

# AN UNLIKELY BANQUET

## 張大千與張學良的晚宴

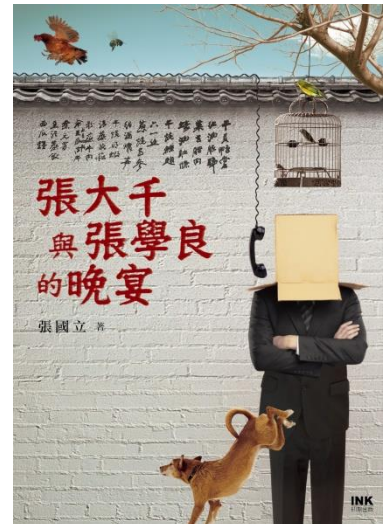
One dinner table. One moment in history. Chinese New Year, 1981. Chang Dai-Chien, world renowned artist, is preparing dinner at home in Taipei for a group of friends. Among them he has invited one special guest in particular, Chang Hsueh-Liang, once warlord of Northeast China and ally of Chiang Kai-Shek, who has lived under house arrest since 1936 after a failed military coup. But in the lead up to the dinner party, the Chinese Communist Party has expressed a desire to draw Chang Hsueh-Liang to their cause, sending one of their agents with a secret present. The approach has not gone unnoticed by the Intelligence Services in Taiwan and now the painter is by extension thrown into suspicion. They will do everything they can to prevent the dinner from going ahead.

The Intelligence Services decide to send their newest recruit, Snow Liang, to work in the warlord's household, where she discovers the real Chang Hsueh-Liang to be very different from the supposed traitor she has read about in textbooks. She is now faced with a choice; do what's best for her career, follow orders from above, or put her trust in the old man? When the party takes place two weeks later than expected, she becomes eyewitness to the friendship of two larger-than-life figures in the twilight of their lives. History, she realises, is never as simple as what they teach you in school.

Chang Kuo-Li brings to life a Taiwan under martial law, with characters whose reputations give them almost emblematic status. It is precisely by drawing on such sensitive historical issues that we feel the contrast, between the paranoia outside and the warmth around the table. *AN UNLIKELY BANQUET* serves up a menu of poetic perfection, and opens up the space between collective memory and the intimate realities of history's most significant moments.

### Chang Kuo-Li 張國立

Chang Kuo-Li, one time editor-in-chief of *China Times Weekly*, has won numerous awards for his writing. A linguist, historian, army



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expert, sports fan, food critic, as well as poet, playwright and novelist, he is truly a Renaissance man. He has published a dozen books over his career, including *ITALY IN ONE BITE*, *BIRDWATCHERS*, and *THE JOBLESS DETECTIVE*.

# AN UNLIKELY BANQUET

By Chang Kuo-Li. Translated by Malachi McGee.

*1994, year 83 according to the calendar used by the Republic of China.*

There wasn't an empty seat at Sotheby's Auction house in Taipei because today was the day they sold off Chang Hsueh-Liang's private art collection. After Chiang Ching-Kuo died, the Kuomintang regime officially released Chang Hsueh-Liang from custody. It was rumored he went to Hawaii to visit his son and that he would stay there for awhile before going to visit family in mainland China. Not only collectors, but scholars, reporters and the Kuomintang were all paying attention.

The crowd filed into the auction room, picking up the catalogue as they went. Almost Chang's entire collection was listed. There was head-shaking and audible sighs from many, but most people talked in loud whispers when they realised what it meant: Chang Hsueh-Liang wouldn't be coming back.

Of course the sighs were to be expected, but once everyone had settled into their seats their minds turned back to the auction, back to what they were really there for. Chang Hsueh-Liang's collection had been on the radars of antique enthusiasts for some time and today it didn't look like anyone would be leaving disappointed.

As the auction progressed, his paintings and calligraphy found buyers even at the highest of prices. Then, the auctioneer produced a tiny yet intricately mounted piece of calligraphy, which, he claimed, was deserving of a special introduction:

'This is a menu for a dinner Chang Dai-Chien held for Chang Hsueh-Liang and his wife, as well as the former president of Taiwan and his entourage. As I'm sure you're all aware, Chang Dai-Chien was in the habit of writing out the menu every time he hosted guests at home. The dishes and drinks were of the highest quality. After dinner, Mr Chang Hsueh-Liang asked Dai-Chien for the menu. Not only was it written by his own hand, but Mr Chang also decorated the leftover space with some simple drawings, the turnips and cabbages you see today. Our starting price is three hundred thousand Taiwanese dollars. Ladies and gentlemen interested in the piece may start the bidding now.'

A bid marker went up at once, five hundred thousand. The price climbed quickly from there until the hammer came down at two and a half million. The room buzzed with excitement.

Outside. A young man with a camera slung on his back stood in the doorway clutching an auction catalogue. He was lost in his own thoughts when someone called out to him. A woman in black with a man's briefcase in her hand approached:

'Lou Tai-Sheng? You're Lou Tai-Sheng, aren't you?' She reached out and grabbed the reporter's pass around his neck. 'You're a reporter now, eh? You don't recognise me? I'm Snow Liang, I used to live behind Fuhsing Middle School.'

'Snow?' The young reporter was taken aback as he surveyed the young woman standing in front of

him. ‘You mean the Snow from the security office opposite Chang Hsueh-Liang’s house?’

‘Do you remember me? I remember the year you passed the college entrance exams your company officer brought over a gift box of fruit so we could all celebrate. I remember he said to our director...’ Snow Liang’s face broke into a playful smile, ‘He told our director that you were destined for a life in the intelligence services. He doesn’t know what came over you.’

Lou Tai-Sheng smiled at this. The only thing he could remember about getting into college was hiding under the covers and pretending to be sick the day they posted the results. He couldn’t work up the courage to walk over to the front gate of National Taiwan University to see the list. It was only when Hsiao-Guai started throwing rocks at the window and his mom opened the door that Lou Tai-Sheng heard him shout:

‘Mama Lou! He passed! Tai-Sheng passed the exams!’

He couldn’t believe it. It was a hot day but he stayed beneath his thick blanket until Hsiao-Guai came in and lifted it off.

‘Why the hell are you crying? Your mom gave me some money so we could go grab something to eat.’

He had turned eighteen that year and that night he drank his first bottle of beer. He ended up throwing up in the ditch in front of his house as the moon faded from the sky.

‘Come on,’ Snow said, pulling him on, ‘I’ll buy you a cup of coffee. Let’s find a place to talk. Geez, how many years has it been?’

‘Thirteen,’ he said. ‘Thirteen years.’

*Wednesday January 7, 1981*

*Year 70 of the Republic of China, one month before Chinese New Year*

Three students in khaki military uniforms leapt over the wall behind Beitou Fuhsing Senior High school, their peaked caps on backwards. They moved like convicts on the run as they sprinted into the hills behind the school. They ran along the winding asphalt path, beneath the acacia tree that protruded from behind the bamboo fence of a stranger’s house and finally came to a stop in front of the thick, heavy wooden door of the house at number 70, Fuhsing 3rd Road. They crouched there, panting.

‘Hey, Chang Hsueh-Liang!’ One of them shouted.

Across from number 70 was a cement guard station, obviously built in violation of building regulations. Two plainclothes guards in dark brown Chinese tunic suits rushed outside and took off in pursuit of the students.

‘Back causing trouble, eh?’

‘What the hell does your teacher do all day?’ The guards shouted.

The high schoolers had long since outrun the guards and were catching their breath.

‘Our teacher cut class to pick up girls!’ One of the students shot back.

They started running again, shouting back as they went, until they were out of sight.

The guards made a quick patrol around number 70. No sight of anyone or any vehicles, so they went back to their post. The taller guard felt for his pack of army issue Kuo-Kuang cigarettes, flicked one out and gave it to the shorter guard, who lit it carefully so it wouldn't go out in the cold wind.

'They haven't gone out today?' asked the tall one as he gazed at the large walls and barbed wire that enclosed number 70. The short one exhaled a puff of smoke, scrunched up his shoulders against the cold and shook his head.

'Sir, it's freezing. Who'd want to go out in this weather?' The tall guard gave him a dirty look.

'Whining about the weather? Had enough on the first day?' The guard station phone rang and the short one went to pick it up, but his superior stopped him.

'There are three phones on the table. The middle one is a direct line to the higher-ups. We can make calls, but we don't answer it. The one on the right is for emergencies only. We can answer it, but we don't make calls. The one on the far left is an extension that runs out of Chang Hsueh- Liang's house. We can't answer it or make calls. It's tapped and they've got someone at the offices listening in.'

The short guard nodded and looked intently at the black phone on the left, the one with a receiver but without a dial.

The tall guard picked up the ringing phone on the right. He sounded a few 'understoods', hung up and went outside without another word. It was only when they were once again facing the door of house number 70, blowing clouds of cigarette smoke out before them, that he explained:

'Tomorrow morning we need to make a trip to Fuhsing Middle school. Those fucking kids just won't learn to keep their mouths shut!'

'I heard their chief instructor is a student of the famous commander Wang Sheng,' said the short guard.

'So what if he is? One of the old president's cronies? Come on... the president has half a million people in his pocket! A student of Wang Sheng thinks he's hot shit because he can hide behind his teacher's name? Fucking Wang Sheng. Let's see how much longer he can last. He has the army to back him up and now he thinks he can use it to get to the top? Yeah, right.'

'Everyone's connected,' the short guard answered cautiously.

'You're right,' the tall guard said more calmly. 'Everyone in the army is a student of Wang Sheng and everyone in our line of work is a disciple of the old man Dai Li.'

The short guard stuck his hands in his pockets, stamping his skinny legs against the cold.

'Then I'm a disciple of old man Dai Li too, sir,' he said.

The tall guard pounded his fist into the short guard's chest.

'That's more like it. Everyone is connected. Who's afraid of who? As long as you can stick up for yourself, no one can tell which side anyone is playing for.'

'And that's the key to a good relationship,' the short guard cut in.

The rain found it's way down through the gaps in the leaves and one drop landed right on the end of the tall guard's cigarette, slaking it with a hiss. He bent his head down to inspect it, then tossed it to the ground.

‘I’m gonna see if the old lady is done with our dinner. She’s always stingy with the hot peppers. If the pickled vegetables don’t set my mouth on fire, it’s not worth the trouble it takes to chew.’

‘There’s smoke coming from the chimney across the street.’

‘The Changs are making braised ‘lion head’ meatballs today,’ the tall guard turned to head back inside. ‘Their servant bought ground pork, water chestnuts and cabbage this morning.’

‘A bowl of lion head stew over rice...’ The short guard looked down at his feet. ‘I could go for two helpings of that.’

‘I’ll go tell the old woman to start dinner early. Stop giving me that damn hungry look. Keep focused. We’re the only ones left after the Garrison Command go off duty. We can’t let anything happen on our watch.’

The short guard didn’t respond, his mind was still stuck in the steaming pot of lion head stew, imagining the taste of the slightly burnt bits at the bottom. At that moment a gust of wind rose, perhaps wafting the smell of the food from the Chang house opposite, and he licked his lips.

January 7 1981, a month left until the second day of Chinese New Year. The weatherman on the television was pointing at a map and telling the viewers that the strongest cold front of the year was moving south from Siberia. The temperature at sundown would drop eight to ten degrees lower than the day before. Tamsui, the northernmost city in Taiwan, would experience a low of between nine and eleven degrees Celsius. The screen switched back to the news anchor, and she, in her unhurried way, reminded people who were going out to dress warmly and not to forget their umbrellas.

The guard post consisted of a square made of concrete. Two wooden windows, normally closed, stared out at the front door of the Chang residence. A wooden table made home to the three phones and a tiny television with bad reception sat in the corner. The short guard shook the water droplets from his pants and went to adjust the antenna hanging in a tree outside. He looked up at the sky, blanketed in thick clouds and once again scrunched up his shoulders against the cold. A soft, thin drizzle had enveloped the entire Da Tun Mountain area, but like in a Chinese painting, it could have been rain or nothing more than a beautiful mist.

Number 70 consisted of a courtyard surrounded by a two metre high wall, planted with trees and potted orchids. To the left side stood a square, dusty gray, two-story western-style home. Weeds and moss thrived in the humidity and no one knew how long they’d been there. Once inside the house a central staircase rose to the second floor and Chang Dai-Chien’s *Waterfall of the Nine Dragons* hung on one of the walls, a farmhouse and hut sat atop blue black mountains and an inscription signed Han-Ching.

Upstairs, the sitting room with its mahogany round table and four curved chairs was on the right and to the left you entered the study, with its disorganised shelves of books that obviously rarely stayed in their place for long. The huge wooden desk was strewn with various objects, among them two reading lamps bent at the same angle. In between the books, papers and other odds and ends nestled a rectangular alarm clock. The minute hand was pointing to a copy of *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, which in turn topped

a stack of books so tall it almost obstructed the calligraphy behind it, a famous piece by Ching-Kuo that read: Each shaft of bamboo embodies the noble character of the ancients.

The fireplace opposite looked as if it hadn't been used since the winter. Four picture frames sat on the mantle displaying a husband and wife, along with a golden Chiang Kai-Shek memorial coin and a ceramic plate printed with a photo of the President and his wife Soong May-Ling. Three grandfather clocks, each inscribed with the name of the organization that had gifted it, stood to attention.

But the most striking thing in the room was the traditional Chinese painting that hung directly above the mantle, flanked by two longer scrolls, autographed by Soong May-Ling.

Chang Hsueh-Liang was wearing a thick plaid shirt made with dark red wool. He sat behind the desk, a black wool hat on his head. He had just hung up the phone when he yelled into the living room: 'Dear, Dai-Chien just called. He wants to have us over during Chinese New Year.' He laughed and added, 'Colonel Chang is treating Marshal Chang to dinner.'

'Time again for another three Chang's and one Wang monthly get together?' came Lady Chao's voice. 'When exactly?'

'The second. He'll call back after he's confirmed with Chang Yue-Gong and Wang Hsin-Heng.'

'Why do you always call him Colonel Chang?' she asked.

'If you're going to blame anyone, blame it on the reporters. The year Dai-Chien came back to Taiwan a newspaper misprinted his Chinese name and everyone read it as Colonel Chang. The nickname stuck, so now he's the Colonel and I'm just a marshal.'

'You two!'

Chang Hsueh-liang turned back to the mess of letters on the desk, his thin, brittle frame curled up in his swivel chair.

'Where's my magnifying glass? Have you seen my magnifying glass, dear?' he called again.

He turned on the two lamps and sifted through the papers on the desk.

'You and your magnifying glasses,' Lady Chao's voice came again. 'We have to buy a new one almost every day. Come and eat, it's lion head stew made with the Kaoliang wine the commander of the Kiman Defense sent us a while ago.'

'Coming,' he said as he continued his search. Just then, he slapped his hand to the back of his head. He reached for Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and there it was, as big as a teacup, wedged between the pages.

Despite its mundane appearance, the office building was actually a cover for a government intelligence operation. Another two-story concrete box, the top was surrounded by walls and barbed wire. Inside housed a parking lot and basketball court. Every room in the building was simply furnished with wooden tables and chairs and in accordance with National Defense and Ministry of Education rules, on the right hung a portrait of the first president Chiang Kai-Shek and on the left his son, Chiang Ching-Kuo.

But the real hub was the first floor telecommunications room in which the words *Down with Communism! Defeat Russia!* cut from blue, faded paper were peeling from the central beam. In the room's centre, three operators listened to tapped calls on a telephone switchboard. That's where Lou sat dressed in a padded jacket, stubble casting a shadow on his chin, scribbling furiously into a notebook. He pulled off his headphones, stood up and turned toward the door, almost running into one of his colleagues. Lou nodded, gave a quick 'Excuse me,' and bounded out of the room and into the hall.

Doors lined the passage, each with its own wooden plaque with names like Mobile Unit, Duty Room etc. Lou climbed the staircase in the building's centre, dodging three other people on his way to the second floor. He stopped outside a door with a frosted glass window and knocked lightly twice on the Director's Office sign.

'Come in,' said a voice from inside. Lou opened the door, bowed respectfully and entered.

It was a small office. A three-seat mahogany couch had been placed beside the door and scattered with red cushions embroidered with bats in black silk that looked like square blocks of tofu. A long cabinet and wooden desk that could have been leftover from the Japanese occupation sat before the window. The man looked up from his newspaper. At around sixty, traces of yellow stained his hairline where it had been dyed. The round glasses and neatly trimmed moustache added a certain respectability.

'What is it?'

'I just listened in on a call between Chang Dai-Chien and Chang Hsueh-Liang.' Lou presented his notes. His boss frowned as he looked down at the the notebook.

'Colonel and Marshal Chang? What are the old fogies up to these days?' He jabbed at the notebook in what looked almost to be anger. 'Their monthly meeting again. During Chinese New Year? At Chang Da-Chien's villa this time? That's close to the President's residence. They're looking for trouble.'

He stamped and passed the notebook back to Lou before going back to his work.

Lou hesitated. He wanted to go but he still had something to add.

'Was there something else?'

'Sir, the President's residence is in Dazhi, not Shilin.'

'And?'

The director answered coldly and without looking up.

'Nothing. That was all.' Lou bowed again and was just about to leave when the director called him back.

'I told you to cut your hair. Are you auditioning to be in the Beatles? What are the basic requirements for someone in our line of work? We don't get to look cool. What kind of a spy draws attention to himself?'

Lou subconsciously touched his collar-length hair, then quietly left the room.

Moye Villa, Chang Dai-Chien's home, was located in Shilin, Wai-Shuangxi. He'd built a pond inside the gate complete with rocks, flowing water and a small bridge, as well as lotus flowers and banana trees along its banks. The entrance to the house was on the right and once inside, the living room



was on the left. Two wooden seating arrangements faced each other and a cabinet against the farthest wall was home to a collection of all sorts of rare wood and stones. Further inside a courtyard with two more small ponds provided a tranquil soundtrack as water ran down the rocks.

Four rooms opened onto this inner garden; a studio to the west and Mrs Chang's guest room to the north among them. But it was from the dining room to the north that the voice of the famous opera singer Kuo Hsiao-Chuang could be heard. Out of the kitchen came Hsiao-Yi, a servant of the Chang residence. He was reading a note as he walked. Chang Dai-Chien's strong Sichuan accent followed close behind:

'It's on the lower floor of Nanmen Market. The first store on your left. Buy the sea cucumber and I'll take care of it. The prawns need to be big and fresh. Order eight of them and have them delivered on New Year's Eve.'

Hsiao-Yi grunted a reply, stuffed the note into his pocket and left on the Kawasaki motorcycle outside. Chang Dai-Chien ran out after him, glasses in hand, but Hsiao-Yi was already out of sight. He ran a hand over his beard.

'Always in such a rush. What's the hurry?'

He turned and headed back to his studio, humming along with Kuo Hsiao-Chuang's beautiful voice. His worktable was custommade at two metres long, with built in drawers on each side. A painting in progress was laid out on the table, most likely a mountain landscape. First he splattered ink, then relied on inspiration to outline the shape of the crags. Chang Dai-Chien picked up his brush. But he stopped just as he was about to touch the paper. He reached for a smaller piece of paper and began writing in his neat hand:

Fried duck feet with dried scallop

Red chili pig's feet

Cured meat with garlic

Tripe in oyster sauce

He stopped and thought for a moment before continuing:

Baked sturgeon fin

Six strands silk

Roasted sea cucumber with onions

Bamboo braised in Shaoxing wine

Baked Prawns

He paused again, scratching a bit of cheek beneath his long beard with the end of the brush. He thought and continued. He wrote and wrote, then put down his brush and sighed.

‘I’m growing forgetful in my old age. Han-Ching is from the northeast. It won’t be Chinese New Year for him without dumplings. I’ve got enough dishes, but what kind of dumplings should we have?’

Chang Dai-Chien deliberated some more and then smiled.

‘Let’s give him something sweet. Steamed sweet bean dumplings.’ His brush was already writing as he spoke.

It was only five o’clock, but the skies above Taipei were already cloaked in thick clouds. The lights were bright in the office building. Snow Liang was standing before the director’s desk. She wore a white dress shirt, black dress pants and a pair of short, black, square toed heels.

Snow Liang’s name had been prescient; she was fair skinned and her hair fell down around her shoulders. She wasn’t one for makeup and at twenty-two she didn’t need it. She was standing at attention, waiting to be questioned.

‘Snow Liang?’ The director finally spoke without looking up.

‘Yes, Sir.’ She clicked her heels together with a crisp, clear snap.

‘Your scores at training were decent. Your family is from China? Shijiachuang in Hebei province?’

‘My father is from Shijiachuang, yes. My mother is Hakka. She’s from Pingtung county in southern Taiwan.’

‘Your old man is a soldier?’

‘He just retired from duty.’

‘Where did the Veteran Affairs Council station him?’

‘He was originally assigned to work at RSEA construction, but he was injured during the war. He took a bullet in his left leg and he had aches in both knees, especially during winter. Rheumatoid arthritis. He turned down the council’s offer and is living off his pension.’

‘So where was he stationed?’

‘Oh...’ Snow Liang paused, ‘He doesn’t have an assignment. He left the military and is at home recuperating.’

‘What I mean is,’ the director looked up, momentarily distracted by Snow Liang’s pretty features, ‘where was he stationed in the army? Which division was he in?’

‘Sir. When he first joined I believe he was in the new 38th division.’

‘The youth corps,’ the director gave a grunt, ‘One of Sun Li-Ren’s men.’

‘Yes, sir. The youth corps.’

‘You graduated with a law degree and yet you didn’t take the bar exam. Why did you apply to serve in our division?’

‘Because of my father, Sir. I want to serve my country.’

‘Hmm, that’s a rare attitude. Young people these days only care about doing business and making US dollars. It’s pathetic. You look agreeable and we just happen to have a job for you. We need someone

smart, good at talking and who will always be on standby.’ The director motioned to the chair in front of his desk. ‘Sit.’

Snow Liang obeyed. She sat up straight just as they taught her during training, her bottom taking up only one third of the chair.

‘How much do you know about Chang Hsueh-Liang?’

‘Just what I’ve read in the history books. He was involved in the Xi’an Incident—’

‘He wasn’t *involved*,’ the director interrupted. He was leaning back in his chair with both arms crossed and looking at Snow, ‘He plotted and executed the Xi’an Incident, a treasonous conspiracy, a grave betrayal of his country.’

‘Yes, Sir. I also know he was called Marshal Chang, King of the Northeast—’

‘The Playboy. He handed the Northeast over to the Japanese. What else?’

‘He was with the Communists and it was under their direction that he was involved... er, plotted and executed the Xi’an incident, kidnapping Chiang Kai-Shek, which led to—’

‘Which led to our failure to suppress the Communists. He is the most notorious criminal in modern Chinese history. If not for him, the Kuomintang would have held the country after the war. We would have rebuilt our nation and would now be the strongest in east Asia.’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘You need to read more. The division’s library isn’t just for smoking and chatting. If you need anything, come talk to me. Now go report to Captain Lee of the Mobile Unit.’ He pushed his chair with his feet and slid back into a sitting position.

Snow Liang stood up and saluted, but the director was already deep in his papers once more.