story he or she tells \textit{(homodiegetic)}.\textsuperscript{35} In the following analysis, I shall explicate how Kingston’s implementation of the talk-story technique generates estrangement. I categorise her narration into two levels and three narrator statuses, as summarised in Table 3.1.\textsuperscript{36}

Narrative level 1 is Maxine speaking in first-person or third-person singular about her mother in the present time and in the distant past. This level of narration does not appear in any diegesis; thus this narrating instance is \textit{extradiegetic}. Maxine as a narrator at this level is on an equal footing with the extradiegetic (real) public audience. Nevertheless, she establishes two narrator statuses in relation to the story within this level. When she narrates in first-person ‘I’ and ‘my mother’, she is one of the characters in the story. From the vantage point of a character she speaks of her direct conversation and emotional connection with her mother. For instance, at the

\textsuperscript{33} Refer to p.274 for Table 3.2.
\textsuperscript{34} Genette, \textit{Narrative Discourse}, 228.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 244-5.
\textsuperscript{36} Refer to p.274 for Table 3.1.
beginning of the section, Maxine narrates: ‘Once in a long while, four times so far for me, my mother brings out the metal tube that holds her medical diploma’ (WW 57, emphasis added). And in the next paragraph: ‘I read in a history book that Hackett Medical College for Women at Canton was founded in the nineteenth century by European women doctors’ (WW 58, emphasis added). Maxine’s presence in the narrative defines her narrator status as homodiegetic. Moreover, since she is also the heroine in the story, her status is autodiegetic. I categorise this narrator status of Maxine in the first narrative instance as level 1a.

On the other hand, at the same narrative level Maxine also establishes her status as heterodiegetic. She switches to narrating her mother’s past in China in third-person narrative. For instance, ‘She bought good clothes and shoes. Then she decided to use the money for becoming a doctor’ (WW 60, emphasis added). And in the next paragraph, ‘They greeted her and she greeted them. But no one wanted to start friendships until the unpacking was done, each item placed precisely to section off the room’ (WW 61, emphasis added). In these examples, Maxine does not exist as a character in the story that she narrates because the narrative is about her mother’s distant past. Thus, her status at this level changes from being the narrator-cum-heroine to becoming a narrator outside of the story. Brave Orchid, Maxine’s mother, becomes the heroine in this section of narration which I categorise as level 1b.

I divide Maxine’s narration into level 1a and 1b, instead of level 1 and 2, in order to indicate that the narrator is still Maxine and she is at the same level as the public audience. However, it is important to note that the division between narrative levels 1a and 1b is at times blurry. There are places at level 1b where Maxine uses ‘my mother’ (first-person narrative), though the prevailing point of view is third-person. For instance,
My mother spotted the name she had written on her application pinned to a headboard, and the annoyance she felt at not arriving early enough for the first choice disappeared. The locks on her suitcase opened with two satisfying clicks; she enjoyed again how neatly her belongings fitted together, clean against the green lining (WW 61, emphasis added).

This passage is taken from what I have categorised as level 1b. Maxine’s narration begins with first-person ‘my mother’ but the point of view soon switches to third-person ‘she’. Mentioning ‘my mother’ echoes Maxine’s narration as a character in the story at level 1a, but such interjection of first-person narrative does not diverge from Maxine’s heterodiegetic narration at level 1b. As shown in the above excerpt, Maxine’s narration at this level is obviously omniscient: her description penetrates into her mother’s inner thoughts and feelings. For instance, she narrates her mother’s annoyance at not arriving earlier at the dormitory room, and her delight at the sight of her belongings fitted neatly in her suitcase. In the same paragraph as the one quoted above, Maxine also provides meticulous information about the contents of her mother’s suitcase:

she [Brave Orchid] took out her pens and inkbox, an atlas of the world, a tea set and tea canister, sewing box, her ruler with the real gold markings, writing paper, envelopes with the thick red stripe to signify no bed news, her bowl and silver chopsticks (WW 61).

Since that level of knowledge regarding Brave Orchid’s past is not likely to be attained by Maxine as a character, such detailed descriptions of the mother’s inner self and her personal possessions demonstrates Maxine’s heterodiegetic and omniscient narrator status. This status is so predominant that the occasional insertion of first-person narrative becomes relatively insignificant.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Point of View</th>
<th>Tense</th>
<th>Genette’s Definition</th>
<th>Bordahl’s Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1a</td>
<td>Maxine</td>
<td>First-person</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Extradiagetic, Homodiegetic/autodiegetic</td>
<td>Storyteller-narrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b</td>
<td>Maxine</td>
<td>Third-person</td>
<td>Past</td>
<td>Extradiagetic, Heterodiegetic</td>
<td>Narrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Maxine’s</td>
<td>First-person</td>
<td>Past</td>
<td>Intradiagetic, Homodiegetic/autodiegetic</td>
<td>Impersonator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mother</td>
<td>(with some first-person)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1 Characteristics of narrative levels and narrator statues in ‘Shaman’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page no.</th>
<th>Excerpt</th>
<th>Narrative Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>57-60</td>
<td>Once in a long while, four times so far for me, my mother brings out the metal tube that holds her medical diploma (57). [...] I keep looking to see whether she was afraid (60).</td>
<td>1a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-62</td>
<td>Year after year my father did not come home or send for her (60). [...] she would have one drawer to sort, one bed to make (62).</td>
<td>1b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62</td>
<td>To shut the door at the end of the workday, which does not spill over into evening (62). [...] The Revolution put an end to prostitution by giving women what they wanted: a job and a room of their own (62).</td>
<td>1a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62-63</td>
<td>Free from families, my mother would live for two years without servitude. (62) [...] She quickly built a reputation for being brilliant, a natural scholar who could glance at a book and know it (63).</td>
<td>1b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63-64</td>
<td>‘The other students fought over who could sit next to me at exams,’ says my mother (63). [...] ‘One hundred and twelve students began the course at the same time as I did’ (64).</td>
<td>1a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>She suspected she did not have the right kind of brains either, my father the one who can recite whole poems (64). [...] ‘She’s so dumb, she has to study day and night’ (64).</td>
<td>1b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64</td>
<td>‘I studied far in advance,’ says my mother (64). [...] It is much more graceful to appear favoured by the gods (64).</td>
<td>1a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64-72</td>
<td>Maybe my mother’s secret place was the room in the dormitory which was haunted (64). [...] ‘There,’ the roommate, giving her ear a last hearty tug, ‘you are cured. Now tell us what happened’ (72).</td>
<td>1b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72-73</td>
<td>‘I had finished reading my novel,’ said my mother (72). [...] ‘And there was a sound like mountain wind, a sound so high it could drive you crazy. Didn’t you hear it?’ (73)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>Yes, they had. [...] Yes, it was the sound of energy amassing (73).</td>
<td>1b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73-74</td>
<td>‘You were lucky you slept because the sound tears the heart (73). [...] ‘when in reality it is a Bag Ghost’ (74).</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>The students moved away from the bag in which they collected their quilting scraps and pulled up their feet that were dangling over the edge of the bed (74).</td>
<td>1b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
<td>‘You have to help me rid the world of this disease [.] The hero in a ghost story laughs a nimble laugh, his life so full it splatters red and gold on all the creatures around him’ (74).</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74-75</td>
<td>These young women, who would have to back up their science with magical spells should their patients be disappointed and not get well, now hurried to get to classes on time (74). [...] They laughed at the smell (75).</td>
<td>1b</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2 Narrative levels in The Woman Warrior (pp. 57-75).
The difference between level 1a and level 1b narration corresponds to an oral storyteller’s multiple roles. When Maxine talks about her own experience in first-person narrative register at level 1a, her voice is comparable to the way an oral storyteller often overtly refers to himself or herself as ‘I who tell the story’ or ‘I, the storyteller’ during a performance. Bør Dahl refers to this role as ‘storyteller-narrator’. When Maxine proceeds to speak about her mother’s life in the voice of a third-person omniscient narrator, her narration resembles that of an oral storyteller when he or she embarks on delivering the actual tale. Bør Dahl calls this role narrator.

The oral storytelling features of Maxine’s narration can be better explained if we take tenses into account. Narrative level 1a is in present tense, while level 1b is in past tense. Present tense is a consistent feature in Maxine’s narrative voice throughout the five stories in The Woman Warrior. Importantly, it hints at her being the autobiographical self of Kingston the author. In terms of oral storytelling, the present tense at level 1a signals Maxine’s role as the presiding narrator in the work. It exemplifies the role of storyteller-narrator which Bør Dahl defines as ‘the voice telling the entire story of the performance’. I have mentioned before that the storyteller-narrator performs two functions in oral storytelling – the narrator and impersonator of characters. The past tense at level 1b specifies a flashback and a change in geographical setting from Stockton to China. I think that, in addition to her use of a third-person omniscient narrator’s point of view, the change of timeframe, from the present tense at level 1a to past tense at level 1b, is a clear signal that indicates the beginning of the actual tale in Maxine’s talk-story performance. Thus her narrative voice at level 1b narration is similar to that of the narrator in oral storytelling.

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37 Bør Dahl, Oral Tradition, 189.
38 Ibid., 182.
The narrative voice at level 2 is Brave Orchid. According to Genette’s definition, since narrative level 2 stems from level 1, level 2 is intradiegetic. While Brave Orchid is the heroine of the story that she tells, her status as a narrator is homodiegetic and, specifically, autodiegetic. Yet since the narrating instance is built on Maxine’s voice at level 1, the speaker at level 2 is still Maxine. In terms of oral storytelling, the narration at level 2 is delivered by Maxine, who momentarily pulls away from her role as a narrator at level 1b in order to impersonate her mother. Thus, when Maxine tells, in her mother’s voice, her mother’s classmates about her night combating the Sitting Ghost in the haunted dormitory room, she is in fact an impersonator. As we can see, the entire level 2 narration, page 72 to 74 of ‘Shaman’, is composed of Brave Orchid’s direct speech. The narration begins with “I had finished reading my novel,” said my mother (WW 72) and ends with ‘[…] The hero in a ghost story laughs a nimble laugh, his life so full it splatters red and gold on all the creatures around him’” (WW 74). I have already shown that Maxine’s voice in the lower narrative levels 1a and 1b corresponds to an oral storyteller’s roles of storyteller-narrator and narrator respectively. Here, at level 2, her narration is equivalent to the role of impersonator. Again, Kingston’s multiple narrative voice arrangement mirrors closely an oral storyteller’s performance technique.

Børdahl stresses that as well as delivering the story in multiple narrative voices, the oral storyteller exercises flexibility and subtlety when switching from one narrative voice to another. A similar flexibility is demonstrated in Maxine’s narration. I will now discuss three examples of this from the section in ‘Shaman’ where Maxine’s narrative levels intertwine. In addition to illustrating the discreet transitions

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39 See above discussion p.275
between different voices which resemble oral storytelling, I will also explain how such a talk-story stylistic feature renders Kingston’s text estranging.

First, let us look at the interruptions in Brave Orchid’s level 2 narration. We can see from table 3.2 that her direct speech from pages 72 to 74 is not delivered continuously. There are four interruptions in total. Two major ones are on pages 73 and 74 respectively, where Maxine’s voice cuts visibly into Brave Orchid’s narration and brings the narration back to level 1b. As well as these, we find two minor interruptions, which are not shown in the table, that momentarily indicate the presence of Maxine the ‘real’ narrator – the one who impersonates Brave Orchid and channels her narration. Chronologically, the first interjection is the use of the speech tag ‘said my mother’, as in “‘I had finished reading my novel,” said my mother’ (WW 72, emphasis added). The use of ‘my mother’ here alludes to Maxine’s presence at level 1. The second interruption is more noticeable. Maxine’s voice from level 1b interrupts Brave Orchid’s narration with an impersonation of the classmates’ response to her mother’s story. Maxine says ‘Yes they [the classmates] had. Wasn’t it like the electric wires that one sometimes heard in the city? Yes, it was the sound of energy amassing’ (WW 73). The third occasion is a description placed in the middle of Brave Orchid’s speech and it is separated by dashes: ‘she [Brave Orchid] pointed with the flat of her palm as if it balanced a top’ (WW 74). The third-person point of view and the past tense show that the line is also delivered by Maxine’s narrator voice from level 1b. The fourth instance is a longer description of the classmates’ response to Brave Orchid’s talk-story: ‘The students moved away from the bag in which they collected their quilting scraps and pulled up their feet that were dangling over the edge of the bed’ (WW 74). Here the third-person narrative and past tense show that, just as in the third interruption, it is spoken by Maxine’s voice from level 1b.
I suggest that the way Maxine interrupts her impersonation of Brave Orchid at level 2 with her narration from level 1b is estranging: Maxine’s multiple voice narration can be seen as a ‘one-man show’ in which Maxine the storyteller-narrator plays several roles, including those of the narrator, Brave Orchid and Brave Orchid’s classmates.\textsuperscript{40} I think that the fact that she plays more than one part means that it is technically impossible for Maxine to impersonate Brave Orchid to the extent of convincing the reader that she exists now, as a character. This style of acting/narrating echoes Brecht’s theatrical notion of estrangement, for Brecht speaks of an estranging form of acting that does not delude the audience into believing that the characters and events on stage are real. Maxine’s impersonation of Brave Orchid can be seen as ‘quoting’ the character;\textsuperscript{41} that is why she can be flexible in interrupting her impersonation. Brecht thinks that this style of acting assigns the audience the position of critical observers. In the case of Maxine’s narration, I think that the estrangement effect invites the reader to identify with the perspective of Maxine the storyteller-narrator who is mostly satirical about Chinese cultural practices. After all, the protagonist Maxine is the alter-ego of Kingston the author in the autobiographical work. Maxine, who was born in America and never visited China, is estranged from Chinese culture. By presenting Brave Orchid’s ghost-combating story, which is a conventional Chinese cultural theme, in the estranging talk-story style, Kingston expresses her estranged relation to the culture. As readers follow Maxine the storyteller-narrator’s estranging narration, they also share her sardonic attitude towards the culture. In a sense, her narration revives the reader’s habitual attitudes

\textsuperscript{40} Børdahl (Oral Tradition, 194) proposes that ‘the storyteller [is] a kind of character in a one-man show, where the actor plays several roles’.

\textsuperscript{41} Brecht uses ‘quoting the character’ to describe Mei Lanfang’s style of acting (‘On Chinese Acting’, 132).
towards the conventional ghost theme, but makes it strange, as if it is being experienced for the first time.

We have seen in the first example how Maxine’s narrator voice from level 1b intervenes in her impersonation of her mother at level 2. The following example illustrates a similar pattern. Maxine’s narration of her mother’s story at level 1b is twice interrupted by her mother’s voice in the form of direct speech and the present tense. Both of these interruptions, which happen intensely on pages 63 and 64, bring the narration back to level 1a. The first one is:

She [Brave Orchid] quickly built a reputation for being brilliant, a natural scholar who could glance at a book and know it.

‘The other students fought over who could sit next to me at exams,’ says my mother. ‘One glimpse at my paper when they got stuck, and they could keep going.’ (WW 63, emphasis added)

The first sentence in the above excerpt belongs to level 1b, as it is in past tense, and is delivered in third-person singular ‘she’. The second sentence belongs to level 1a because the speech tag of Brave Orchid’s utterance is in the present tense, and ‘my mother’ indicates Maxine’s first-person narration at level 1a. Thus, Brave Orchid’s speech is on the same narrative plane as Maxine the storyteller-narrator’s. The abrupt transition into level 1a is more obvious when Brave Orchid’s voice intrudes into Maxine’s narration again, three paragraphs later:

She [Brave Orchid] did not want to overhear students or teachers say, ‘She must be exceedingly stupid, doing no better than anyone else when she is a generation older. She’s so dumb, she has to study day and night.’

‘I studied far in advance,’ says my mother. ‘I studied when the breathing coming from the beds and coming through the wood walls was deep and even […] I let them take turns sitting next to me at the tests.’ The sweat of
hard work is not to be displayed. It is much more graceful to appear favored by the gods. (WW 64, emphasis added)

As in the previous excerpt, the first sentence is Maxine’s narration at level 1b. The next paragraph is Brave Orchid’s direct speech. The speech tag is put in present tense and ‘my mother’, the subject, indicates Maxine’s first-person narration. Brave Orchid’s speech in this example not only signifies level 1a but occasions Maxine to speak in the voice of level 1a. The last two lines of the excerpt, in which Maxine comments about hiding one’s hard work, is delivered in the voice of a storyteller-narrator, as it is her direct address to the reader in the present tense.

Brave Orchid’s speeches at level 1a in these two interventions have an estranging quality because they, unlike her other speeches at level 2, which are channelled through Maxine’s impersonation, are uttered by herself. Since level 1a is on an equal footing with the extradiegetic audience, Brave Orchid’s speeches at this level resemble the audience’s response at an oral storytelling performance. It sounds as if she suddenly appears as a member of the audience who listens and comments on Maxine’s story-talking. In this case, it seems that the readers of Kingston’s text are estranged from the entire storytelling activity: on the one hand, the first example shows that readers are estranged from Maxine’s talk-story due to her multiple narrative roles; on the other hand, this example shows that the readers are not simply part of the audience either. They do not have the same status as Brave Orchid at level 1a who can make comments. Rather, the readers are estranged and confined to the perimeter of Maxine’s talk-story activity. They become observers of both the storytelling and story-listening processes.

While such interruptions of voices from different narrative levels show the flexibility of Kingston’s stylistic arrangement, this last example will illustrate how
narrative levels are covertly connected. If we look again at the incident wherein the voice of Maxine the storyteller-narrator at level 1a switches, for the first time, to that of Maxine the narrator at level 1b, we see that she does not state that ‘my mother once told me that’ when introducing her narration of her mother’s past. Instead, she begins telling the story as if there is no time-lapse and no reporting/retelling process involved. At the first change from level 1a to lb Kingston writes: ‘I [Maxine] keep looking to see whether she [Brave Orchid] was afraid. Year after year my father did not come home or send for her’ (WW 60). The first sentence belongs to level 1a because Maxine is looking at her mother’s photograph and she speaks her thought in first-person ‘I’. But the second sentence immediately unfolds what happened long ago when Brave Orchid was waiting in China. Despite the large lapse in time, the transition is carried out discreetly in the middle of the paragraph. The exit and entry between the two time spans is so fleeting that the change from present to past tense may not easily be noticed.

In storytelling, such a subtle transition in narrative levels can evoke an estrangement effect: the brief transition brings a quick change in time and physical settings that may momentarily confuse and, as a result, estrange the readers: it takes them a while to figure out, and adjust to, the setting of old China. More importantly, since Maxine does not forewarn the readers about the beginning of her ‘talk-story’ at level 1b, her unexpected omniscient narrative voice may create discomfort for readers. They may ponder Maxine’s narrative status, which has abruptly changed from autodiegetic to heterodiegetic, as her level 1b narrative unfolds. In this sense, this transition of Maxine from a narrator and character to becoming a narrator outside of the story is estranging. To put it in Brecht’s terms, the readers’ awareness of the vantage point of Maxine’s narration means that they are not in the ‘illusion’ of the
story but are estranged from it; and their estrangement allows them to read with the critical attitude of an observer.

**Conclusion**

In chapter 3, I have presented and analysed two oral storytelling stylistic features found in *The Woman Warrior*: the repetition of the ‘tongue-cutting’ image in ‘A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe’, and the multiple narrative voices in ‘Shaman’. I have illustrated how the recurrent ‘tongue-cutting’ motif gradually evolves into other images, such as ‘the telling list’ and ‘throat pain’. I have also shown how the different narrative levels in the text are flexibly and subtly connected. Each of these narrative techniques adapted from traditional oral storytelling are estranging in their respective ways. These borrowed techniques are an integral part of Kingston’s cultural translation which gives rise to hybridity in *The Woman Warrior*.

In chapter 2 we also saw how Kingston understands and translates Chinese cultural elements from the vantage point of her hybrid Chinese-American identity. Her translation displays a hybridity which transforms the two cultures and their languages and creates an in-between space wherein she deconstructs boundaries existing between disparate cultural domains. We might even conceptualise this process of hybridization as operating at an intra-subjective level – as a kind of healing of a schizoid self. Hybridity, we might surmise, aims at transformation – at the expansion and fusion of estranged selves and estranged cultures.

Kingston uproots Chinese oral storytelling techniques from their original context, in which they are normally used to narrate a repertoire of tales featuring a subset of themes and motifs, and revives them in and for a new hybrid cultural framework. This is a form of the literary displacement which results in the creation of
new literary contours, a new ethnic-linguistic conceptual framework, an innovative focus and, above all, an unprecedented audience that shares a novel cultural and interpretive orientation. Such a complex literary and cultural mode can seem inimical, and thus estranging, to those who do not, and cannot, understand the myriad, and different, cultural constituents that are fused together in its creation. The native Chinese reader criticizes it for distorting and deforming important Chinese motifs, while for the American reader it seems exotic and mysterious, and thus incomprehensible. In this sense, cultural translation creates hybridization, which in turn opens up an in-between space of estrangement.

My discussion of Kingston’s cultural translation reveals two levels of estrangement effects in her work – the cultural level and textual level. Estrangement at cultural level results from her transposition of Chinese cultural, literary and linguistic materials to the American context. It leads to the formation of a hybridity which estranges both cultures. This is a higher – or, what I call, the macro-perspective – level of estrangement, and the estranging process includes Kingston’s translation of the Chinese oral storytelling narrative style. The way she uses Chinese narrative techniques in her text creates a literary fusion that estranges both traditional Chinese oral narratives and conventional English literary forms.

Estrangement at the textual level involves the effects generated by the stylistic features per se. I term this the micro-perspective level of estrangement. My analysis suggests that Kingston’s adapted talk-story narrative techniques – repetition, multiple narrative voices and the like – induce various estranging reading experiences. In fact, these techniques and their associated estrangement are inherent properties of traditional Chinese oral storytelling performance. As Kingston bears the narrative techniques across cultural and linguistic boundaries, so she transports some of their
embedded estranging qualities. To put it another way: she borrows the estrangement effect from Chinese oral storytelling, but the effect takes on new interpretive possibilities in her hybrid text.

In the next and concluding chapter, I will reflect on the creative component of my thesis – the novel entitled *The Genius of Asia*, which is also an identity-seeking story, to illustrate how my translation of Hong Kong culture conveys a sense of estrangement. In addition, I consider the significance of reader response in the production of estrangement effects.
CHAPTER 4

_The Genius of Asia: Estrangement and Readership_

It is a challenge for me to narrate Hong Kong, a place where I was born and raised, using the English language as my medium of narration. The creative component of this thesis, _The Genius of Asia_, is a novel set in Hong Kong soon after the SARS pandemic in 2003 – a time when social anxiety is still settling and the economy is recovering from the crisis which has caused among other things, high unemployment. The story is about Yu, a local, desperate, young male graduate, who takes a job in a funeral parlour. He has grown up in Wong Tai Sin, a working class district that houses a large portion of Hong Kong’s aged population, new immigrants from Mainland China, and some who become psychotic because they cannot handle the stress of modern living. The socio-economic conditions of the area compel him to be resourceful in seeking employment. However, Yu belongs to the younger and more cosmopolitan generation of Hong Kong, and working in a funeral parlour forces him to encounter many traditional Chinese practices. He feels quite alienated and estranged when he departs his customary post-colonial British world, where materialism and modern technology prevail, to work in the strange world of the funeral business, where death, beliefs, ghosts, traditions and pragmatism intermingle. So begins an adventure.

In the previous chapters we have seen how Kingston translates aspects of Chinese culture and adapts cultural materials, such as traditional mythical and oral stories, in order to fashion and convey her particular version of Chinese ethnicity. Like Kingston, my depiction of Yu’s confrontation with the traditional Chinese side of Hong Kong requires me to translate and adapt an extensive range of cultural
practices, motifs and attitudes into English. For example, in order to evoke the uncanny ambience of the funeral parlour world, I cite and adapt elements from a variety of Chinese funeral customs, ritual procedures in different regions of China, Taoist and Buddhist beliefs regarding death, conventional taboos on funeral-related activities, and traditional ghost tales. The process of translating Chinese cultural materials is challenging because of the vast disparities between the English and Chinese cultures and languages. It is especially difficult to find appropriate words in English to convey metaphorical meanings and sensibilities that are embedded in Chinese written characters and syntax. Nevertheless, and despite the complex procedure of simultaneously translating and creating a literary text, I find this kind of translation extremely inspiring.

The process of seeking a counterpart for a Chinese cultural term in English involves a sort of deconstruction of the term in order to tease out and examine its various components. This process means that we need to first ‘deform’, and thus defamiliarise, the original entity and then ‘form’ – or re-form – it in accordance with another cultural perspective. Such work is endlessly surprising; it reveals a richness and complexity of meanings in Chinese materials that my habitual perception tends to miss. In other words, I experience estrangement as I strive to describe a familiar culture in a foreign language.

Such estrangement prompts me as a writer straddling Chinese culture and the English language to translate Chinese cultural materials in a highly creative manner in order to highlight the uniqueness of that culture for Chinese natives and others who are supposedly knowledgeable about the culture. While I expect my style of translation and adaptation to estrange those readers, it will also be estranging for readers who are not familiar with, or have little knowledge about, Chinese culture.
The Chinese cultural elements in the text appear difficult to comprehend – and thus strange – to them; in addition, my translation foreignises the English language from its conventional use.¹ In fact, like Kingston’s text, my novel demonstrates an essential linguistic and cultural hybridity. Thematically speaking, its creative adaption of the culture serves to foreground the estranged situation of the protagonist, Yu, during his employment in the funeral parlour. In this sense my translation of Chinese culture in English language comes to echo Yu’s hybrid identity. To illustrate how my translation brings about these different aspects of estrangement let us look at my portrayal of the ‘Sorcerer’ characters in the funeral parlour.

**Estrangement effects in the translation of Sorcerers**

In the second part of my novel, ‘The Lotus Scent Chamber’, I depict a group of ‘Sorcerers’ – characters who conduct rituals in the funeral parlour. They are Sorcerer Chiu Chow, Sorcerer Fujian, Sorcerer Shanghai, Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches and Sorcerer Guangdong. The title ‘sorcerer’ is my translation for a type of Taoist monk who can be seen in Hong Kong and in most parts of China. I choose to translate ‘sorcerer’ in order to establish an association with the characters who possess magical powers in western fantasy fiction. Such characters can also go by names like ‘mage, sorceress, wizard, warlock, witch, or necromancer’.² The title ‘Sorcerer’ is a deliberately fanciful designation in the largely realist context of my story and is intended to create a mood reminiscent of magic-realism; one not unlike the effect created by Kingston’s translation of the Chinese word gwai as ‘ghost’.³ In this sense

¹ See discussion in chapter 2 of Venuti’s foreginisation, p.238
³ See discussion in chapter 2, p.248.

As well, these characters are named after regions whence most Hong Kong families originated. I believe that the awkwardness of the names augments the strangeness already conjured by their titles. Since their names foreground the regional funeral customs they specialise in, my descriptions of these Sorcerers’ personalities and behaviours are constructed on the basis of those regions’ stereotypical images. As a result, the supposedly ordinary cultural figures are further estranged and transformed into metaphorical figures that represent different Chinese regional traits. For instance, I depict Sorcerer Shanghai as an arrogant person who dresses in gaudy outfits, sips expensive drinks and is served by a big group of subordinates. The image comes from a stereotype according to which all Shanghai people are rich, condescending and inclined to show-off. On the other hand, Sorcerer Guangdong is a gentleman who behaves in Chinese operatic manner and delivers archaic speeches. This portrayal is based on the standard, rounded Cantonese accent spoken by most people from Guangzhou (the capital of Guangdong province). To Hong Kong people, who also speak Cantonese, this accent resembles the way actors and actresses speak in Cantonese operas. Note that the estrangement effect here is generated by exaggerating stereotypical regional traits which are habitually taken as norms. By magnifying customary and expected perceptions, the ‘norms’ themselves are exaggerated, then becoming strange and slightly fanciful. In this way, the Sorcerer characters are first estranged from their real-life identity as Taoist monks, and further estranged by their embodiment of amplified versions of regional stereotypical images.

The same estranging mechanism occurs in Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches’s extreme temperament and in Sorcerer Chiu Chow’s talkativeness. In addition to their
exaggerated stereotypical images, I use other estranging aspects in my portrayal of their characters. Take for instance my literal translation of a region in southern China called *Hai Lu Feng*: *Hai* means ‘sea’, *Lu* means ‘land’ and *Feng* means ‘rich’. Rather than using the transliteration ‘*Hai Lu Feng*’, I devise the translation ‘Sea and Land Riches’ in order to evoke an image of a wilderness between the mountains and the sea that these stereotypically fearsome people inhabit. The visual quality in the translated name accentuates the characteristics of Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches and the people from that region who are said to be hot-tempered. Thus, my literal translation dramatises and estranges the normal geographical designation. This particular form of estrangement effect does not occur in the translations of other regional names, though the translation of ‘Chiu Chow’, as in Sorcerer Chiu Chow, is only a slight variation on it. ‘Chiu Chow’ is a transliteration based on Cantonese pronunciation, whereas ‘Fujian’, ‘Shanghai’ and ‘Guangdong’ are transliterations from Mandarin pronunciation. The name ‘Chiu Chow’ itself produces little estrangement effect, yet the rather awkward co-existence of the two sets of transliterations reflects the linguistic situation of Hong Kong where Cantonese is the native language and the majority possess a basic grasp of Mandarin.

Now let’s consider the estranging elements in my portrayal of Sorcerer Chiu Chow. Sorcerer Chiu Chow is a loud talker since my description draws on the stereotypically loud and rough tone of the Chiu Chow dialect. During the Sorcerer’s telephone conversation, he complains about practical issues concerning the funeral business – clients, payment and the obnoxious behaviours of mainland Chinese.⁴ These everyday issues, described in realist terms, contrast with the supposed magical quality indicated by his title ‘Sorcerer’. Whilst such ordinary concerns may neutralise

⁴ See *The Genius of Asia*, chapter 7.
the fantastic aura of the Sorcerer and make him appear rather realistic, the contrast also heightens the character’s ambiguous nature and his mysterious estrangement from his real-life counterpart – a Taoist monk.

Here it is important to note that the story is presented from Yu’s point of view. It is from his perspective that we encounter the Sorcerers, imagine their manners and listen to their speeches. In this sense, the unusual combination of the westernised title ‘Sorcerer’ and Chinese regional names echoes Yu’s incomprehension and estrangement within the cultural and religious context of the funeral parlour. Since the Sorcerers’ names hybridise Chinese tradition with western magical connotations, they also show that Yu must attempt to understand the strange characters he encounters through his hybrid interpretive framework. Likewise, the exaggerated stereotypical images can be interpreted as reflecting Yu’s naivety and his ignorance of various Chinese regions. In this sense, Yu’s understanding of the Sorcerers and their specific regional traits reflects his struggle to relate to his new environment. Similarly, the vivid descriptions of the Sorcerer’s appearances, attitudes and behaviours result from his anxious need to comprehend the funeral parlour world. Thus, in the scene concerning Sorcerer Chiu Chow, Yu listens intently to the entirety of the Sorcerer’s telephone conversation as if he is eavesdropping, observing and seeking a clue that can relieve his bewilderment.

Detailed descriptions are frequently seen not only in my depiction of the funeral parlour, but also in my depiction of the sociological situation of contemporary Hong Kong and in Yu’s nightmares and ghostly imaginings. In fact, long descriptive passages are a pervasive and deliberate feature of my narrative. In the following, I will elaborate on how these descriptive details convey a sense of estrangement for the
reader and how they reflect Yu’s psychological development, which is the central theme of the work.

**Estrangement effects in miniaturised descriptions**

I have said that the elaborate descriptions of the Sorcerers in the funeral parlour emphasise Yu’s hybrid perspective and alienation as he re-encounters the Chinese tradition after having been influenced by western ideology and modernization in Hong Kong. The descriptions of Yu’s life outside the funeral parlour tend to focus on aspects of his surroundings which are not typical of the mainstream social environment of Hong Kong. An obvious example is my portrayal of Wong Tai Sin, Yu’s home district. The district houses a large portion of Hong Kong’s aged population, new immigrants and, in some cases, mentally deranged people like the Genius of Asia and Pao Ding. The demographic of the district makes it in a sense an alternative territory which belies the prevailing image of Hong Kong as a cosmopolitan financial centre. By describing in fine detail the Wong Tai Sin district and its residents, I construct an ‘estranged’ setting and atmosphere that arouses the reader’s curiosity as they journey into an unusual region of Hong Kong. Since the descriptions are fashioned from Yu’s point of view, the minute details indicate – and this is one of his character traits – that he is an extremely observant character:

Four old ladies in violet floral-print sleeveless shirts and matching pants were ‘chilling out’ on the doorstep of the shopping centre behind Yu. They were enjoying the zephyr that flowed from the air-conditioned mall of the district, Dragon Runway Shopping Arcade, named after the main road. The old ladies didn’t mind blocking half of the entrance; it was their territory, even though that meant crowds of shoppers had to squeeze through the remaining one-metre-wide door. Three women with broad-brimmed straw hats who looked like farmers’ wives joined the four old ladies for a chat. The three were holding armfuls of incense sticks, wish
candles and coloured-paper gifts for Wong Tai Sin, the Taoist master for whom the temple was built. A bus had stopped in front of Yu to discharge passengers. The three farmers’ wives rushed forwards brandishing their goods despite the heat the bus was radiating.\(^5\)

This passage occurs in chapter 1 of the novel when Yu is waiting for the bus at the bus stop. The description from his vantage point shows that he pays sharp attention to an ordinary street scene, though he resides in the district. The fact that he carefully observes every-day phenomena suggests that, to some extent, he is an estranged individual in an estranged district of Hong Kong.

One purpose of my detailed descriptions of the setting of Wong Tai Sin is to foreground this intrinsically estranged quality in Yu’s consciousness. It is important to reveal this part of his personality because such attentiveness to peripheral matters in his surroundings is what eventually draws him to look for work in the funeral parlour, an often hidden sector of that community. Since both the detailed depictions of the funeral parlour and those of Wong Tai Sin are from Yu’s point of view, the reader senses that he is in a frequently estranged condition in both settings.

I also describe in extensive detail the dream/vision sequences that gradually lead to his vision of the ghost of the old lady who wears a red lily gown. I elaborate on the scenes in which the old lady appears. I also construct graphic images of the windmill, wind chime and the Eight Hanger. Some of these descriptive passages are so miniatuurized, and the narrative tempo consequently so restrained, that they temporarily divert the realist mode into one of magic-realist fantasy. For instance, when Yu slips into a coma after having been attacked by Pao Ding, I describe the windmill image:

\(^5\) See *The Genius of Asia*, p.3.
Round and round the windmill turned. Yu could feel it behind his forehead. He wondered why there was wind inside his head. Pao Ding must have cracked his skull; so wind leaked in. Or was it the injury inflicted by Sorcerer Sea and Land Riches? In slow motion, the windmill pulled away from Yu’s eyeballs and began to shrink. Now he felt it in the centre of his head. There was a rack behind the windmill constructed with three rattan rings – one big circle and two small circles arranged like Mickey Mouse ears. The big windmill was tied to the middle of the big circle; three small windmills were tied onto the small circles. They were all twirling vigorously; *wind must be strong in there*. Shiny pink and gold paper strips spiralled along the rattan rack like DNA. Six tiny bells dangled on the colourful rack. An empty red envelope with blessings written in gold was glued in the middle. Above the red envelope, two triangular red flags fluttered. 

In fact such magic-realist descriptions are intended to achieve a sudden change in tempo and mood in the flow of the narrative – a change that itself reflects something of the aesthetic ‘The Genius of Asia’. The resultant delay in plot development momentarily directs the reader away from the realist story of Yu’s life. This fanciful domain, with its ghostly images, is elaborately described. These changes of narrative pace and trajectory are intended both to deepen the central plot and to invest the themes of death and funeral rites with a sense of magic and enchantment. These prolonged elaborations of strange images are then a fundamental and, I hope, effective aspect of the texture of my novel.

However, the readers’ presence in this fantastic domain is only temporary. Soon they return to the central plot of Yu’s story. In terms of the reading experience, these descriptive passages steer them between the magical and realist moods in a manner that is meant to be dream-like and estranging. As I have said, in terms of the portrayal

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6 See *The Genius of Asia*, p.144
of Yu, these miniaturised descriptions of ghostly images represent his active imagination and observant attitude. Thematically speaking, the images also reflect his developing sensitivity, even receptiveness, towards Chinese ghost culture. If the depiction of Wong Tai Sin and the Sorcerers in the funeral parlour conveys his estrangement from his surroundings, his vibrant imagination and exotic dreams suggest a potential re-familiarising movement wherein he re-engages imaginatively with the traditional culture of ghosts, even though the traditional spiritual world is still strange to him. Such movement from estrangement to creative re-engagement is an aspect of his struggle to re-establish his cultural identity, and this involves a realisation – on his part, but also on the readers’ – of his status as an outsider within this rather estranged Chinese cultural environment. This in turn occasions a redefinition of his identity as a Hong Kong Chinese.

While Yu’s psychological and emotional growth is the novel’s major theme, the alteration in his perspective towards the Chinese tradition is intended to be subtle. I do not aim to portray a dramatic shift in his belief system; a shift, say, from simple denial of the supernatural to an equally simple belief in its existence. Nor do I attempt to narrate a change from total ignorance of Chinese culture to a total familiarity with its various cultural and religious aspects. The process of change, which is gradual and never finally complete, is a consequence of Yu’s increasing embrace of the Chinese roots of his identity, which have been eclipsed by western modernity in Hong Kong. Even at the end of the story, he remains suspended on the fringe of traditional Chinese culture – or rather, still significantly estranged from it.

Such an alteration in cultural awareness reflects the sociological situation of Hong Kong as a former British colony. Those like Yu who grow up under a British educational system tend to feel rather distanced from Chinese culture. It is hard for
the younger generation in Hong Kong to identify fully with their Chinese cultural roots; yet it is exactly this position of being on the periphery of the traditional culture that constitutes what might be termed the ‘Hong Kong-Chinese identity’. Here it should be noted that religions do not play a significant role in contemporary Hong Kong life. True, Taoism is the basis of Chinese culture; its philosophy is largely embedded in Chinese customs and cultural knowledge, such as, feng shui (a study of interior arrangement of buildings), tai chi (a movement controlling exercise), qi gong (a breath controlling exercise) and Chinese medicine; but while many Hong Kong people do follow these practices as part of a philosophy of embracing a healthier lifestyle, they seldom practice them as aspects of a traditional religious way of life. Partly because of this widely-occurring and rather blithe disregard for traditional cultural and religious practices, my novel is pitched in a light comic genre. The comic inflection alludes to – but without sternly condemning – the superficiality of contemporary Hong Kong religious life. It also reflects the character of Yu who is a fun, sensitive and quite serious person, but not one given to brooding depression or western style of existential crisis.

**Oral Storytelling Features in The Genius of Asia**

I have identified two estrangement techniques in my novel: the creative translation of the Sorcerers and the miniaturised descriptions of funeral parlour and urban scenes. There are other estranging aspects in my work which are engendered by translation and various stylistic techniques; however, space does not permit a very detailed discussion of these here. And, in any case, a limited number of examples will suffice to highlight some of the salient estrangement effects in my novel.
Another one of these is the way in which I have adapted certain traditional narrative features from Chinese oral storytelling – rather as Kingston does in *The Woman Warrior*. My analysis of Kingston’s style in chapter 3 shows that she has borrowed the characteristic oral storytelling techniques of repetition and multiple narrative voices. My novel too employs such devices – devices intended to achieve estrangement effects.

There are a number of recurrent imageries and motifs throughout *The Genius of Asia*; for example, the flower imageries (calla lily, White Flower Embrocation), the colours of the pagoda wind chime (‘pink, blue, peach, purple and green’), instances of physical injury that Yu receives (a scratch on his forearm, a bump on his forehead and a cut on his shin), and the ‘genius’ motif. These repetitions resemble oral storytelling. As in Kingston’s text, the imagery or motif concerned tends both to recur and to evolve. While such a style of repetition estranges the original imagery or motif, it also creates estrangement for the reader. Take for example the iteration of the all-important ‘genius’ motif.7

When the term ‘the Genius of Asia’ first appears, in chapter 1, it refers to the now mentally deranged teenage boy whose mother has tried to make him a singer. Initially, the term has a concrete reference to the boy; however, as the story develops, the term’s reference to that particular person becomes increasingly tenuous. The following two examples describe how Yu imagines the Genius of Asia’s voice, thoughts and actions. In these excerpts, ‘the Genius of Asia’ resembles an inner voice in Yu’s consciousness:

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7 See Appendix, p.303, for a complete list of all the instances of ‘genius’ in *The Genius of Asia*. 296
**Example 1** He [Yu] could almost hear *the Genius of Asia*, waving on the sheet metal body of a bus, singing, ‘Congratulations!’ (*GOA* 37, *emphasis added*)

**Example 2** ‘Uncle Bong,’’ guessed Yu. Even *the Genius of Asia* would have guessed. (*GOA* 42, *emphasis added*)

At this stage, the voice of ‘the Genius of Asia’ is rather informal and is largely a humorous reflection by Yu on the mental disturbance often seen in Wong Tai Sin district. As the term continues to recur it also starts to evolve and to connect to some Chinese traditional and cultural aspects. For instance:

**Example 3** Perhaps he [Sorcerer Guangdong] has swallowed a big pill and has just gone on living, hence his archaic manner, guessed *the Genius of Asia*. (*GOA* 115, *emphasis added*)

**Example 4** Yet, even then, he [Yu] wouldn’t stop worrying about ghosts once and for all. He was scared of ghosts sometimes. *It all depends on you, the Genius of Asia* repeated. (*GOA* 175, *emphasis added*)

These queries and concerns about the Sorcerer and the ghosts – aspects of traditional Chinese belief – indicate Yu’s increasing awareness of his originating culture. The fact that these thoughts are uttered by the voice of ‘the Genius of Asia’ in Yu’s mind inflects the term ‘the Genius of Asia’ with a new meaning. Rather than referring to the former singer, the term here can imply ‘the traditional wisdom of China’. This new meaning becomes explicit when repetition of the ‘genius’ motif morphs into the term ‘the Genius of Tao’:

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8 In this section, the abbreviation *GOA* is used to indicate citations from *The Genius of Asia*. 
Example 5 ‘It all depends on you. Tao never forces anybody to follow it. That is the genius of this culture,’ said Uncle Bong.

‘The Genius of what?’ asked Yu. He missed the last few words when the air-conditioner suddenly rumbled.

‘The Genius of Tao, the Way,’ Uncle Bong said (GOA 182, emphases added).

Here the ‘genius’ motif has undergone a profound evolution from being the derisive name for the teenage singer, to signifying the essence of traditional Chinese culture. This rather unpredictable transformative trajectory of the motif is intended to surprise – an arresting, and indeed estranging effect upon the reader.

However, the repetition of the motif does not stop here. In the second last chapter of the novel a classic Chinese poet Li Bai is called the ‘genius’:

Example 6 ‘Li Bai was a genius, wasn’t he?’ said Mina. (GOA 200, emphasis added).

Unlike the teenage boy who in fact does not possess unusual genius, Li Bai possessed real genius in poetry. The appearance of the poet towards the end of the story creates a deliberately jarring contrast to the singer who appears at the beginning. While the vast discrepancies between these symbols of ‘genius’ is puzzling – and thus estranging – they reflect the deepening of Yu’s understanding of the true genius of Chinese culture. In this sense, the iteration of the ‘genius’ motif, which provides the novel’s title, hints at Yu’s psychological journey from observing a mentally disturbed character in his home district, to engaging with some of the core values of his culture – values that underlie funeral rituals and also inform some of the contemporary behaviour he sees around him.
A Reflection on Readership

In conclusion, some reflection on my intended readership. As I have said, I personally experienced estrangement between languages and cultures during the writing of this work. In order to produce a literary translation of the culture of Hong Kong, I had to estrange myself from my home culture to some extent and see it from the standpoint of an outsider. On the other hand, as I strove to delineate Chinese culture in English, I found that the English language also had an estranging effect on me and on my understanding of my culture. In this state of partial disorientation, I chose to present Yu’s story in an estranging style which I believe is an honest way to express the perplexity of cultural hybridity. However, while these estrangement techniques are part of the objective stylistic construction of my novel, their interpretation depends ultimately on the cultural locations and hermeneutic practices of its readers. As we have seen, Chinese readers can respond to an estrangement effect quite differently from readers unfamiliar with Chinese culture, or those from hybrid cultural background.⁹ Insofar as my work is written in English, it has the potential to reach a global readership. Hence the question: how should I address a culturally diverse audience?

In order to envisage my readership, I searched for clues from my predecessors – established Hong Kong English writers. I was inspired by the view of Agnes Lam, a well-known Hong Kong poet who writes in English. She suggests that there are ‘cultural constraints in the sense that readers from some cultures may be able to identify more easily with a certain poet than readers from other cultures’. Poets,

⁹ The diverse estrangements experiences recall Stanley Fish’s reader-response theory in which he challenges the idea that the text is the self-sufficient repository of meaning. He suggests that the formal structures of a text acquire significance only in the context of the reader’s experience. See Stanley Fish, Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (London: Harvard University Press, 1980), 2.
therefore, have to decide for themselves which readership they intend to reach.\textsuperscript{10}

Although she speaks in terms of poets’ cross-cultural situation, I find the idea of establishing a ‘target readership’ very helpful because it allows writers, whether poets or novelists, to focus their energies on maximising their communicativeness with specific groups of readers.\textsuperscript{11} According to Lam, the poet’s success as a communicator with a chosen readership is an important criterion for measuring how good a poet s/he is.\textsuperscript{12} Be that as it may, establishing a target readership can also foster the creativity of cross-cultural writers who tend to borrow materials from their home cultures. Their translations of the materials can be geared to ways in which the target readers can be assumed to comprehend their work. Nevertheless, I am concerned about the intelligibility of my work – especially of the translated cultural materials for readers who have not been factored into my target readership. Does establishing a target readership mean we can simply ignore those readers whom we do not include in our conception of that readership?

Before we try to answer this question, we might recall that the fundamental purpose of art, according to Shklovsky’s theory, is to estrange the audience by providing them with a new perspective for looking at ordinary objects. On this view, as we have seen, the audience then re-familiarises with that same object – an object which is now imbued with a new sensation. When readers who are not familiar with Chinese culture read Kingston’s translation of Chinese culture in English, the fact that they do not comprehend Chinese cultural and linguistic features does not mean that

\textsuperscript{10} Agnes Lam, ‘Defining Hong Kong poetry in English: An answer from linguistics,’ in \textit{Hong Kong English: Autonomy and Creativity}, ed. Kingsley Bolton (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), 188.

\textsuperscript{11} Precursor of Lam’s idea of ‘target reader’ can be traced back to Umberto Eco’s ‘model reader’. Eco writes: ‘To make his text communicative, the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by his possible reader. The author has thus to foresee a model of the possible reader supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them.’ See Umberto Eco, \textit{The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the semiotics of texts} (London: Hutchinson, 1979), 7.

\textsuperscript{12} Lam, \textit{op.cit.}, 188.

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the text then becomes meaningless to them. Rather, these readers experience forms of cultural and linguistic estrangement. Although such estrangement effects may momentarily confuse these readers, they also make them aware of the writer’s cultural and linguistic orientation, and if they try to engage deeply with the text, they will be able to re-familiarise themselves with the work and acquire new responses to the text’s language and the cultural milieu. Thus, even readers not included in the intended target audience, who are not familiar with the writer’s cultural and linguistic characteristics, can attain new cultural and linguistic understandings through the process of estrangement and re-familiarisation. In other words, cross-cultural writers should not be anxious that readers outside their target readerships will not immediately understand their works and their translated cultural materials, because the meaningfulness of such work is most likely to emerge after the reader has first experienced estrangement and unintelligibility.13

My novel is written for a target readership of English readers who possess only impressionistic knowledge of the culture and mores of contemporary Hong Kong. My creative translations of Chinese customs do not provide much background information for readers who are not familiar with traditional Chinese culture. In fact, it has been technically impossible to do so since the point of focalisation of my novel is the protagonist Yu, who possesses only a sketchy understanding of Chinese traditional practices.

I also regard young adult readers as an important part of my intended readership because the central theme of my novel concerns the psychological development of a young man who is trying to fashion an identity in an increasingly globalised – and thus estranging – world. My light comic tone is intended to let such readers down

lightly. This is not a novel of existential crisis. Of course, beyond a certain point, I cannot predict the way this novel will be interpreted by readers outside my target readership, nor whether their estrangement experiences will necessarily avail them of alternate cultural and linguistic understandings. However, I believe that by narrating my protagonist’s identity-seeking journey in an estranging style, I can effectively convey the strangeness and even tumult which are associated with the struggle of people of all ages to find secure individual identity in the modern westernised and globalised world – a world in which various forms of cultural and linguistic estrangements have become a familiar aspect of daily life.
Appendix: Complete List of Instances of ‘Genius’ in *The Genius of Asia*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Excerpt</th>
<th>Page no.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1       | ‘Have you got the post?’ asked the Genius of Asia.  
[...] The Genius of Asia was a local tragedy.  
That sweltering day when Yu was waiting for the bus with the Genius of Asia waiting for his post.  
‘Look, the Genius of Asia!’ howled Man.  
[...] But as Yu and Daniel also joined in to yell at the screen praising the beauty of Hong Kong, they were all reminded of the Genius of Asia and his bizarre life story. | 1-3     |
| 2       | The prompt phone call from the funeral parlour proved to him the accuracy of his intuition on that sweltering day at the bus stop when he stood with the Genius of Asia.  
He hadn’t thought his plan audacious on the day he stood next to the Genius of Asia at the bus stop. | 10      |
| 3       | He could almost hear the Genius of Asia, waving on the sheet metal body of a bus, singing, ‘Congratulations!’  
[...] The Genius of Asia, now bereft of his singing career, might be pleased too. | 37-38   |
| 4       | ‘Uncle Bong,’ guessed Yu. Even the Genius of Asia would have guessed. | 42      |
| 6       | The opening of the rice bag was punctured so Yu only needed to push the hairpin in and out of the holes in a running stitch. *So simple even the Genius of Asia can manage it!*  
It wasn’t food poisoning; even the Genius of Asia could tell that. | 68-73   |
| 8       | Even the Genius of Asia couldn’t take back the inauspicious reference to collecting Father’s bones from his grave.  
*If there was one thing Sorcerer Shanghai knew about ghosts, he surely knew how to make Shanghainese the richest ghosts in Hell,* teased the Genius of Asia. | 96-104  |
| 9       | *Perhaps he has swallowed a big pill and has just gone on living, hence his archaic manner,* guessed the Genius of Asia.  
He saw a section of the Dragon Runway in the distance, but the temple was on another section of the road near the bus stop where the Genius of Asia hung out. | 116-123 |
| 11      | Potential Geniuses of Asia in white shirts and tight grey shorts plodded home carrying huge school backpacks, water bottles across their chests and snacks in their hands.  
So Yu wouldn’t venture to step any closer until he determined that the man was as harmless as the Genius of Asia. | 138-139 |
| 12      | I was even tempted to go to Wong Tai Sin Temple to see what fate would reveal to me, as you had suggested with your usual genius.  
They had twirled around a red envelope in the middle. Yu paused. The Genius of Asia tapped him on the shoulder. | 159-163 |
| 13      | Yet, even then, he wouldn’t stop worrying about ghosts once and for all. He was scared of ghosts sometimes. *It all depends on you,* the Genius of Asia repeated.  
‘It all depends on you. Tao never forces anybody to follow it. That is the genius of this culture,’ said Uncle Bong.  
‘The Genius of what?’ asked Yu. He missed the last few words when the air-conditioner suddenly rumbled.  
‘The Genius of Tao, the Way,’ Uncle Bong said and finished what was left in the cup in one gulp.  
[...] Yu wasn’t sure what he had understood about the Genius of Tao, though he now realised Uncle Bong wasn’t that hard to talk to when the elderly man wasn’t angry. | 176-184 |
That is the Way for us and we navigate by our senses. And such flexibility is the genius …’

‘Of Tao,’ Yu finished Chung’s sentence.

‘Correct,’ Chung grinned.

[...] His mind was foggy; he wondered if he would ever sense anything regarding the Way, or the genius of Tao.

Death was never far away, the Genius of Asia now told him.

Yu heard the voice of the Genius of Asia: it was part of the universe, it said.

‘Li Bai was a genius, wasn’t he?’ said Mina.

He didn’t know how long it would take but he wasn’t going to pursue a career in Kowloon Funeral Parlour. He was certain about that. Why not? asked that inner voice, the Genius of Asia.

Li Bai the genius said we shouldn’t harbour grudges because nothing would last – all matters ended when we died.

Flexibility, he recalled, was the genius of Tao. Yu repeated Uncle Bong’s words.

[...] His father needed to be educated about the genius of Tao.

Li Bai was a genius.

The Genius of Asia was always there at the bus stop but no one ever asked him anything.

‘Have you got the post?’ asked the Genius, [...] ‘The Genius of Asia,’ Yu read on a bus stopped in front of them.

‘I’m the Genius of Tao,’ Yu said and laughed at his own joke.

The Genius didn’t respond to Yu’s humour; he continued to stare ahead and ignore his presence. Yu stopped laughing and stood next to the young man in silence.

‘Brother?’ Mina stood in front of Yu and the Genius of Asia. ‘What’re you doing here?’

[...] In the suddenly bright scene, Yu saw the Genius of Asia dash past him.
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