

# CHILDREN OF THE SALTPANS

## 鹽田兒女

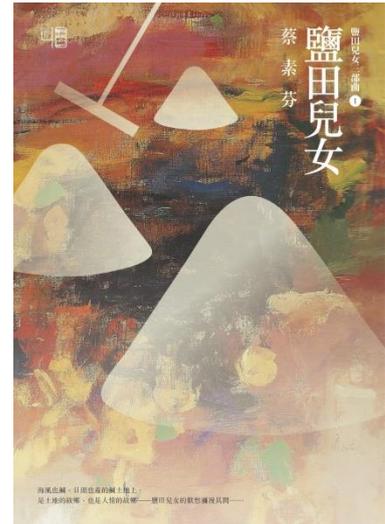
Two young people meet in southern Taiwan's salt flats and fall in love. But Ming-Yueh's parents disapprove of her boyfriend Da-Fang, and arrange for their daughter to marry a man who turns out to be a dissolute gambler. This mistake brings much hardship to Ming-Yueh, but she never stops loving the boy she met in the fields. When fate conspires to give the young sweethearts another chance at happiness, the weight of tradition and familial duty is heavy on their heads and once again they are pulled apart. But Ming-Yueh's continued love for Da-Fang is what gives her sustenance and the hope to carry on, so she buries it deep in her heart.

Tsai Suh-Fen is a master storyteller. Not only does she bring to life the people of Qigu, Tainan, but also the way traditional patriarchy and the dominance of parents over their children has the power to destroy the lives of the young. Her prose is vivid and precise, just like her characters, whose seemingly quiet acceptance masks the rich and dramatic realities of their inner worlds.

Taiwan has since undergone dramatic social change and many of these customs are disappearing just as the saltpans have done already. This book records a moment in Taiwan's recent history, a society then on the cusp of modernity. This is a beautiful and moving story and an undisputed classic of Taiwanese literature.

### Tsai Suh-Fen 蔡素芬

Tsai Suh-Fen was born in 1963 and studied in Taiwan and Texas. She started writing while still in high school and began winning awards while at university. *CHILDREN OF THE SALTPANS* won the 1993 Unitas Award for Best Novel and was adapted for television. Her 1998 follow-up, *THE OLIVE TREE*, won the Chung Hsing Award for Literature and Art and in 2014 she completed her Taiwan 'trilogy' with *ALL THE STARS ARE TALKING*. Other books include *SISTERS*,



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- Over 100,000 copies sold in Taiwan, continuously in print for over twenty years
  - Selected as one of Taiwan's best loved novels in 2004
  - Adapted for television in 1998
  - Winner of the Unitas Award for Best Novel, *CHILDREN OF THE SALTPANS* is considered Tsai Suh-Fen's masterpiece

*TAIPEI STATION* and *A CANDLELIT DINNER*, for which she was selected as one of 2009 *Asia Weekly*'s Ten Best Chinese writers.

# CHILDREN OF THE SALTPANS

By Tsai Su-Fen. Translated by Robert Fox.

## Chapter One

### 2

Time went on. Chih-Hsien left in the spring and returned again in the fall. Four years passed in the wink of an eye. To Chih-Hsien, who dried salt in the fall and winter and operated a pedicab in the spring and summer, the days were without freshness or excitement. The one thing that pleased him was that when he returned to the village, people relied on him to settle their disputes, some even entrusting him to name their children. He felt his youthful studies had not been wasted; with a book in hand he could help people solve their problems. But his wife A-She viewed him as a failure, invariably complaining to others: 'Those books haven't done him a bit of good. Just look at how hard he has to work.'

To Ming-Yueh and Ming-Hsin, however, those were four years of travail and sacrifice, but also a time of fun. The girls kept house for their ailing mother and helped their father in the salt fields. The two were now slender and graceful young women of eighteen and twenty. Hard physical labour had made them lean, lithe and shapely. Like other village girls, their faces were bronzed by daily exposure to the sun and the ocean winds. But the colour couldn't hide the sickly pallor in Ming-Hsin's cheeks.

'It looks like it'll be even hotter tomorrow,' Ming-Hsin said, lifting the carrying pole with the empty water buckets onto her shoulders. 'I'll only be able to make one trip in the morning, so I'd better go twice today.' She told Ming-Yueh to take the firewood in the cookhouse outside to dry in the sun, then headed out of the village. It was an hour's walk and across the bridge to draw water from the neighbouring hamlet's pond. The well water in their own village, salty and undrinkable, could only be used for washing clothes and scrubbing up.

Ming-Hsin usually went to fetch water at five o'clock in the morning. She would then pour the fresh water into the cistern and eat the breakfast Ming-Yueh had prepared. Hard calluses had formed on her shoulders. Sometimes Ming-Yueh would go for water in Ming-Hsin's place. At first bruises and blisters formed on Ming-Yueh's shoulders but after a few trips she grew much stronger and didn't mind. Nimble, considerate and hardworking, eldest sister Ming-Hsin was always the first to do whatever job needed doing and it was she who usually carried water. But that job, her many other chores and their poor diet were taking a toll. That summer Ming-Hsin had suffered stomachaches and often had to stop when carrying water. Nauseous, she would set the pole and buckets down, clasp her stomach and retch.

Today Ming-Hsin wanted to make two trips to the pond. Ming-Yueh did as she was told, taking some of the firewood stored in the cookhouse outside to dry. The two youngest sisters left to do the washing.

After he had eaten his breakfast, their father went out to inspect the salt fields. Looking back, he saw his wife sitting in the doorway in the warm sunshine.

‘Where’s Ming-Hsin?’ A-She asked.

‘Gone to fetch water,’ Ming-Yueh replied. She was surprised to see her mother had pinned her ordinarily unkempt hair up in a neat, coiled bun, revealing her slightly bulging forehead. A thin layer of makeup covered her face and she had put on lipstick, transforming completely her usual sickly appearance—she looked just like the image of Guanyin, the goddess of mercy, kept in the main room of their house. The villagers all said her beauty had made the gods jealous on her wedding day and so they had afflicted her with ill health.

‘A girl shouldn’t have to work so hard,’ A-She said. ‘But I’m not well.’ Ming-Yueh was used to such complaints. Her curiosity was focused entirely on her mother’s appearance.

‘What about your father?’

‘Gone to the salt fields.’

‘What? That man can’t remember a thing. I have to deal with everything important.’

‘What’s happening?’ Ming-Yueh was quick to ask.

A-She’s gaze, sharp and probing, fell on Ming-Yueh like an eagle searching for a place to land.

‘You girls are no longer children. Other seventeen-year olds are already holding babies. If I wasn’t so sick I’d have married you both off by now,’ A-She sighed. ‘Daughters aren’t suppose to live with their parents forever.’

Panic showed in Ming-Yueh’s eyes. She didn’t understand what her mother was talking about. Marriage had never crossed her mind. The young men and women of the village laboured together in the salt fields. They worked hard but had fun too. In their free time they’d make up songs and whistle tunes on tree-leaf flutes. Da-Fang played the leaf-flute, creating his own melodies and the rest supplied lyrics as they sang in the moonlit dusk. The salt fields were a part of Ming-Yueh’s life, she’d never thought of marrying and leaving them behind. But she’d watched as the other young village women left. She knew what it meant. Once gone, they’d never return. How could she leave Da-Fang behind?

A surge of emotion made her blush. Her mother’s eagle-sharp eyes instantly took note. ‘Are you ready to leave and become daughter-in-law to some rich man?’ her mother said, taunting her. ‘So you won’t have to work so hard? Not until your older sister has married.’

‘I don’t want to get married.’

‘I can’t support an old maid.’

Ming-Yueh decided not to argue back and instead went to the cookhouse to chop vegetables. Her long illness has somehow made her mother unable to read the good intentions of others. It was better not to say anything than cause unpleasantness. Still, A-She would feel she was being ignored. When that thought crossed her mind, Ming-Yueh immediately turned and looked back at her mother’s stooped shoulders.

‘You look very pretty today, Mama.’

Her mother sighed and but remained silent. The sunlight seemed to float, moving from the doorstep to

the little bamboo chair where A-She sat. The new blue-soled shoes she wore shone in the light of the sun.

Some time later, the two youngest sisters returned with the clothes and hung them out to dry on a bamboo pole at the front of the house. Shifting in her seat, A-She coughed twice and called to Ming-Yueh, 'Today is the fifteenth day of the lunar month, isn't it?'

'That's right. There'll be a full moon tonight.' Ming-Yueh's name meant 'Bright Moon,' so she always felt the fifteenth of the month belonged to her. Her father had given her that name because he wanted her to shine brightly on others.

The two younger sisters kept turning, glancing at their mother and whispering. A-She took note of their awkward behaviour: 'It's taken you all morning to wash those clothes! You'll never be as hardworking as your older sisters. What'll I do when I've married them off I'm left with just the two of you?' A-She told Ming-Yueh to go and tell Father and to come back to the house.

'Why?' Ming-Yueh wanted to know.

'Why? Tell him we're having visitors.'

'Who?' the three sisters asked as one.

In the uneventful life the family led, the arrival of any guest was always a matter of great curiosity.

'Children should be seen and not heard,' A-She said. 'When the guests arrive the three of you will go to your room and stay there.'

Chih-Hsien returned just then and little brother Ming-Hui ran out to greet him, leaping into his father's arms.

'Oh, you're heavy!' Chih-Hsien said, putting Ming-Hui down.

'Have you forgotten?' A-She asked her husband.

'No, I haven't. I'm back, aren't I?'

Ming-Yueh pulled her father into the cookhouse and spoke to him in a low voice: 'Papa, who's coming to visit?'

'They're coming to propose marriage to Ming-Hsin,' her father said. 'Cook up a pot of noodles. They've been walking all morning and they'll probably be hungry.'

Father went into the house to change his clothes. Ming-Yueh realised that the moment had come in which she would finally have to part with her older sister. Ming-Hsin was twenty years old, of marriageable age. From then on, Ming-Yueh would have to take over her older sister's responsibilities.

As she cooked the noodles sadness welled up within her and there was no one she could talk to about it. She didn't want her sister to leave and hoped the family Ming-Hsin was marrying into didn't work the land for a living. Did they live far away? If so, they would rarely get to see each other again. Suddenly her two younger sisters rushed in to report that the guests had arrived. There were five of them, all dressed in white, but they had come a long way and their faces were covered in sweat. They were sitting in the main room of the house talking with Mother and Father.

The three sisters ducked into their bedroom. Heads pressed together, they peered in through a tiny crack in the curtains. They could only see one side of the room. An old man with a wispy white beard sat with his back to the ancestral tablets. Next to him sat a middle-aged man with a broad brow and coarse,

dark hands and feet, and beside him a gangly youth, his knees pressed together, hands resting on his knees. The young man's features closely resembled those of the middle-age man. Little Ming-Chan whispered, 'Is he the one?'

'Shh!' Ming-Yueh and Ming-Yu covered Ming-Chan's mouth with their hands.

Just then Ming-Hsin came into the yard carrying two buckets of water on the shoulder pole. She turned right and went over to the cistern, removed the wooden cover and poured in the water. In the main room, all eyes were focused on her graceful figure. Ming-Hsin took off her bamboo leaf hat and undid her headscarf, letting her pitch-black hair tumble down around her shoulders and cover her ears. Bending over, she scooped up a dipper of water, washed her face and then replaced the cover. Turning, she spotted the crowd in the main hall. Her mother and father waved to her and she walked over to them. After a short while she came out again and made her way to the cookhouse. Her three sisters hurried into the cookhouse ahead of her. When Ming-Hsin entered they covered their mouths to stifle their laughter.

'Are the noodles ready?' Ming-Hsin asked. 'Papa's invited the guests to stay for a meal.' She rubbed her aching shoulders. She was visibly tired from the two trips to the pond.

Ming-Yueh ladled noodles into bowls. 'Who are they?' she asked pointedly.

'I don't know,' Ming-Hsin replied. 'I've never seen them before. You've been here all this time and you don't know?'

'Sister,' Ming-Chan could hold it in no longer, 'they've come to propose marriage. To you.'

Really? Ming-Hsin was doubtful. Why hadn't Father and Mother mentioned it to her beforehand? Was the family so eager to be rid of her that they couldn't discuss such an important matter with her first? She slumped down on a bamboo chair, covered her face and cried. To the two youngest sisters, weddings were happy, festive occasions and they couldn't understand why their big sister was weeping. But Ming-Yueh understood. She tugged at her sister's shoulder and said, 'Take the noodles in before they get cold.'

Before her, she saw only a road of no return. Everything had already been arranged and now she had no choice but to bring the guests the noodles and subject herself to their appraisal. Ming-Hsin wiped her tears away. She understood that even though she performed all the family's chores big and small, when all was said and done she was a girl and girls all had to do this at some point. She picked up the bowls of noodles and began walking.

The marriage would take place in the autumn. The groom's family farmed, owning almost a hectare of arable soil on which they planted seasonal crops. 'You'll have to work, but they have land,' Mother said. 'And as long as they have land, you'll never go hungry.' Father thought the young man seemed quiet but intelligent, a well-spoken stay-at-home boy who would be a good match for their kind and industrious Ming-Hsin.

Ming-Hsin always obeyed her parents. Since they had decided that she was to marry, she would accept her fate.

'What do you think of him,' Ming-Yueh asked.

'I don't know him!' Ming-Yueh replied. 'I'm afraid to look at him.'

The night before the wedding A-She called Ming-Hsin to her bedside and brought out a ring. ‘The groom’s family provided the gold jewelry for your wedding as a betrothal gift. All your father and I can give you is this ring. It was part of my dowry, but I’m giving it to you as a memento. The rest is for your sisters. You know we don’t have much and there are so many of you girls, so this is all we can give you. Don’t be sad or resentful if your younger sisters do better when they marry. No one knows what the future will bring. Your in-laws are farmers and they need extra hands to work the land. Don’t worry about us here at home. If you’re too busy, you needn’t return to visit.’

Her mother’s words made Ming-Hsin feel uneasy. A married woman was like a kite on a broken string, her connection to home and family severed forever. Was she just supposed to stop worrying about her own family’s hardships and only concern herself with a group of complete strangers? People said girls were like seeds blowing in the wind, wherever they landed, that’s where they’d grow.

Ming-Hsin grew disconsolate at the thought. How could she simply abandon her siblings? Ming-Hsin couldn’t bear the thought of allowing her sister to look after the family by herself.

When she went into the girls’ bedroom Ming-Hsin couldn’t keep from coughing and crying. Her sisters gathered around her. Ming-Yueh grabbed a handkerchief and handed it to Ming-Hsin to wipe her eyes. Ming-Hsin covered her mouth with the cloth and coughed up phlegm. Ming-Yueh took the handkerchief from her, ‘Blood!’

‘Shh!’ Ming-Hsin said, snatching the handkerchief back. ‘I’m just nervous about leaving tomorrow.’

Ming-Hsin’s pallor alarmed her sisters. ‘You’d better get to sleep early,’ they all said at once.

But how could she sleep? As the four sisters lay on their bed, a shard of moonlight cut through the darkness. Ming-Hsin gazed at the light. Ordinarily she didn’t pay much attention to the soft, silvery glow, but now she was brokenhearted at having to leave it. Ming-Yueh was already asleep beside her. Ming-Hsin shook her awake and told her to drape something over her shoulders and come outside into the yard. The two sat down on a bamboo bench under the light of the moon. All of the sorrow Ming-Hsin felt at going away translated itself into one single sentence.

‘It’s your turn to look to after them.’

## 5

Da-Fang sang a song for Ming-Hsin :

*White warbler beside the paddy  
Autumn wind, winter frost  
White warbler beside the paddy  
Waiting for our footsteps to join her  
To stay with her in the wind and rain  
She calls to us  
Swaying footsteps*

*Like a bird singing and foraging in the wind*

*White warbler beside the paddy*

*Autumn wind, winter frost*

*White silhouette flying to and fro*

*White warbler beside the paddy*

*Waiting for our swaying footsteps*

*After the wind and rain have passed*

*After the summer heat and winter dew have passed*

*She calls to us*

*Forgotten are the salt fields*

*We don't know where she's gone*

*To what faraway place in the heavens*

White crystalline salt floated over the unfenced salt fields, spreading out over a vast area. Occasionally egrets alighted in the fields, their heads held high. Da-Fang kept humming the tune as he helped Ming-Yueh carry salt. The song sounded sad to her at first, but Da-Fang hummed briskly and after awhile it wasn't so mournful sounding. But could final partings really be dealt with so easily? Unconsciously, Ming-Yueh began humming along with Da-Fang. Chih-Hsien sat on an earthen mound, resting and smoking a pipe. He was moved by their singing, but had no idea Da-Fang had composed the song for Ming-Yueh.

It was the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month and the sun still beat down on them. Ming-Yu was in the fields too and they were all covered in sweat. Sweat soaked through their clothing and dried in the sun, over and over, leaving salty white streaks on their clothes. Ming-Yueh was strong and healthy; each load of salt she carried weighed over a hundred catties. She not only carried more than Ming-Yu, she also worked faster. She worked almost as hard as two people. Chih-Hsien sometimes lazed about in the fields, but whenever he labored with Ming-Yueh, her sweat and the load after load of salt all seemed to chide him: 'We were born to these salt fields, working in these salt fields is as much a part of our lives as the three meals we eat every day, because this is where we live. The salt fields. Our livelihood. There's no excuse for laziness.'

After fluffing the crystallised salt at the edge of the field with their rakes, Ming-Yueh and Ming-Yu gathered the salt into a pile, then collected it in a bamboo scoop and dumped into it a salt basket. Ming-Yueh and Da-Fang took turns hauling the salt to the earthen mound, passing through field after field. When Chih-Hsien saw their sweat-soaked shirts, he waved his bamboo-leaf hat and shouted to them, 'That's all for today. We'll come back tomorrow.' He pointed to the earthen mound, signaling for them to come and join him.

When they had finished the work at hand, Ming-Yueh and Da-Fang carried the rakes, scoop and other

tools over to the mound. Chih-Hsien looked at Da-Fang, who at that moment was cleaning the soles of his feet. 'Thank you for helping out, Da-Fang. You're your family's only son, so you've already got more than enough work to do, looking after twelve salt fields with your father. Aren't you afraid of wearing yourself out by helping people the way you do?'

Da-Fang laughed, his two thick black eyebrows alive with affection. 'Uncle Chih-Hsien, as strong as I am, how could I be afraid of working too hard? The more I work the stronger I get.'

Sitting beside their father, Ming-Yueh and Ming-Yu each looked at Da-Fang and smiled.

'I'm afraid people will talk,' Chih-Hsien said, 'You're not my son, yet you're always over here helping us. Some people might get the wrong idea.'

Da-Fang and Ming-Yueh exchanged a glance. Ming-Yueh turned away, searching for the outline of an egret, pretending she hadn't been paying attention to what her father was saying. He continued: 'I don't mean anything by it. If you're not bothered by what other people think, then you're more than welcome to come over and help out.'

'Uncle Chih-Hsien, a man's not afraid of gossip and I've got energy to spare,' Da-Fang said, stealing a glance at Ming-Yueh, who sat gazing raptly at an egret standing tall and still on the far side of the salt field. In his heart Da-Fang was saying, Ming-Yueh, I do it all for you, Ming-Yueh, I do it gladly. Ming-Yueh heard it all clearly, what her father was saying and what Da-Fang was saying. An ineffable sadness came over her. She watched the egret's pure white silhouette against the crystallised salt in the fields. As the sun began to sink in the west, the salt crystals and the egret reflected faint, almost imperceptible traces of red, as though they were blushing. She loved this land, the wind and the sun, but whenever she thought about life's impermanence, especially after Ming-Hsin's death, the things she loved left her with an insecure, unsettled feeling.

Chih-Hsien nodded, acknowledging Da-Fang's generosity. He deeply envied Da-Fang's father. Having raised such a boy the man could live comfortably and happily for the rest of his life. Chih-Hsien rose to his feet. 'Put the tools away. We're done for the day,' he said again and headed in the direction of the village.

The three young people followed far behind him, talking and singing. When they reached the third banyan tree in front of the temple, Da-Fang stopped, reached up and plucked a leaf from the tree. He wiped both sides of the leaf clean on his shirtsleeves, then brought it to his mouth and blew twice. Under the shade of the banyan he began to play 'Moonlit Sorrow':

*The moon shines down on Three-lane Road*

*A breeze is gently blowing*

*Where is the one I've been waiting for?*

*Doubts fill my heart when I think of him*

*Ah, sorrow on a moonlit night*

*Late at night, alone and yearning*

*An autumn cicada sadly weeps  
The shadows of the trees  
Deepen my gloom  
And tears come falling down  
Ah, sorrow on a moonlit night.*

*Could it be he wasn't meant for me, the one I love?  
Why can't I let him go?  
Let us go our separate ways, and I'll sing my lovesick song  
Ah, heartless moonlit night*

Da-Fang played the tune over and over. At first Ming-Yueh and Ming-Yu just listened, but after a while they began to sing along. Under the lush leaves of the banyan they watched the round sun turn red in the west and hover over an empty stretch of land beyond the river, accompanied by a cluster of wispy, pink clouds. In the east, a full white moon rose in pursuit. It was the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month. Tonight the moon, clear and luminous, would hang high in the heavens. When she was a little girl Ming-Yueh had asked her father why he had named her after the full moon. Her father told her that the full moon lighted the way for people, so that they could finish whatever they happened to be doing. Some used the night's light to study, some hurried along the byways, and others went about their chores. Only the full moon could help them fulfil their wishes. But it was only full and round one night of the month, Ming-Yueh thought. Her favourite time of the month. On nights like this, her name made perfect sense.

They sang song after song. Chih-Hsien walked on, thoughts weighing heavily on his mind. He bowed his head, lost in rumination, the pipe gone cold in his hand. When he reached the house he looked back at the Ming-Yueh and Ming-Yu, their figures dark against the setting sun. Then he entered A-she's bedroom. A-She was seated on the bed beside the window, a thread twisted in her fingers, sewing a new money pouch. Chih-Hsien sat down on the bed and leaned forward to look. 'I carried that old one for over ten years,' A-she said, 'It was full of holes. At first I was going to mend it, but then I decide to take one of Ming-Chan's old blouses and make a new one. She's outgrown her old clothes and there's no one to hand them down to.'

Chih-Hsien saw that A-She was intent on her sewing and in one of her rare good moods, so he ventured a question. 'Ming-Yueh is twenty this year,' he said. 'We should be planning for her future.'

A-She glanced up without saying anything, then looked down again at her work.

'Well, what do you think?' Chih-Hsien went on. 'Should we ask a matchmaker to look around for a suitable partner? I like Da-Fang. Do you think the boy would be interested?'

'No, not Da-Fang,' A-She laid the needle and thread aside. 'I've already thought the matter over,' she said firmly. 'Ming-Chan and Ming-Yu aren't strong enough and don't know what to do without being told. They can manage small chores but they can't handle big responsibilities yet. And Ming-Hui is only seven. He can barely feed himself, so we can't rely on him. We have to keep Ming-Yueh here with us.'

Chih-Hsien was taken aback. He raised his voice a notch. 'Sacrifice her future so she can stay here and look after the family? I'd be ashamed to be that kind of parent.'

A-She seemed not to hear him. She went on as though she was talking to herself. 'Ming-Hsin died after being married less than a year. We spend twenty years raising a girl and that's what happens. Maybe that doesn't frighten you, but it does me.'

'Ming-Hsin was in poor health before she married. She worked too hard and we're to blame.'

'It's no use of you talking. If Ming-Yueh is gone who'll take care of things around here? Who'll help you dry salt? And then what will we live on? Rainwater? In another year or two the two youngest girls will be married off and then there won't even be anybody around here to look after the chickens. I'm getting weaker by the day. Just a little bit of housework leaves me out of breath. With you away half the year, how will we get by?'

Chih-Hsien hesitated. He sat silently facing A-She, not wanting to argue with her. There was some truth to what she was saying, but he couldn't bring himself to settle Ming-Yueh's entire life for her just like that. A-She saw his expression and stared at him. 'You're an educated man, aren't you? Did all those books leave you empty in the head? Don't you get it? I want a son-in-law to marry into the family and live here with us.'

'Oh!'

'Da-Fang is an only son. He couldn't live with us.'

Chih-Hsien fell silent, his excitement at the idea of Da-Fang as a son-in-law dispelled in an instant. He felt empty and alone. If they wanted a boy to marry Ming-Yueh and come to live with them, Da-Fang was out of the question. His fondness for the young man would remain just that, fondness. It was foolish to think they would ever be closer.

'Would Ming-Yueh want that?' Chih-Hsien asked.

'She doesn't have any say in the matter. Parents make the decisions. We'd be laughingstocks if we took a daughter's opinion into consideration.'

Outside, Ming-Yueh and Ming-Yu had returned. A-She and Chih-Hsien could hear them putting the tools back in the shed.

'Let's call her in and ask her,' Chih-Hsien said.

'What? Are you out of your mind? We haven't even started looking yet. Wait until we've found a match for her. What if it takes years find someone? We'd make fools of ourselves.' So spoke A-She. In her heart, however, she worried that Ming-Yueh would be unwilling and her plan would come to nothing.

Chih-Hsien didn't want to oppose A-She. He wouldn't know what to do if Ming-Yueh left either. He had taken work in the city driving a pedicab just to support the family and he didn't want to idle his time away in the countryside. Maybe A-She was right. He gazed at the weak light coming in through the window. No other ideas came to him. He would let his wife make the arrangements. Although A-She had always been sickly and unable to do much work around the house, it was she who was in charge of the family, ruling on matters large and small.

Chih-Hsien walked out into the yard again. Ming-Yueh and Ming-Yu were peeling sugar cane. Each

held a stalk horizontally in the middle and with a long knife stroked outward, peeling back a section to reveal its white insides. The sisters stood under the eaves, chewing on the sweet, refreshing cane, talking and laughing, relaxing after a long day in the salt fields. Chih-Hsien gazed at Ming-Yu. She wasn't as strong as her older sisters and her easygoing nature was ill suited to the demands of managing family affairs.

He turned to look at Ming-Yueh. She had seen him enter the yard and had already peeled a section of sugar cane for him. 'Papa, haven't you eaten yet? The cane is sweet and juicy,' she said, handing him a section. 'Have some.'

Chih-Hsien took the cane and bit into it. He wanted to tell his wife about its sugary flavour.