

# KILLING GHOSTS

## 殺鬼

**Winner of the 2009 China Times Open Book Award**

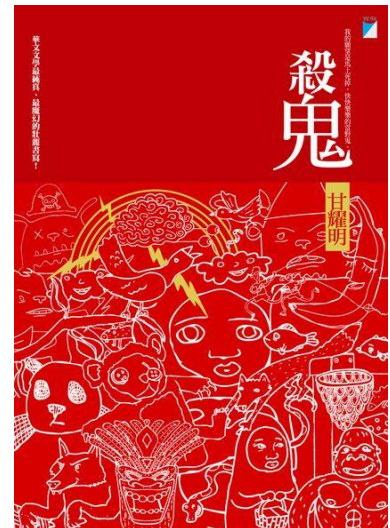
**Winner of the 2009 Taipei Book Fair Award**

Set in the 1940s rural Taiwan before and after the Japanese colonial rule, Kan Yao-Ming's epic *Killing Ghosts* was a publishing sensation when it first came out. A dazzling feat of storytelling, it tells the adventures of an unusually tall boy for his age by the name of Pa, a kind of a superman imbued with the spirits of the gods. He hurtles through a magical landscape filled with trains that 'can walk without rails,' boy soldiers who march with their family tombstones on their backs, and a stubborn old man who defies the Japanese rule by burying himself alive before turning into a forest. Told in a language mixing Mandarin, Japanese, Hakka and Taiwanese languages, the novel addresses serious historical and political issues with a fabulist approach that is gleefully irreverent and wildly imaginative.

*Killing Ghosts* became Taiwan's most talked-about Chinese novel in 2009, selling over 10,000 copies, a huge number for a domestic literary novel. It won both the China Times Open Book Award, the Taipei Book Fair Award, and was chosen as the Chinese Book of the Year by Books.com, the country's leading online bookstore. Mo Yan, wrote an enthusiastic blurb for the book, praising it as a story that 'has the power to move heaven and earth.'

## Kan Yao-Ming 甘耀明

Kan Yao-Ming is hailed as Taiwan's foremost 'Neo Nativist' writer, successfully mixing farce, tall tales, folk legend and collective memories to create his own uniquely magic realist world. Like a magician of words, he writes with a highly experimental but always accessible style. Kan's reputation was first built on two collections of short stories, *The Mysterious Train*, and *The School of The Water Spirit*, and later *Tales at a Funeral*. His short fiction has won numerous awards and is often chosen for 'Best of the Year'



• Category: Literary Fiction

• Publisher: Aquarius

• Date: 7/2009

• Rights contact:

Laetitia Chien (Aquarius)

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• Pages: 448pp

• Length: 300,000 characters  
(approx. 190,000 words in English)

• Rights sold: China (China Friendship); Japan (Hakushuisha)

anthologies. He is two-time winner of the China Times Open Book Award.

# KILLING GHOSTS

By Kan Yao-Ming. Translated by Sylvia Li-Chun Lin & Howard Goldblatt.

## 1. The Boy With a Savage Name

The beast was a giant steel killer with ten legs and four hearts. When it first came to the savage land of Guanniuwo, it pressed down so heavily on the road that water seemed to ooze from the surface, as if a grand ocean liner was sailing down the street. The new world was finally here, and it shook up everything.

When the beast arrived, some people fled while others crowded around for a look. Only Pa planned to stop it. Though still in elementary school, Pa was nearly six feet tall. He was immensely strong, and ran so fast that he even left his shadow behind. Those two traits alone earned him the title *choudokyuujin*, meaning those with immeasurable power, or, as you might say today, a superman.

School had just let out for Pa and his friends on that bone-chilling day that the beast first arrived. They were walking on the handcart tracks that had been laid in earlier times, hoping the ice-cold metal would freeze the soles of their feet enough to ease the pain of walking barefoot, even though sometimes their feet got so numb that they did not realize the skin on their toes had broken. Suddenly, Pa knelt down and pressed his ear against the track. He could hear a handcart speeding towards them. Beyond this, still far off in the distance, he heard the coal-crunching roar of the steel beast. Leaping to his feet and donning his Japanese-style military cap, he declared that he would stop it. The other boys, all Pa's followers, put on their own bucket caps and gave them a perfunctory tug; then they spread their arms just as he had, though they had no idea what they could do to help. Pa was different. His eyes brimmed with excitement as he flexed his muscles and stepped onto the bridgehead, spreading his legs, stiffening his waist and puffing out his chest. He roared. Standing alone, he would single-handedly stop this monstrous power that had changed Guanniuwo.

Now, here was the rumbling beast, spewing smoke into the air, swelling the crest lines of nearby mountains. Turning the corner, its turquoise shell came into view, perched atop ten wheels and four upright cylinders with violently pounding pistons. It was a train that could travel without tracks, preceded by a Jeep and trailed by two trucks and five horses. From the Jeep, a member of the military police shouted at the handcart to get off the tracks, or else it would be crushed into a meat patty. A couple of the more daring kids ran up and yelled in Japanese, 'It's a *densha!* A train!' others yelled, also in Japanese, 'No, it's a *jidousha!* A bus!' The two groups argued back and forth, but the heavy breathing of the beast drowned out their voices.

Suddenly, the villagers' attention was diverted elsewhere. A frightened ox, foaming at the mouth and bleeding from a taut nose ring, charged at Pa, as the empty cart it had been attached to hit a rock and shot into the air. The owner, an old farmer, gave chase, screaming and crying. Seeing this, Pa called upon all

his strength. He grabbed a horn with one hand, the nose ring with the other, and, just like that, with the ease of picking up morsels of food with chopsticks, he had the ox lying quietly in his arms.

Everyone cheered. The Japanese commander, Lieutenant Colonel Kano Takeo, was so startled that he shot out of his seat. He turned to the village head, who was traveling with his retinue, asking, ‘Who is that?’

‘That’s Pa, a child abandoned by his parents. He may be big, but he’s only in elementary school,’ the village head answered in a respectful tone. ‘He has an exceptional strength. He’s the kind of boy who will stand in the way of anything unusual on the road, even if its the north wind itself.’

With his lips pressed together, Kano silently sized up the boy standing in the distance. ‘A boy with such great strength is a *choudokyuujin*.’ He decided to put the boy’s strength to the test. Pa was to be given the chance to stop something, anything he wanted – if that meant stopping the whole world on its axis, so much the better..

Kano was called the ‘Demon Colonel’ because of his ferocious manner. Every command he made had to be analyzed and interpreted a hundred different ways so that his subordinates could carry it out without fail. Today, after hearing Kano’s instructions, an orderly reined in his horse and delivered the command to the ranks. The leading Jeep screeched to a halt in front of Pa, not because he was blocked, but because of the unthinkable consequences if he were to disobey an order. Seeing this, Pa’s eyes bulged with anger. ‘Out of my way.’ He demanded. ‘You’re blocking the beast behind you.’ He pushed aside the Jeep with the military police still inside. The entire action used up less energy than he would have needed to pee. Then, clapping the dirt from his hands, he stepped back onto the bridgehead, cracked his knuckles till they throbbed, and spread his arms again. The clamoring villagers stood by expectantly.

The train’s engineer spun the oversized steering wheel. To make bystanders’ hair stand on end he only needed to pull the lever which sounded the locomotive’s shrill whistle. But when he did that, he was answered by a shout from Pa, who had stored up enough energy to meet this challenge. His shout brought the train to a shuddering stop, releasing blasts of steam from both sides, as if Pa had turned it into nothing more than a paper model. A stoker emerged from the rear of the train and climbed up to the roof, where he opened the water tank and dragged over a hose to refill the tank.

Exhilarated by Pa’s ability to make the wheeled beast stop, and seeing it hesitate to continue, the village kids cheered noisily. Then they quietly exclaimed to each other, for it seemed to them that the newly built wooden edifice wasn’t a train station – it was an animal pen and the water tower was there to wash the beast’s throat. After refilling the tank, the stoker ran back to the boiler, where steam, like transparent earthworms, filled the sweltering air. The fire baked his sweat-soaked body dry; white grains of salt rained down from him and rustled under his feet. He shoveled lumps of coal into the firebox while voracious flames crunched them up. Then a single piece tumbled out of the box and shot into the air, where a nimble child caught it before it fell to the ground. He took a bite, breaking his tooth and smearing his mouth black. ‘It’s rock fuel!’ he shouted.

Seeing as the beast had refused to come to Pa, he went up to argue with it. What a magnificent behemoth it was. On its facing was black sandalwood plaque inlaid with a chrysanthemum ring, with the

words *Hakkou ichiu*: Eight Corners of the World under One Roof. What it really meant was: We will conquer the world. The front of the train was also adorned with two crossed flags, one showing a red sun, the other with sixteen red rays emanating from the center. They flapped in the wind, declaring their military might. With bold, masculine lines, the train was equipped with a maze of shafts and delicate gears that meshed mysteriously; the solid rubber tires were attached to a drive sprocket that was nearly 2 meters in diameter. The beast's shell emitted a bright glint under the slanting setting sun.

Pa touched the cowcatcher, which gave off waves of static electricity. 'It bit me!' he screeched. He nearly lost his courage when he walked cautiously to the other side for a closer look. Then he yelled again, even louder than before; not in reaction to another electric shock, but because he had caught sight of the front-page headline on a newspaper pasted to the side of the train: 'Imperial Air Force Launches Surprise Attack on America: Bombs Sink Pearl Harbor.' America's Pearl Harbor had been destroyed. It said 'sink', not 'attacked', as if Pearl Harbor had plunged to the depths of the ocean, like a warship. As air filled his lungs, an elated Pa spread his arms and shouted, 'Bombard America! Am-er-ica - has - fallen!' By 'fallen' he meant taken by Japan. The surrounding mountains echoed his call and spurred the other kids to shout excitedly: Fallen! Fallen!

With thoughts of blocking the beast now gone from his mind, Pa grabbed on to it instead, shaking it with great excitement, and as the other kids joined him, the train soon began to tremble. Wanting to see how Pa would deal with this modern contraption, the Colonel held his soldiers back. Even if Pa started a fire on the train, he said, they must adopt the willingness of a scarecrow to turn to ashes. After shaking the train, the kids copied Pa by climbing on top of it, running amok as if they were in their own kitchen at home. It was then that Pa spotted the Demon Colonel for the first time, but he showed no fear.

It was someone else who brought him up short: a young woman named Hideyama Mieko, who stood beside the Colonel. She was dressed in a white blouse and a long, soft blue skirt, with white shoes and white socks. She was blessed with a slim figure. A new teacher at the Guanniuwo Public School, she appeared much more modern and Western than village women in their traditional trousers. She had apple-red cheeks and a fair complexion - a clear sign of Japanese origins.

'You savages really are acting wild,' she said to Pa, with a threatening look. But when he said nothing in response, she said, 'You must have already left primary school.'

Pa noticed the big black suitcase by her feet that had been shaken off of the train, along with books and daily necessities. 'No, I'm still in school,' he said as he looked at in the soft outlines of her face against the setting sun. So lovely.

The Colonel soon realized that Guanniuwo was not the wilderness it had been rumoured to be, nor was it infested with poisonous snakes, malaria, or savages who cut people down like grass. Finding instead a paradise rich in natural resources, he gave it a new name: Mizuho. The name painted the image of ripened grains of rice, rolling down the tips of the plants at harvest time, like fresh nourishing milk. It was a pity that the region's famous September winds were sharp as a knife, all too frequently slicing through one's skin. They were like the Downhill Winds of Kanto back home, cutting to the quick yet left

no visible signs. He ordered his men to pitch camp on the empty ground beside the school before beginning the drills that would turn his troops as sharp as the winds, training them to cut down enemies on the battlefield. The sound of the Jeep starting up and horses neighing became a constant interruption to the school classes.

Every day, after facing east as the flag was raised, the students had to turn to the northeast and bow toward the Imperial Palace as a sign of respect to the Emperor and Empress, who were far away in Japan. Closer to the students were horses that snorted and bared their teeth at them. When soldiers hastily led the horses away, they presented the students with an even more spectacular sight: the horses' rear ends, from which steamy droppings fell to the ground. Pa fell into a series of laughing fits, each more outrageous than the one before, until he felt his intestines disintegrate and his lungs all but collapse from a lack of air. He could hardly straighten up after he bowed.

The teachers had no idea how to deal with this oversized boy, though they would not hesitate to slap any other child who dared laugh like that. The principal, who gave the most vicious slaps, would scold anyone who spoke Hakka or Atayal, following his verbal assault with a smack that could turn the culprit's face upside down. Then he would hang an accursed placard inscribed with the words 'Slave to the Qing' around the neck of the student, who was then required to find the next kid who did not speak the 'national language' and pass the placard along. All the placards eventually gravitated toward one person—Pa—who wore them as lightly as he would wear a beard, unaffected by a weight that would have bent an average kid's spine. The more placards he received, the more he spoke his own language, a clear challenge to the school rules. If the principal somehow forgot about Pa's strength and slapped him, his hand would swell up until he could not find his fingernails. So as Pa laughed himself silly over the horses, the principal could only grit his teeth. After some deep thought, however, he decided to 'promote' Pa to the position of flag raiser. Maybe this task would focus the boy's attention towards the flagpole rope, and away from horse dung. Just as he hoped, not one muscle moved on the face of Pa at the flag raising ceremony three days later; he remained as motionless as a stone after a stroke, even when all six horses relieved themselves at the same time.

The principal took the credit for Pa's changed attitude but in fact it was the new teacher, Mieko, who had inadvertently tamed Pa. She did it with a black pill.

Mieko instructed the students to wash their hands before meals. Even filthy houseflies, before they feast on rotten things, rub their feet and wipe their faces. Humans should be no different. She also told them to be like the big ape, Rita, at the zoo, and brush their teeth after meals. What's more, they should bathe every day and wipe themselves with pieces of newspaper she cut and hung in the toilets. While Pa squatted in the toilet, he read the articles and ads. While his bowel movement was in progress, he would count out the Chinese characters his grandfather, Liu Jinfu, had taught him, reading them aloud to students in the next stall. He was drawn most of all to the kaleidoscopic world he found in the illustrations accompanying the ads, which were so dazzling that he felt dizzy when he stood up upon finishing his business.

Their first outing to the big city following graduation would be an eye-opening experience, but the

ads gave them a preview of all the things in the new world one could experience, so long as one had money. For instance, an ice box, available for rent at eight *sen*, could secrete a chilly hormonal steam that would turn pork meat into a slumbering mummy; or, when water died and turned into stiff ice cream, for five *rin* you could bring it back to life in your own mouth; or, for less than ten yen, an electric fan could produce a small-scale ‘kamikaze,’ as well as the power to pulverize mosquitoes and cockroaches. With no money of their own, the students enjoyed themselves by drooling over the sight of other people eating ice cream. It was just as satisfying to look at the ads, although this had an unintended consequence: they stayed in the toilet until the bell rang, and, to save the newspaper for the pleasant surprises it afforded them, they chose to clean themselves with bamboo strips.

One day in class, Mieko had Pa and a scrawny student stand side by side to illustrate a point about malnutrition. Her negative example, a sallow, slovenly boy, was bamboo thin; tapeworms, those long, fat, squirming thieves, had intercepted all the nutrients he’d taken in. She then told the class that Pa, with his brawny physique, was a model rice eater. Everyone clapped with envy, but Pa shook his head, saying that he had white soup only on New Year’s Eve, and even then the broth did not contain a single kernel of rice. She told them that the white soup was called milk, and was a nutritious soup that would make them big and tall. Shaking his head vigorously, Pa argued that it was called *miyin* - porridge - and it was a thin liquid. As he had trouble translating the Hakka term *miyin* into Japanese, he mixed chalk powder with water to demonstrate what he meant, before opening his patterned cloth bag to satisfy Mieko’s curiosity over his diet. It turned out that instead of food, the bag contained only a liquor bottle; that startled the teacher, who thought that he must be an alcoholic. About the size of a sake bottle, it was stuffed with preserved turnip. It hardly seemed enough to make a child to grow big and strong, free of illness and pain. Finally, Pa admitted that he did suffer from a crazy tooth bug, which had wormed its way under his scalp and into his jaw. That was a toothache, Mieko knew, so she stuffed a moist, smelly black pill between his molars and said, ‘This is medicine from the Emperor, and it demands your respect.’

Pa’s toothache was cured completely. He remembered that the *seiro* pill had been taken from an orange box with a bugle illustration on the outside. A medicine for digestive problems, it had been invented in 1904, during the Russo-Japanese War; the word *seiro* meant, ‘send the Russian packing.’ That pill had Pa in the teacher’s thrall. It was because of the pill that he no longer laughed himself silly at the sight of horses relieving themselves during the flag raising ceremony.

It wasn’t long, however, before the students couldn’t see anything of the horses at all. After turning the school into a drill ground, the Demon Colonel moved the students to the Temple of the Benevolent God. He had removed the idol and placed it on the altar table on the temple grounds, with plans to immolate it. Wanting to deliver the temple to heaven, he set a date to burn the Chinamen’s idol, telling the villagers that they were to worship Amaterasu, equivalent to China’s Jade Emperor, at the Shinto shrine. As a captive idol, the Benevolent God was given a table laden with rice, pork, and duck for his last supper. Unable to sleep for days, the idol’s eyes became puffy and bleary. He soon had companions, though, as all twenty-eight Guanniuwo deities came to join him on their journey to the Western Paradise.

Armed soldiers stood guard to prevent the villagers from kidnapping the condemned. He was nailed down and shackled with so many chains that he looked like the Fat Laughing Buddha, although he wasn't smiling, of course. A Shinto priest intoned a prayer, and the execution began. Kindling doused in gasoline encircled the gods with a ring of fire. The flames formed a barrier that the gods clung on to as smoke rose from their bodies and they turned to ashes. The Benevolent God survived, though he was a sorry sight. His famous red face was now blackened, like the visage of Zhang Fei; his robe and tasseled cap had been stripped by flames, turning him bald and so shamefully ugly he wished he could ram his head against a wall and end it all.

Colonel Kano ordered that the naked statue be put on display at the train station, where the train would crush the celestial spirit out of it. In a matter of moments, the train passed Niubeidong and stormed its way into the station, belching smoke along the way, dying white clouds black. It bore down on the idol, intending to crush it like a cockroach. The Benevolent God was so terrified that he called up all his strength, gritted his teeth, and turned himself into a mud clod that could not be stomped, flattened, or pulped.. Back and forth the train went, over and over, all without success. Commanding the train to stop, Colonel Kano walked up to the statue and shouted, 'Come over here, Pa.' The boy's head floated above the crowd towards the colonel until he was standing in front of him. He was told to state his name.

'I am Pa,' he said, with his hands on his hips; his eyes were big but not fierce.

'That is a name for a savage. What about your Chinese name?'

'Liu Xingpa.' Then he added, 'There's a savage word in my name.'

'Your parents abandoned you, so I will adopt you as my son. From now your name will be Kano Senbatsu.' The Colonel repeated Pa's new name at a measured pace for the boy. Pa resisted at first by balling his fists and covering his ears, but it was too late. The name began to expand in his head, as overpowering as a thunderclap, as corrosive as seawater. Better to accept than try to chase it away, so Pa opened his mouth, sending other thoughts into exile. 'Kano Senbatsu,' he repeated.

'Come, Kano Senbatsu. Take this sword and slay that deity.' The Colonel patted the sword on his hip.

Pa walked up. Grabbing hold of the handle, he unsheathed the sword and swirled it over his head until he had visualized a gaping wound cutting through the air. He swung the sword down with a roar, cleaving the statue in half, releasing a small cloud of dust and a swarm of hornets. The insects had been sealed into the statue when it was made in order to demonstrate the deity's power. Evidently they had remained impressively ferocious, as they stirred up a wind by buzzing their wings and raised their stingers to launch an attack. Pa snatched thirty-six hornets out of the air, put them in his mouth, and chewed with noticeable pleasure.

At this moment a fire was raging in the train's boiler. Tongues of flame pushed open the door, trying to sweep the stoker inside. Japanese soldiers rushed up to toss in the remains of the idol. After absorbing the spirit of the deity, the train was energized; without even a speck of coal to help, its wheels started to work, leaping and clawing. It reached the other end of the long valley in no time, trailed by black smoke that was released into the blue sky. Older villagers got down on their knees and cupped their hands to catch the celestial ashes; later they would carefully put them away for future worship. Then, the



coal-infused clouds above expanded with an audible rumble, and before long, lighting struck, bringing with it a rainsquall. Everyone left except Pa. He stood his ground, his trembling hands turning purple from the cold, as he listened to the thunderstorm roar in the arms of the mountains around him. He had killed a deity, though he had no idea how he had done it. Now he was cursed for life, with no place to hide.

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Liu Jinfu, Pa's grandfather, was the last person in Guanniuwo to learn about the murder of the Benevolent God. Liu, who hated the Japanese with a passion and refused to have anything to do with them, moved to the mountains and built a fence around his house, where he raised chickens and ducks, fancying himself a local overlord. With hardly any personal or sentimental words between them, Pa and his grandfather were more like wandering ghosts from different ages; exchanging more than ten words meant they were having an argument. When he was inside the fence, Pa obeyed Liu Jinfu's every command, but he behaved differently once outside, even playing pranks on the old man. On the other hand, they were all each other had, and on occasions when they did not so much as hear a fart from the other person, they would feel strange, or even physically ill. After school, Pa left his Japanese books and uniform in a hut by a gravesite before changing into Taiwanese clothes. On this particular day, when Pa came home from school, he told his grandfather how the Benevolent God's statue had been smashed.

'Who did it?' Granddad asked.

Pa paused before answering. 'A four-legged one.' That is what the Japanese were called, because of the way they barked at the villagers like dogs.

'Which four-legged one was it?' Granddad asked.

'Kano Senbatsu.' He said the name reluctantly and then ducked, but he could not escape the resounding slap in time. He had violated a major taboo, which was the use of any Japanese inside the fence. For that reason, Liu Jinfu had invented new words in place of all the Japanese terms. A watch was called 'a sun box' instead of *tokei*, a bus was not a *jidensha*, but a 'wooden people holder'; tomato became 'soft persimmon' instead of *domato*, and *tokeiso* - passion fruit - was now called 'sour guava'. But Jinfu realized that resisting Japanese terms was nearly as hard as hiding from the sun; stubborn and insidious, they seeped into his daily life, affecting his thought processes, even turning into snakes to plague him in his dreams. So he adopted a more passive aggressive form of resistance: he would yell at Pa whenever he inserted Japanese words into his speech. 'Shut up!' Jinfu shouted when Pa said he was going to the *benjo*. Though the old man had yet to learn that *benjo* meant toilet, he knew it had to mean something bad. On another occasion, when Pa brought home some especially fragrant bread, and said 'let's have some *pan*,' the old man knocked it to the floor and stomped it into a pulp, all the while shouting 'Shut up.! This is called 'Big-nose's Bun.' Do you think I'm stupid?' Big-nose: the name for Westerners. Having learned his lesson, Pa saved himself the trouble of using difficult words he'd learned by glossing over them over with *jeige* -this- or *neige* -that- whenever possible and necessary, which in

turn spared him harsh reactions from his granddad. So in their conversation, Pa would say, ‘Well, the *jeige* down the mountain has now become *neige*’ Or, *Neige* has now become, ai, you know what.’ Sometimes it was simplified to *Neige* is now *neige*. To which his grandfather would respond with an wily, ‘Right, it’s already *neige*.’ Exactly what *neige* was was a mystery to Liu Jinfu, who knew only that he would fall into Pa’s ‘trap’ if ‘*neige*’ was explained clearly. Things had been different recently, however, for Pa could not stop talking about the train, using many more words than *jeige* and *neige*. Instead of getting upset, Jinfu had to fight the urge to go see the train for himself.

Now, after the slap, the two fell silent. The sound of a shrill train whistle came from down below with extreme clarity. No longer able to contain his curiosity, Jinfu asked Pa to get the horse sedan ready for him to go see that thing, an act that would move their communication well beyond the *jeige* and *neige* stage and significantly ease the awkwardness between them. A ‘horse sedan’ was a type of chair modified from the ‘bamboo sedan,’ which was a contraption used to carry wood; now it was fitted over Pa’s back for Jinfu to ‘drive.’ After wrapping his long queue in black cloth, Jinfu climbed onto Pa’s back and, drawing the wind from his left and pushing clouds to the right, he swayed his way to the village several *li* distant. When they reached their destination, he saw only a sky turned ugly by a plume of smoke, like a dragon uncoiling his tail, boring its head into the train’s smokestack. The train had traveled beyond the five mountain ranges, but its rumble was audible everywhere within ten ranges. From the density of the smoke, Pa calculated that he could catch up with the ferocious steel beast. That would throw a scare into Liu Jinfu - best of all would be if Grandpa started cursing. The horse sedan took off like a whirlwind, shaking the old man until every joint in his body ached and bile rose up in his throat. Fearing that his bones would be shaken loose, he tapped Pa on the shoulder with his feet. ‘You’re being foolish. There are no fire-wheels in the mountains. You’ll only find them in the county town.’ That comment only made Pa even more steadfast in his desire to let the old man see for himself, so he kept going until Jinfu told him that the ride was pulverizing his joints. The old man was right; the monster would not vanish from sight. It would be back, so there was no need to hurry.

As it was rare for the old man to leave his mountain home, Jinfu asked Pa to take a few turns around the village so he could have a look at this new world. The local villagers called Pa and Jinfu ‘Those Two’ in the local tongue, meaning granddad and grandson, and they would call out ‘Here come Those Two’ the moment the pair showed up. They called Liu Jinfu ‘The Old Hero’, for the backbone he showed in resisting the Japanese, but behind his back, they mocked him as ‘The Stubborn Old Fossil’ , because he chose to live as an impoverished bandit in the mountains, all the while acting like some well-fed, emperor of leisure. After a few turns around the village, Those Two’ had drawn out all the village children. Liu Jinfu continued to use the old terms, telling the children that what had just roared by was called a fire-wheel and that it stopped at a ‘fire-wheel pier.’ The children rewarded him with thunderous applause, impressed by an old fellow who called a train ‘flowing fire’ and, thought to call a train depot a pier. The final stop for the pair was a newspaper display board donated by a member of the local gentry. The headline was nearly a month old and still reported the attack on Pearl Harbor. Look, Granddad, Pa called

out loudly, the Mi-koku-jin have lost. Jinfu's only retort was to correct the boy: the correct name was, 'The United States of America'. After that, the old man was quiet. For years he had been carried on Pa's shoulders into the village, where he would draw the children around him to read the paper and memorize those few Chinese characters that were concealed within the Japanese script. In the wake of the outbreak of fighting between the Japanese and Chinese, the Japanese government had banned anything related to Chinese culture, so Chinese newspapers began to fold and weekly Chinese lessons at school were canceled. But under Liu Jinfu's clandestine instruction the village children still learned to read more than a dozen Chinese characters. However, they were fun-loving youngsters after all, and so they failed to take good care of the Chinese in their heads, letting much of it sneak out through their ears.

This time was much like any other. Liu Jinfu asked the village children to pick out the Chinese characters that they wanted to learn. But Pa, who was a cowardly worm on the mountain but a dragon when he came down to the village, was emboldened enough to employ the children to play pranks on his granddad. After seeing Pa write the characters for 'Main-land' on the ground with his toes, several children landed their fingers on various spots of the newspaper, all on the same characters. Liu Jinfu knew that Pa was trying to provoke him, for otherwise how could they all have a problem with the same characters? 'Can't you learn anything? I taught you these. How could you have forgotten them already?' he exclaimed angrily, but continued onto an explanation. 'Main-land is Tangshan – China – where we came from.' Then he read the characters one more time with a standard Chinese pronunciation. Pa, the king of children, shook his foot violently, and as usual the village kids burst out laughing, 'Wrong! Mainland means Japan.' They hurled the words back at Jinfu in Japanese. Outraged, he declared that Japanese was mosquito script; their words sucked human blood. The four-legged ones either had moustaches or wore wooden clogs, and everything they had was junk discarded in Tangshan long ago, including what they spoke, what they wore, and what they used, all scavenged by those dogs for use in Japan. You children have it backward! Instead of first-hand things, you prefer learning second-hand stuff. What a joke!

Liu Jinfu was too stuck up for Pa, who found the nerve to argue, 'Where did the fire-wheel come from? From the Mainland, they said.'

Liu Jinfu sighed and mumbled to himself that it must be a wooden people holder. No fire-wheel in the world can make a turn or climb a hill without tracks. And if there were one, then it would have to have come from Tangshan.

## **2. I Want to Be Japanese from Now On**

With the arrival of the Demon Colonel came the *hoko* – compulsory labor. Villagers were required to contribute half a day's work every week to repay the Emperor for his kindness. Children cut grass for the horses, dug trenches, grew castor-oil plants for airplane lubricants, or tended quinine trees to make malaria medicine. Carrying bamboo scoops and hoes, the adults were charged with opening up roads and chopping down trees until they reached a designated spot, where they would level weedy ground with fire,

sending up enough smoke to turn the place into a misty celestial abode. They emulated the fabled Foolish Old Man who wanted to move mountains, filling the valley with dirt dug from the mountaintops. Several hundred Aboriginals and Chinese worked side-by-side every day. Pa, blessed with superhuman stamina and strength, pushed boulders that weighed a ton down the slope and uprooted large trees as if he were picking bones out of a fish. He could carry eight loads of dirt, which meant he usually had four well-used carrying poles over his shoulders. But he provided more services than that alone, as even the games he played were fun to watch.

Once, during a work break, Pa and the other children were playing a game called ‘Red vs. White,’ with red and white teams vying to be the first to take down each other’s flag. Pa, a team of one, faced thirty youngsters who stood behind a line of stones, all throwing rocks at the red flag on the other side. If one of those rocks hit its target, they would win. Pa used a club to bat away the incoming missiles as if he were playing baseball, smashing some of them so hard that they hit the birds that were flying high above them. The Colonel rode by, and told Pa to be more aggressive in battle; instead of knocking down birds with his club, he must launch a counterattack against the other team. Pa nodded his understanding. As Pa told the others he was going to attack, they rushed back to their base, forming human pyramids around their flag as defense. ‘Here – I – come!’ Pa shouted from the east, but then he broke through in the west, snatching the flag so swiftly it was as if he’d traveled on winged feet, his running figure a blur.

Stunned by the sight, the Demon Colonel sent a command to the field gunners on the opposite hill to affix a white flag to a tall tree. Turning to the mountain gunners on this side of the valley, he ordered them to shoot down the flag before Pa could snatch it. The winner of the contest would be well rewarded. His men took their place by the mountain gun, but their first shot landed halfway up the hill, creating a thudding echo in the valley and startling birds into flight. The second shot was too high, but the third hit the target, sending powdery shreds from their objective into the air and leaving a crater several feet deep. The soldiers cheered, but before the echo from their shouts reached them, Pa reappeared. He was holding the top half of the tree, on which the white flag still burned. He wouldn’t have been so slow if he hadn’t thought he needed to bring back the flag *and* the tree. The children surrounded him, cheering loudly, while Pa opened his hands to reveal four chirping fledglings. He had removed them from a nest in the tree on his way back.

But really this episode had frightened Pa; he saw now that the Colonel was capable of killing, even for the sake of a game.

Three days a week Pa dined with the Demon Colonel. They ate Japanese food, all cold, except for the miso soup. After each meal, they would sit on the cypress floor, the door open to let in a view of the mountains and a howling wind. Though it was the heart of winter, they met the knife-like wind head on, but this, was comfortably cool for the Colonel. He was born in arctic Manchuria, an orphan of the Russo-Japanese War.

Late one night, the Tsar’s Cossack cavalry had launched an offensive against the Japanese army, whose defeat would likely occur at daybreak. So the Japanese brought over a doe, opened its belly, and stuffed a six-month baby – the future Demon Colonel – inside, and sewed it up, leaving his head exposed

to breathe. Fleeing the battlefield into the mountains, the doe went on living as usual, eating, drinking, and mating. When hungry the baby drank the doe's milk, and when thirsty he drank her urine or snowmelt. To pass the time he talked to the wind, to the doe, and to other passing animals. One day the doe could no longer contain the growing baby, and her internal organs exploded, giving birth to the baby Colonel and to two fawns she had been carrying. Crawling on his hands and knees, he nestled up against his doe-mother, releasing tearful animal sounds in hopes of returning to her belly, which was by then filled with his feces. Three days later, his crying alerted a patrolling Japanese sergeant, who followed the sound to its source. When he first saw the boy, who had buried his head in the doe's neck, simultaneously eating her flesh and stroking her hide, he was convinced that it was a baby deer.

The army's Commander-in-Chief came to see the boy and gave him the surname, Kano, which means 'wild deer,' while the army Chief-of-Staff, gave him the name Takeo, which means valor. The young Demon Colonel was sent to Japan for his education, which led him to a Military Academy and, upon graduation, a commission in the army. A few years later, he was sent to China. There, during a battle in Shanghai, the Japanese army laid siege to a building guarded by the Chinese. The two sides exchanged fire, sending a barrage of bullets that lit up the sky, turning night into day. A Chinese soldier swallowed enough explosives to turn his blood to black powder, and leaped from the top of the building with an armload of grenades. The explosion sent body parts flying in all directions; it also gave the Colonel a head injury so severe that he was no longer fit for battle. And that is how he was transferred to Taiwan to train soldiers.

The Demon Colonel described part, but not all, of his background, to Pa, a frightening story that was as shocking to him as bursts of gunfire. Most of the time the Colonel talked geopolitics, a subject on which he could expound forever. He told Pa that the great Japanese people had entered China with the glorious mission of strengthening the nation. China, he said, had always enjoyed prosperity when ruled by an alien race; when under the Mongols and Manchus, for instance, China had experienced periods of cultural and military dominance. Now ruled by the superior Japanese nation, China would rise up again. Corruption and arrogance by the feckless Chiang Kai-shek would, if allowed to continue, ruin China. But when China, Korea, Vietnam, and the Philippines were united in a co-prosperity sphere, governed by Japan, then a strong and prosperous world would be formed in the East to face challenges from the West. The Colonel's rousing speech made Pa's blood run hot.

Once, while they were talking, a maid brought tea to Pa in a special cup from the Mino Kiln in Okaya, Japan. This one was shaped like a section of bamboo that had been twisted out of shape; it was covered in tiny glaze bubbles, with hints of sunset red and charred iron black showing through the white porcelain. A tiny cup of tea like that could barely cover the bottom of Pa's stomach; for an uncultured person like him, the only way to drink tea was to pour it from a tea pot directly into the mouth or scoop the liquid up with a ladle made of a halved gourd. So he waited for the Colonel to drink first, afraid of making a fool of himself; but the Colonel told him to take a sip, so, with a nod, he complied. Clutching the bowl in his hand, his thumb onto the rim, he dumped its contents into his mouth, causing the Colonel to roar with laughter. He told Pa that he drank tea like a carp dying of thirst. Pa laughed with him, spit out some of the

tea, wiping it off with his sleeve. The Colonel, discarding dainty tea etiquette, picked up his cup and drank it like a true soldier. Later, he brought out some cups from a chest and lined them up, telling Pa to choose a few to take home with him. The boy knew nothing about these simple, unique cups; to him all looked like small bowls covered in grease to him, and were too small for soup and too delicate for tea. But, since he could not decline the Colonel's offer, he selected an old-looking one at random. It was glazed in indigo and white, with a hint of sky blue in the moist white background. Weighing it in his hand, it felt lighter than the others, and seemed slightly dirty, with an unglazed rim cracks running across it. He would not be taking advantage of the Colonel, he felt, if he chose an inferior cup. But Pa had not realized that this was a war trophy from China's famed porcelain town of Jingde. Impressed, the Colonel praised his good taste and keen eye. Pa was not entirely sure what the Japanese was getting at, but be it praise or criticism, condemnation or endearment, he knew to nod and say 'Hai.' That was what a Japanese would do.

Scarlet cherry trees were blossoming in the yard. They opened their sparse, pale blooms, ugly and stark, while distant plums and peaches burst into flower as if their lives depended on it. This type of cherry blossom always drags its feet when blooming and withering, the Colonel told Pa. You must go to Japan. There the weeping cherry, like the sorrowful spirit of the deities, turns its flesh into a sea of flower petals in an instant, then sends them plunging to earth like snowflakes. Now those blossoms – not these pale imitations – meant life. They were the true manifestation of *bushido*. With all the cherry trees in bloom, the area lights up so brightly there is no need for lamps at night. The fallen petals could burn or crush a person to death. Whenever the Colonel stood beneath the flames of the cherry blossom, he instinctively crawled into the sea of petals and sprawled against a tree to feel its incomparable warmth, seemingly transported back to his days inside the doe's belly.

'The pinnacle of man is the warrior, the finest flower is the cherry. Senbatsu, you must be a warrior and outshine me.' The Colonel walked over to the trees, drawing his sword which became an extension of his arm. Like a mantis catching prey in its scythe-like feet, he twirled his sword and, with a swish and a flickering glint, felled two of the scarlet cherry trees. 'These have no right to be called cherry trees, nor cherry flowers. Uproot them for me, Senbatsu.'

*Hai!* Pa nodded vigorously, yet remained seated until he grasped the Colonel's intention, and jumped frantically to his feet, nearly knocking over the teacups. He walked into the yard and rolled up his sleeves. First he cleared away the felled tops of the trees, and then, taking a deep breath, he bent down, leaned back, and effortlessly yanked the trunks out of the ground. The ground shook as dirt flew into the air from the unearthed roots and fell onto roof tiles with a patter. After Pa flung everything, trunks and branches, out of the yard, a maid swept it clean of fallen flowers, leaving no trace of red to incur the Colonel's wrath.