

THE BASEBALL CLUB MURDER

野球俱樂部事件

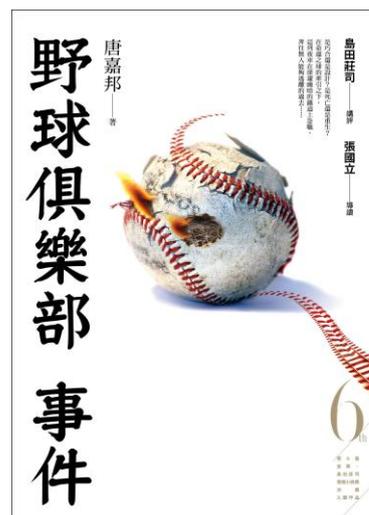
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The setting is Japanese-occupied Taiwan. Two businessmen – one Japanese, one Taiwanese – are murdered on the same night while riding trains at opposite ends of the island. Both were members of an exclusive club for baseball aficionados, and each disliked the other intensely. Who could have masterminded the murders – and what does it have to do with the game that defined the 20th century?

At 7:22 p.m. on the 31st of October, 1938, millionaire businessman and baseball enthusiast Fujishima Keizaburo boards a train bound for southern Taiwan. His unexplained absence at the Kyumikai Baseball Club, which had convened that night to listen to the game between rivals Keio and Waseda University, was noted but understood: he was headed south to convince the best young star in Taiwan to join the Keio team.

Yet, when the train pulls into Kaohsiung station the following morning, Fujishima's stabbed body is found sprawled across the floor of his compartment. At around the same time, his fellow club member Chen Chin-Shui is found dead by poisoning while riding the Taipei Rail. The two men hated each other enough to be suspect, but who would kill them both at once?

In this historical dive into one of the tensest periods in Taiwanese history, award-winning mystery writer Tang Chia-Bang writes the sinister side of a world defined by high stakes, home runs, and dangerous fouls.



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THE BASEBALL CLUB MURDER

By Tang Chia-Bang

Translated by Brendan O'Kane

Prologue: The Baseball Club

October 31, Shōwa year 13, Taipei.

The paper lanterns have just been lit for the night and the bustling streets of Taipei glitter colorfully. Traffic is bumper to bumper on Sanhsien Road; eager customers spill out of the Kikumoto Department Store on Sakae-cho; Dadaocheng, where the natives of the island are concentrated, is if anything even more busily jumbled. Whatever you want – movies, plays, music, food, horse-races, baseball – you'll find it here. It is everything you would expect of a modern city.

The war between China and Japan has been raging for more than a year, spreading from Peiping, Shanghai, and Nanking all the way to Shanxi, Henan, Jiangxi, and Guangdong – but the battlegrounds are far away, on the Chinese mainland. For most people on the other side of the Taiwan Strait – to say nothing of the Japanese home islands – life carries on as it always has, untroubled by thoughts of war.

Soviet Volunteer Group bombers painted with the national emblem of the Republic of China attacked Matsuyama Airfield in February. A public panic ensued, but there have been no more raids since then, and over the intervening months the scent of gunpowder has faded even from memory.

The show, more or less, goes on. The “Island Metropolis”, with Taipei Station at its heart, continues to sparkle and shine.

Behind the Railway Hotel that faces the station is the Grand Slam Café, an unremarkable-looking establishment that serves as a gathering place for the city's baseball enthusiasts. The baseball-mad owner, Notsuka Nao, founded the Kyūmikai Club three years ago, and invites his fellow enthusiasts to his establishment every Monday evening from 6 to 10 to share their opinions on ongoing developments in baseball matches around the world, some of which even go on to see print in newspapers and magazines.

October 31, a Monday, is the last day of the Fall season for the Tokyo Big 6 intercollegiate baseball league, and the second of the season's eagerly awaited Sōkeisen games between Waseda and Keio Universities. The Big 6 and the Intercity Baseball Tournament undoubtedly represented the highest levels of baseball in Japan until the Japanese Baseball League came along two years ago. Even now, in the third year of the JBL, the Big 6 games are still more popular. It's still early days for professional baseball, after all, and most people are waiting to see what the future will bring.

The Waseda-Keio game was rescheduled for noon after getting rained out the day before. Taipei Radio, which broadcasts the games in Taiwan, has a fixed daytime broadcasting schedule on Mondays, so the game won't be broadcast until six o'clock, just as the Kyūmikai Club assembles for its Monday meeting.

It's after ten. The Kyūmikai Club has concluded its activities and its members have wended their ways home. Two men remain in the cafe, chatting idly. One of them, an impeccably mannered man in a sharp Western-style suit, looks over his notes from the broadcast as if reliving the game. This is Kanuma Yūsuke. Not yet 40 years old, he has already risen to take charge of the massive Ōkido Corporation's Taiwan concerns, making him perhaps the most valuable member of the Kyūmikai Club.

"Waseda and Keio played one hell of a game this time!" Kanuma says, sounding too excited to be a corporate executive. "Even just listening to it, I was so on the edge of my seat that it felt like I was right there in Jingū Stadium."

"Did you get to Jingū a lot when you were studying at Rikkyo?" Notsuka, a fiftyish man with a greying moustache, sits off to one side with his legs crossed, sipping his coffee.

"They opened Jingū just before I got to Rikkyo, and I was there any time I got a free moment! I was even there the time the Emperor graced the Waseda-Keio game with His presence."

Kanuma had plenty of chances to watch games in person when he was working and studying in Tokyo – but he hasn't made it to as many games as Notsuka, whose enthusiasm for baseball borders on mania. Four years ago, when the American Major League All-Star team toured Japan, he followed them all around the country, watching Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Jimmie Foxx and the others in person. They played eighteen games – Jingū Stadium in Tokyo, Kōshien Stadium in Kansai, Hakodate in Hokkaido, Kokura in Kyushu – and he didn't miss a single one.

The conversation turns back to that day's game, in which Waseda followed up on its 7-5 win the day before to shut Keio out of the whole series with a narrow 3-2 victory.

Notsuka glances over at the Big 6 table he drew and put up on the wall. "Two losses in a row to Waseda – Keio might as well have given Meiji the championship on a silver platter."

The Fall season has come down to Meiji against Keio. As of the last week of the season, Meiji has seven wins, one loss, and two ties against Keio's six wins, one loss, and one tie. Meiji has played all of its games, so Keio could have snatched up the championship at the last minute with two wins against Waseda. Waseda, in third place behind them, didn't have a shot at the championship, but its two close victories over Keio have effectively ended its rival's hopes of winning the season.

"Waseda's getting its revenge on Keio for costing them their shot at the title last year," Kanuma says. Last year's Waseda-Keio games went the opposite way, with Keio emerging victorious and ending Waseda's struggle to win the championship.

The Kyūmikai Club has adjourned for the week, but Kanuma and Notsuka remain in the Grand Slam Café, reliving the game.

Only four of the club's seven regular members came to listen to the broadcast. Watanabe Riku, the semi-pro pitcher for the Ministry of Taiwan Railway team, had told them in advance that

he would be away for training with his team in Kaohsiung; the other two members had simply not shown up.

“Just as well Fujishima didn’t come,” Notsuka says. “Seeing Keio lose to Waseda twice in a row and blow its chance at the title would’ve put him in a foul mood.” The founder of the Kyūmikai Club has been growing irritable on the subject of Fujishima, who has a tendency to lose his temper when games don’t go as he hopes.

By “Fujishima”, Notsuka means Fujishima Keizaburō, Keio University alumnus and head of Fujishima Enterprises in Shinki-chō.

“Nothing surprising about Fujishima not showing up. I didn’t think Chen would miss it, though – he always comes,” Kanuma says, sounding rather more concerned about the other absent member of the club.

Chen Chin-Shui is the only local among the seven core members of the Kyūmikai Club. He runs a small company by the name of Lung-Chang Trade in Banka.

The mention of Chen reminds Notsuka of something. “The two of them can’t stand each other anyway,” he mutters.

A week ago, the club’s discussion of Kano University’s team and the Waseda-graduate player Wu Ming-Chieh started a serious dispute between Fujishima and Chen. Fujishima, always concerned with personal backgrounds, is not shy about his own – a Keio graduate and a native of the home islands – and has always looked down on the natives of this island. His judgment of Wu was scathing: “People wouldn’t talk about Waseda the way they do if it didn’t take players from the *lower* classes!” and “That coward wouldn’t dare show his face in the pro leagues.” He capped off his remarks on Wu Ming-Chieh by saying “A Chinaman is only ever going to be a Chinaman.” He was looking Chen dead in the eye as he said it.

Fujishima has never been able to abide the presence of locals in the Kyūmikai Club. More than once he has tried to get Notsuka to kick Chen out, and more frequently still he has subjected Chen to all manner of scorn and mockery. Chen, for his part, has always borne this bravely, but at the word “Chinaman” he threw himself at Fujishima and knocked him to the floor, where the two men grappled and beat at each other in a tangled, violent mess.

The others pulled them apart quickly, but Fujishima’s injured pride drove him straight to the police station, where he tried to get the police to arrest Chen Chin-Shui. The other members of the Kyūmikai Club managed to send the policeman away, but things with Fujishima and Chen have passed all hope of resolution.

“Fujishima came by this afternoon to tell me he’d be leaving for Kaohsiung early,” Notsuka says. “Something came up, so he said he had to take the 53 at 7:22 p.m.”

“That must be why he turned me down when I asked if he wanted to take the G3 back with me at 10:30 tonight,” says Kanuma. “But what could he be doing in Kaohsiung so late?”

The 53 and the G3 are sleeper trains on the West Coast Line between Keelung and Kaohsiung. The 53 leaves from Keelung at 6:25 p.m. and passes through Taipei at 7:22 p.m.; the G3 departs at 9:45 p.m. and passes through Taipei at 10:30 p.m.

On November 1 – tomorrow – the Ministry of Taiwan Railway team, including Kyūmikai Club member and Meiji University graduate Watanabe Riku, will play a practice game against Kaohsiung Commerce High School. Kanuma, graduate of Rikkyo, and Fujishima, graduate of Keio, have been planning to take the overnight train south to see the match. Their purpose is not to cheer on their friend Watanabe; each of the three men will in fact be competing against the others to buttonhole Ōshita Hiroshi, Commerce’s star pitcher and cleanup hitter, and convince the promising young player to attend his own alma mater.

“So is Ōshita really worth the three of you fighting over him for your schools?” Notsuka, who has never laid eyes on Ōshita himself, has been reserving judgment.

“I saw Commerce playing in the All-Taiwan Middle School games at Maruyama Stadium last summer. Ōshita stood out for the power in his swing. Unfortunately, the rest of the team isn’t at his level. They’re ranked behind Kanō and Chiayi Middle School. I don’t think he’s got much chance of making it to Kōshien before he graduates.”

Kanuma smiles, hearing himself sounding like a baseball scout. “Make no mistake about it, Ōshita is going to be one of the stars of the next generation in baseball, and I’ll get him for Rikkyo University. Players at his level are what the Big 6 needs to stay on top.”

“Ah,” Notsuka sighs. “But will the Big 6 stay on top, now that the game is going professional? Or will it just fade away? Everything changes so fast nowadays.”

“Not on your life,” replies Kanuma, proud graduate of a Big 6 school. “A hundred years from now, Big 6 will still be lighting up the field at Jingū Stadium.”

The hands on the wall clock point to 10:20 p.m. Kanuma stands up and gets ready to cross the road to Taipei Station and catch the G3 overnight to Kaohsiung.

Notsuka stands up with him. “I’ll walk with you – It’s just across the street.”

“Much obliged.”

Side by side, the two men walk out of the cafe and toward the station.

1. Last Train

Taipei Rail’s Taipei-Shinten Line, the city’s only commercial rail line, runs between Banka and Shinten, a distance of around 10 kilometers, and is (along with the Tamsui Line) Greater Taipei’s most important public transit line. Its main interchange is Taipei Banka, where it shares a station with the Ministry of Taiwan Railway’s West Coast Line.

October 31, 11:40 p.m.: a train with only two cars pulls slowly into Taipei Banka, the last stop on the Shinten Line. It is the last train of the night, and is concluding a journey that began at 11:15 p.m. at Gonyakusho-mae Station, the other end of the line.

The few remaining passengers disembark. The engineer on duty waits for them to leave before walking out of the driver’s cab and through the cars for his final inspection.

In the second car he sees a passenger still sitting in the last row: a man, head lowered, apparently fast asleep. As he draws closer, he notices an open one-liter bottle of Hakutsuru Sake in the man’s right hand.

Another drunk, the engineer thinks. I can't go more than a few days without a drunk passenger. At least this one hasn't puked on his seat – it'll save me the trouble of cleaning up after him.

He walks up next to the man. "We've arrived at the last stop, sir," he whispers in Japanese. "Please exit the train." When the man doesn't respond, the engineer switches to Taiwanese, raising his voice and shaking the man's shoulder, but still nothing.

The engineer starts to get a bad feeling about his unresponsive passenger. He studies the man's face. After a moment's hesitation, he puts a hand under the man's nose to see if he's breathing.

There is no breath, nothing but a faint whiff of almonds.

The engineer has never seen a dead person before. He runs out onto the platform in a panic and shouts for his coworkers: "Emergency! Call the police!"

Taipei Banka Station falls within the jurisdiction of the Taipei South Police Department, and patrolmen from Shintomi-chō Station quickly arrive on the scene. After pronouncing the man dead, they call for officers from the Criminal Investigation Department and begin the search for eyewitnesses. As it happens, two of the man's fellow passengers are still waiting to be picked up at the station, and agree to assist the police in their inquiries.

One of the other passengers says he had been sitting near the door. He hadn't noticed the dead man, but is sure that the man hadn't boarded after he got on at Keibi Station. Another passenger says he saw the man sitting in the back row after he got on at Kotei-chō Station and walked to the back of the car to find a seat, but assumed he was asleep.

According to both passengers, the man didn't move or do anything to draw their attention. Both are pretty sure no one approached him.

Detectives Kitagawa Hidetaka and Li Shan-Hai of the Taipei South Police Department's Criminal Investigation Department are the officers on duty, so they catch the case. They hurry to the scene upon being notified, just after midnight.

The two men joined the police force at the same time, though Li Shan-Hai has two years on Kitagawa and considerably more in the way of investigative skills. Kitagawa, however, has already made Inspector, while Li is still a sergeant.

No native Taiwanese has ever been promoted to the rank of Inspector, as Li's superiors have told him, and Li is not particularly bothered by this. He knows how the world works: natives are natives, Japanese are Japanese, and that is that.

In any case, Li has nothing against his partner Kitagawa; he's even fond of him. The Shikoku-born Kitagawa has a straightforward personality, a strong sense of justice, and an unwillingness to bow to the hypocritical demands of the world. The two of them treat one another as equals, and Kitagawa has never looked down on Li for being Taiwanese. Quite the opposite, in fact: Li takes the lead in their investigations, with Kitagawa, deferring to Li's professionalism as an investigator, serving as more of an assistant.

Once Li and Kitagawa arrive in the train car, a patrolman from the local station comes over to make a report: Male, deceased, found by engineer on duty at 11:42 p.m.; absence of livor mortis indicates time of death within the past two hours; cause of death presumed to be the potassium cyanide mixed in with his sake.

Also, a search of the dead man has turned up a monthly Taipei Rail pass, according to which he was probably Chen Chin-Shui, of 27 Shinten Road, Wenshan District, and a paper bag in his coat containing five 100-yen notes.

“Who would carry five hundred yen around with them?” blurts Kitagawa, who makes 35 yen a month and has hardly ever seen so much cash in one place.

Going by the other passengers’ statements, the dead man probably got on the train before Keibi Station. The station nearest to the home address on his rail pass was Kōgakkō-mae Station. There are no station attendants there, so passengers boarding at Kōgakkō-mae have to show the engineer their tickets or buy one directly – but the engineer on duty didn’t see the dead man get on there.

Nor did he see the man get on at Shichichōsuki or Nijūchō, the other two unattended stations, suggesting that the dead man likely boarded the train at Daiheirin, Shinten, or Guniyakucho-mae, where there were station attendants, drank the cyanide-poisoned sake onboard, and died – whether by suicide or by murder remains to be determined.

Nobody could have carried him onboard after his death without being noticed. The train’s timetable therefore makes it possible to narrow his time of death down beyond “some point in the preceding two hours,” to having likely occurred between the time the last train of the night left Guniyakucho-mae and the time it stopped at Keibi – that is, some time between 11:15 and 11:30 p.m..

As he listens to the initial report, Kitagawa takes out a Shinten Line map that he got from a Taipei Rail employee a moment ago.

Taipei Rail - Shinten Line

Banka – Baba-chō – Keikyō – Kotei-chō – Senkōbyo – Suigenchi –
Kōkan – Jūgobun – Seibinkaisha-mae – Keibi – Nijūchō – Kōgakkō-
mae – Daiheirin – Shichichōsuki – Shinten – Guniyakucho-mae

“A suicide?” Kitagawa muses. “But no one found a note.” Turning to Li Shan-Hai for his thoughts, Kitagawa is startled to see him sitting next to the corpse, leaning his head against the back of the seat like the dead man and holding an imaginary sake bottle in his right hand and a bottle cap in his left.

Li is clearly thinking about something, but Kitagawa can’t help himself from asking. “Is there anything unusual about that pose? It’s just how you’d sit if you’ve opened the bottle, drunk the poisoned sake, and died, isn’t it?”

Li shakes his head. “I don’t know either, but something feels wrong about this.”

He turns to the patrolman. “Get in touch with his family and see whether he’d been suicidal. And find out what the story is with the five hundred yen.”

The patrolman is already not in the best of moods about having to come out in the dead of night, and is even less excited to contact the dead man’s family. The stiff lived all the way out

by Daheirin Elementary on Shinten Road, he protested. Even if he calls the local station in Wenshan and gets them to contact the family, it's already after midnight. The family probably won't be able to get there to identify the body until morning – why not just contact them then?

“Better if we notify them sooner – they might be waiting up for him to get home right now,” Li says, wincing inwardly at the thought of a family waiting for the dead man in front of him to return home.

“But...”

“Please. I appreciate it.” Li smiles at the patrolman, even though he outranks him, but something in his tone says that refusal is not an option.

2. The Corpse on the Overnight

Kaohsiung: one of Taiwan's main military, transportation, and economic hubs, and a key stronghold at the Empire's southern frontier. Thirty years ago, the Government General built the vast Kaohsiung Railway Station beside Kaohsiung Harbor; then, two years ago, the Kaohsiung authorities' Greater Kaohsiung Urban Plan called for a new passenger rail station to be built, and for the old station to transition to cargo rail. The old station, freighted with emotions by years of travelers passing through it, has begun counting its days.

Early in the morning of November 1, after 5 a.m., before the sky begins turning fishbelly pale, Inspector Mitsuo Ishigami, officer on duty at the Kaohsiung Police Department's Criminal Investigation Division, is notified of a fatality discovered at Kaohsiung Railway Station. The '53' Keelung-Kaohsiung sleeper train, arriving at 5:18 a.m., was carrying a dead man.

The body, discovered in a first-class single cabin, belonged to Keizaburō Fujishima, formerly head of Fujishima Enterprises in Taipei, currently dead of a stab wound to the left chest. A porter told responding officers that when he knocked on cabin doors around 4:50 a.m. to notify passengers of their imminent arrival there had been no response from Fujishima's cabin. He had assumed this merely meant that the passenger was still asleep inside. The porter only became aware that something was wrong after the other passengers disembarked at the station and Fujishima's cabin door remained closed, at which point he opened the door to find the body lying on the floor, face-up.

Ishigami arrives on the scene and determines based on the degree of rigor mortis and lividity that the man probably died at least eight or nine hours earlier. He examines the dead man's wound and finds that the short knife that killed him is still almost completely buried in his body, indicating that the killer was strong, probably male, and left-handed. There are no obvious signs of struggle at the scene. Fujishima's luggage is all present and the cabin window is closed, ruling out the possibility that the killer robbed him and jumped off. The working hypothesis is that the killer was known to Fujishima or was someone he had met onboard.

Ishigami calls over the porter. “When was the last time you saw the victim?”

“Not long after the train pulled out of Taipei, around 7:30 p.m., I saw him and another man walk into the cabin from the rear cars. I think they must have known each other before.”

“They couldn’t have met onboard? Maybe in the dining car, when they were eating?”

“I don’t think so. We’d just left the station, so he wouldn’t have had time to go to the dining car, and nobody makes friends that quickly.”

Ishigami nods. “Did the other man have any distinguishing features?”

“Average build, wearing a grey beret and a black overcoat, suit pants, leather shoes, white gloves, and a white scarf – but the scarf was covering most of his face, so I didn’t get a good look at him. But he didn’t look like he was a nobody, if you know what I mean.”

“Did you see the man leave Fujishima’s cabin?”

“No – I was busy making up the beds in the other cabins, so I wasn’t at my seat in the corridor.”

“You didn’t go in to make up Fujishima’s bed?”

“I’d made it up before he and the man went in.”

“What time did you get back to your seat? Did you see anyone else go into the cabin?”

“It was around 8:10 p.m. by the time I finished up and sat back down. I stayed there for the rest of the journey, but I didn’t see anybody go in.”

So the porter goes back to his post at 8:10 p.m. and doesn’t see anyone entering or leaving after that, Ishigami thinks. That means the crime must have taken place between 7:30 and 8:10 p.m. – and where did the killer go then? The train was in constant motion. Maybe the killer left the cabin and hid in a toilet, then slipped off at one of the stops along the route.

He checks the timetable. The killer made his move not long after the 53 left Taipei, so the train would have been passing Shurin or Shanzijiao. The next stops on the line were Taoyuan at 8:15 p.m., Hsinchu at 9:33 p.m., Taichung at 12:10 a.m., Changhua at 12:40 a.m., Chiayi at 2:35 a.m., Tainan, at 4:10 a.m., and Kaohsiung at 5:18 a.m.

The first order of business is to ask Kaohsiung Railway Station to contact the other stations along the line and find out whether the staff saw anyone matching the description of the other man getting off. Of course, the killer could easily have changed clothes onboard to escape detection. The next order of business is to learn more about Keizaburō Fujishima and any enemies he might have had, which will mean asking the Taipei police for help.

It’s 6 a.m. by the station clock. The sky has started to brighten.

Ishigawa has been expecting it to take a while to get a better picture of how the suspect made his escape, but a phone call to other stations along the line quickly turns up a clue.

A station employee at Chiayi immediately recognizes a description of the mystery man. When stationmaster at Chiayi calls, Kaohsiung Station promptly puts Ishigami on the line.

“You’re certain that you saw a man in a grey beret, a black overcoat, suit pants, leather shoes, white gloves, and a white scarf getting off from the sleeper car at 2:35 a.m.? Absolutely no chance of a mistake?” Not quite willing to believe his luck at finding a witness so quickly, Ishigami repeats the description of the target in case there has been a misunderstanding.

“Not likely – it was a pretty noticeable get-up, and only two or three passengers got off the 53 at Chiayi, so the station employees wouldn’t have missed anyone.”

“Did anyone see where he went after getting off?”

“He didn’t go anywhere, just stayed at the station.”

Ishigawa is shocked. “What?”

“To be more precise, he stayed in the waiting room of the Sugar Railways Chiayi Station.”

“The waiting room?”

“Yes, waiting for the first Greater Nippon Sugar Railways train of the day to leave for Beigang at 6 a.m.. The people waiting for the train at that hour are mostly local farmers or people going to do some business at Chaotian Temple. He didn’t look anything like them, the way he was dressed.”

“Did anyone talk to him?”

“I don’t think so. The station workers figured he was someone important, so they did ask whether he wanted to wait in the station office – don’t want to upset a big shot – but he just waved them away without a word.”

“And he was waiting there until just now?”

“Yes – but he left on the first train to Beigang fifteen minutes ago.”

So close! Exasperating, Ishigami thinks, but there’s still time.

“Please contact the other stations along the line as soon as you can and tell them that if they see this man getting off the train they are to detain him there and contact the nearest police station – he’s a suspect we’re chasing. We’ll request support from the Chiayi police department too.”

More than an hour later, just as Ishigami is getting his hopes up of bringing in the key figure in his case, the Chiayi police department calls to say that after getting on the train to Beigang, the man got off at Zhuwei, the next stop on the line, where there are no station attendants. The engineer has no idea where the man went after getting off at the platform. Local police have been directed to try to find any trace of him.

What the hell!

First the man spends three hours swaggering around Chiayi Station while he waits for his next train, then he hops off at the first stop and vanishes. It makes no sense, Ishigami thinks. He’d had his doubts about the man having any connection to the case in the first place, but the latest updates certainly do make his mystery man sound suspicious. Best to bring him in as soon as possible.

Flashback 1. The Call

Yi was one of the best students in school, top of the class on every test, due in no small degree to his erudite parentage. His father, a figure of local renown, had earned the title of *xiucaï*, or “Distinguished Scholar,” in the county-level Imperial examinations under the old Qing empire, and had crossed the strait to Fuzhou to sit for the triennial provincial-level examination.

Few people in the countryside had titles of any sort. Even now, nearly twenty years after Japan took control of Taiwan, people still respectfully addressed him as “Master Xiucai,” and the hall in his family’s home where his ancestors had lived was referred to as the “*xiucaï* shrine.”

Like all men educated in the traditional fashion, Yi's father had first achieved the rank of *tongsheng*, or "Child Student," followed by the annual exam that conferred the rank of *shengyuan*, or "Student Member" – this was what people meant by "*xiuca*" – which then qualified him to sit for the provincial exam. He had done so, taking his title of *xiuca* and traveling all the way to Fuzhou, in the year *jia-wu*, when he was only 24 years old.

Taiwan was ceded to Japan just one year later. Its inhabitants were given the choice of becoming subjects of Japan or remaining subjects of the Qing, and as the deadline approached, Yi's father's schoolmates had urged him to move to the mainland to continue pursuing an illustrious career as a scholar-official. Yi's grandmother had fallen ill at the same time, however. Confucius instructed his disciples not to travel afar while their parents yet lived, and being a filial son and a good Confucian, Yi's father chose in the end to turn away from his quest for rank and riches and stay in Taiwan to care for his mother.

Yi's grandmother, bedridden for years, never forgave herself for falling ill and ending her son's dream. She told her son – pleaded with him – not to sacrifice his future for her sake.

Her son comforted her whenever the subject came up. He kept his tone light, and sometimes even reminded her of the satirical novel *The Scholars*, in which a frustrated would-be scholar-official finally passed the examinations only to die of old age. "Who's to say I would've passed it even if I had gone?" he would say. "I could just as easily have grown old far from home while I waited to pass it – Fan Jin might've taken that deal, but not me!"

Yi's father was a cheerful, open man, free, by all indications, of any trace of resentment or regret at not joining the ranks of officialdom. He turned their home into a school teaching the Confucian classics, did the occasional bit of scribbling when someone needed a letter written, and reliably provided the locals with seasonal couplets and occasional verse at festivals. He had also inherited some farmland, and with it the rent from the tenant farmers, and while these dribs and drabs of income may not have added up to wealth, they did at least afford a life somewhat better than the average. As far as Yi could tell, his father was living precisely as he wished.

Yi had been under his father's tutelage for as long as he could remember. He was a clever child with a photographic memory for anything he read, and he arrived at the public school with a considerably stronger command of the classics than any of his teachers.

Yi was 13 this year, and set to graduate from the school. Under most circumstances, graduation marked the beginning of adulthood and the point at which people would leave the village to look for work. But Yi hoped to continue his studies at the middle school the Government-General had opened in Tainan the year before. People said it only ever accepted Japanese students, but he was confident that the quality of his education put him ahead of even Japanese children.

The villagers lamented that in any other age, Yi might have distinguished himself in the examinations, just like his father – that father and son might even have continued their scholarly careers and risen to even greater heights together.

Yi's father smiled and made no further reply to such remarks. In point of fact, Yi's father did not share most traditional scholars' hostility to the new educational system the Japanese had brought with them; on the contrary, he had always encouraged Yi in his studies at the public

school. The past was the past, and had been so for some time; anyone who wanted to make something of himself would need more than a classical education.

Yi's mother had died shortly after he was born. He had grown up with his father and his grandmother, who had died three years earlier, leaving Yi and his father with only each other. It was, all things considered, still a happy and fulfilling life for Yi, and he was proud to have a father capable of greeting the new age while maintaining the old tradition.

Yi looked up to his father. He hoped to grow up to become just like him: an educated and refined intellectual, versed in modern ways and ancient traditions.

Yi was walking home from school one day when he saw a crowd of neighbors around his house. Not knowing what had happened, he hurried toward his door.

He pushed through the crowd and crossed the yard to the main hall. His father was sitting on a chair inside, with five unfamiliar men standing in front of him. Like Yi's father, they wore their hair in the queue that the Qing empire had imposed on its subjects, and were dressed in similarly old-fashioned robes.

Their leader faced Yi's father with a scroll in his hand. One of the men standing behind him held a broadsword; another held twin axes; another, a three-pronged spear; the last man was holding a flag. Charms for the Five Lords of Blessings had been scrawled over each of these objects. The men looked utterly ferocious.

Yi had no idea who these men were or what they wanted, and terror flooded his heart.

One of the gawking neighbors saw the bewilderment on Yi's face and took it upon himself to explain: "They're from Xilai Temple in town. It looks like they've come to ask your father for something."

The conversation in the main hall reached Yi's ears.

"There's no time, Master Xiucai," the leader said in a surprisingly courteous voice. He really must have come to ask for a favor, Yi thought. "You're the only one who can help us."

Saying nothing, Yi's father turned his gaze to the household altar table, which was dedicated to a figure of a bodhisattva. Next to this was the family's ancestral tablet, and in front of both of them was an object wrapped in silk. This, Yi knew, was what his father was looking at; this was his most treasured possession.

The leader of the group, seeing that Yi's father hadn't responded, hurriedly added: "Don't worry, Master Xiucai – it's just, none of us knows how to write a proper call to arms, and time's very tight, so we were hoping you could help. You don't have to join us! It'll all be written in my name; anything that happens afterwards, it won't be connected to you."

Except by all of the neighbors who've been watching us, Yi's father thought. *This is ridiculous.*

He took his time getting to his feet, and bowed perfunctorily to the leader. "I'll just ask you one thing, Mr. Yu," he said mildly. "And please do answer me."

"Of course, Master Xiucai," the man addressed as Mr. Yu immediately replied.

"Will your 'Great Ming Compassionate Kingdom' have examinations to pick its officials?"

Mr. Yu hadn't been expecting the question, but he quickly recovered. "Since ancient times, the Imperial examinations have been the means by which talented scholar-officials have been

identified. How could we not follow the ancient tradition? It is by the wisdom of sagely Confucius and worthy Mencius that kingdoms are governed, after all!”

Ancient tradition? Haven't you heard? Even in the 'old country' they stopped the examinations ten years ago!

This was what Yi's father thought, but he kept it to himself.

He turned his head and spotted Yi standing outside. He sighed heavily, and seemed to reach a decision. “All right. That was all I needed to hear. I'll write it for you.”

The men from Xilai Temple cheered excitedly, and the leader handed the scroll he'd been holding to Yi's father. “Thank you for your help, Master Xiucan. We'll just wait here for you.”

Fifteen years since the Boxer Rebellion and these people still think they can go up against guns and cannons with nothing but amulets to protect them! Are they playing dumb, or are they truly dumb?

Whatever. It doesn't matter.

Rather than spend too much time or effort on their “call to arms,” Yi's father cobbled together a simple “Proclamation from Generalissimo Yu” based on the declaration Luo Binwang wrote at the outset of the Tang dynasty general Xu Jingye's campaign against the wicked Empress Wu. He titled it “A Proclamation, in the Name of the Great Ming Compassionate Kingdom, that Generalissimo Yu Shall Bring Peace to Taiwan and All Under Heaven,” and pronounced himself done.

Thus satisfied, the men from Xilai Temple took the proclamation and left, and the neighbors who had been milling about outside went home none the wiser as to what had happened. Only Yi and his father remained, looking at each other through the dark. Yi could tell that something strange had happened, perhaps even something dangerous – but what that was, exactly, he couldn't say.

He tried to ask his father, but the words wouldn't come out of his mouth. He was afraid he might hear something he didn't want to know.

Most of the night passed in silence before Yi's father spoke: “Do you want to go see a show tomorrow? I hear there's an opera troupe from Shanghai performing.”

It couldn't be too serious if his father was still in the mood to watch opera, Yi thought. Relieved, at long last, to have the stone lifted from his heart, he replied happily: “I want to go!”