

THE RED MANSION: THE STORY OF YUANSHAN GRAND HOTEL

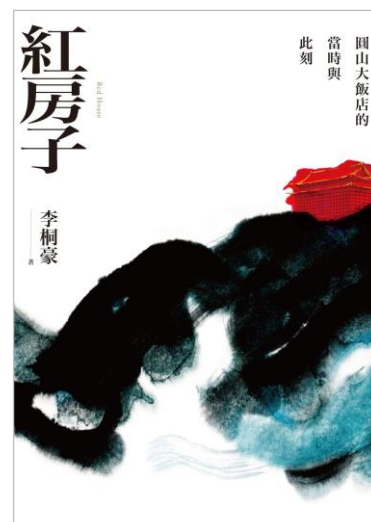
紅房子：圓山大飯店的當時 與此刻

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This palatial edifice overlooking Taipei has always been the meeting place of Taiwan's elites and international dignitaries. From its beginnings as a Shinto shrine, journalist T.H. Lee guides readers through the pivotal events of a half-century of Taiwan's history as witnessed from within the vermillion walls of the iconic Yuanshan Grand Hotel.

As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, a *torii* gate was erected on the slopes of Mount Jiantan, marking the entrance to the Taiwan Shinto Shrine that would stand watch over the lower reaches of Keelung River on Taipei's northern border for the duration of Japanese colonial rule. After World War II, this potent symbol of the Japanese empire took on a secular significance, becoming the site of the palatial Yuanshan Grand Hotel, a favored location for the lavish state events of the succeeding Chiang Kai-shek regime.

With *The Red Mansion*, author T.H. Lee revisits the first fifty years in the life of this fabled hotel that hosted countless dignitaries, and bore witness to the major events of its time: the visits of American presidents; the 1978 talks that ended formal diplomatic relations between the Republic of China and the U.S., secret meetings of opposition groups during KMT rule; the crash of a movie tycoon's private plane; a banquet to honor the Young Marshall, Chang Hsueh-liang, the last warlord of Manchuria; to say nothing of countless parties that attracted the film, television, and radio stars of the era.



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booksfromtaiwan@taicca.com

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Digging beyond the official accounts and the records of the wealthy and powerful, author T.H. Lee paints a comprehensive history of the Yuanshan Grand Hotel that incorporates the perspectives of common people by also drawing on interviews with longtime hotel staff, personal attendants to visiting dignitaries, and even the barber who cut the hair of the presidents of Taiwan. This humanizing approach brings the towering figures of history down to earth, and situates the Yuanshan Grand Hotel as a unique site where ordinary people bore witness to extraordinary events.

Within the pages of *The Red Mansion*, the story of the Yuanshan Grand Hotel is brought to life, vividly populated by people from all walks of life. More than just the history of an illustrious landmark, this is an intimate history of mid-to-late twentieth century Taiwan as told through the collective memories of an iconic hotel.

T.H. Lee 李桐豪

A graduate of the Journalism College of Fudan University, T.H. Lee is a journalist for Mirror Media, and author/administrator of the Please Say the F-word blog and Facebook page. He is a recipient of the Beautiful Life Recommended Book award, the Lin Rong-San Literature Award, and the Chiu Ko Annual Fiction Prize. His previous works include *Breaking Up on the Silk Road* and *Alibi*.

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By T.H. Lee

Translated by Mike Fu

Preface: Palace of Dragons – Welcome to the Red Mansion

There are two paths that lead to the red mansion in the mountains.

By car, you can take Zhongshan North Road past the Taipei Fine Arts Museum and Zhongshan Bridge. Make a turn when you see a road that slopes into the mountains; follow it to the top and you'll arrive. If you're going by foot, start from the Chientan Youth Activity Center on Zhongshan North Road. Cross the street to the bus stop and find the pair of stone sculptures that look like half-dog, half-lion creatures. Behind them is a walkway going up the mountain. Gradually ascend by following this meandering path until you reach a desolate and overgrown landscape. Take a turn from there and you'll come upon a gigantic *pailou*, a traditional Chinese arched gateway, identical to the one in Beijing's Yonghe Temple. The words "Yuanshan Grand Hotel" are written on the arch from right to left, in the vigorous calligraphy of Kung Te-cheng, a 77th generation descendant of Confucius.

The Yuanshan Grand Hotel, the red mansion on Mount Jiantan, rises fourteen stories tall, with colorful painted beams, up-curved eaves, circular pillars of vermilion, and glazed tiles of gold.¹ With its architectural language of antique elegance, the red mansion seems straight out of a classical Chinese novel.

In the plaza, wave after wave of visitors arrive on tour buses. This is among the few attractions that have managed to thrive during the pandemic. Like a palace or temple, the red mansion is filled with red colonnades, carpets, and window lattices. It's the red of vermilion, of ritual candles, of maple blossoms in February. Of fire, or rouge, or the blood of doves. The red poetry of melted candle wax. This solemn and imposing hue is even known by a specific name among local paint companies: Yuanshan red.

Tourists stand in the entrance hall and look up at the caisson ceiling decorated with plum blossoms. "The caisson ceiling, or 'algae well', is a decorative technique of Chinese architecture," a nearby guide explains. "The roof is recessed upwards like a well, and the four walls are adorned with decorations that look like aquatic plants, hence the name. Caisson ceilings are often seen in palaces and temples above the emperor's throne or the Buddhist altar. It is usually the most

¹ The official English name of the hotel is the Grand Hotel Taipei, but the name "Yuanshan Grand Hotel" is used here to help the reader contextualize the building with the local landscape and the works of art that also incorporate the name Yuanshan.

sacred place in the building. For this reason, feng shui experts have said that the most powerful spot within the Yuanshan Grand Hotel is this plum blossom caisson ceiling. If you stand beneath it, you can absorb the prosperous energy of the dragon and the phoenix. Five golden dragons encircle a pearl at the center of the caisson, representing the Chinese concept of ‘five blessings upon one’s home’.”

Dragons can be found on the meticulously crafted plum blossom caisson ceiling, on the lotus flower lanterns, and in the fountains on the hotel grounds.

The Golden Dragon Pavilion has a fountain featuring a dragon with three-toed claws, a vestige of the Yuanshan Grand Hotel’s previous existence as a Shinto shrine. In 1944, a Japanese fighter plane accidentally crashed into the shrine, and the ornate wooden structure burned to the ground. Only the bronze dragon in the courtyard remained intact, and thus many proclaimed it to be a divine miracle. When the Golden Dragon Pavilion of the Yuanshan Grand Hotel was being constructed, Madame Chiang Kai-shek instructed her subordinates to put the bronze dragon inside this hall. In 1987, the pavilion was renovated and the dragon was plated in real gold. Today it nests within a rockery planted with ferns, clear water streaming from its mouth. The fountain itself is a wishing pool full of coins that represent individual wishes for success on the civil service examinations, for familial harmony, and for marital bliss. Innumerable claims have been made regarding the feng shui of the golden dragon, making it a perennial topic of gossip on television talk shows. “The ‘dragon vein’ of Mount Jiantan is that of a hidden dragon,” they say. “A hidden dragon only shows its head and tail above ground. Muzha Chihnan Temple on Mount Hou is the dragon’s head, while Mount Jiantan is the dragon’s tail. This means the energy of the dragon is concentrated right at the golden dragon fountain of the Yuanshan Grand Hotel.”

Dragons are ubiquitous in the red mansion. According to local lore, a long-term foreign resident once had the urge to look up and count the golden dragons. With his head tilted back, he counted and counted until his neck grew sore, and finally gave up. Looking down at the counter in his hand, he saw that he had reached 220,000. With at least 220,000 dragons, the red mansion is worthy of being called a dragon palace indeed.

Atop the glazed golden eaves of the roof are not only dragons, but the unicorn-like qilin, phoenixes, and a multitude of sacred beasts known as the “nine sons of the dragon”. There are also dragons on the colorful glass screens of the banquet hall. Dragons in a field, dragon gods thrashing their tails, and flying dragons in the air comprise the “nine dragons of the spirit screen”, modeled after the Nine-Dragon Wall of the Forbidden City in Beijing. In fact, all of the above are references to the Chinese emperors of old, as evoked in imperial epithets such as the “dragon of the sky” and “the honor of nine and five”, thereby framing the red mansion as an imperial palace.

In 1949, when Chiang Kai-shek was defeated in the Chinese Civil War and retreated to Taiwan, he effectively became a strongman who’d lost his kingdom, confined to a small island. Iron willed, he purged dissidents and reorganized political parties in an attempt to reestablish a dynasty of his own. On the site of this former Shinto shrine, he built a soaring hall to entertain guests from President Eisenhower, to King Pahlavi of Iran, to King Bhumibol of Thailand. A hundred and eleven world leaders came and went, filling the red mansion with an endless parade

of aristocratic guests in all their finery. When Chiang eventually passed away, his son Chiang Ching-kuo took the reins; after Chiang Ching-kuo's death came a succession of presidents: Lee Teng-hui, Chen Shui-bian, Ma Ying-jeou, and Tsai Ing-wen. Several eras have come and gone, and the winds of destiny have shifted course. Only the red mansion remains, towering over the slopes of Mount Jiantan, gazing serenely out over the Keelung River that flows beneath. Sino-American diplomatic negotiations have taken place here, as have the establishment of the Democratic People's Party and the Cross-Strait high-level talks. The history of the red mansion is, in essence, the history of Taiwan.

Nowadays, history can be found in the red bean sponge cake that Madame Chiang ate with her afternoon tea, or in secret passages running from east to west.

As an emergency measure implemented during times of peace, two escape routes were constructed for the red mansion's visiting heads of state. They remain to this day as the eastern and western secret passages. The western secret passage is 85 meters long and has 74 steps. The passage also contains a slide approximately 20 meters in length, which had originally been designed for Chiang Kai-shek in his old age. If the old president had an emergency, his attendant could simply gather him up and slide to safety with him. In 2012, a female television journalist did a live broadcast from the slide. When she clumsily slid down and let out a cry that sounded like something from the Angry Birds game, the video went viral and garnered millions of views, amplifying the fame of the Yuanshan Secret Tunnel. The tunnel has attracted more than 300,000 visitors since being opened to the public in 2019. The eastern passage has since been repaired to capitalize on this interest.

A speech by Chiang Kai-shek plays at the entrance to the eastern passage. The strongman of yore speaks with a Zhejiang accent so thick that his words are nigh impossible to make out, like a hypnotic incantation or perhaps a curse. As you walk deeper into the secret tunnel, you'll find that it's 67 meters long and has 84 steps. In order to deter enemy soldiers, it was constructed with many twists and turns. When you reach the end and open the door, a small rose garden comes into view in the daylight. A path through the garden leads to a cream-colored Western-style building, the former residence of Kung Ling-wei, another erstwhile owner of the red mansion. The older employees say that Miss Kung's lovers used this secret passage to visit her.

Kung Ling-wei was Madame Chiang's niece, the second daughter of Kung Hsiang-hsi and Soong Ai-ling. She was also known as Second Miss Kung or Kung Er. But Kung Er was a name used only in private. When the employees saw her, they were obliged to bow and properly greet her as Madame President. Kung Ling-wei wore men's suits and kept her hair slicked back like a man. She had no Adam's apple, but tied large knots in her neckties to compensate. Though intent alone would never make her a man, the intensity of her will far surpassed most men. Before 1949, she ran her own company out of the Jialing Building in Shanghai, working in foreign exchange speculation and the import-export business. She preferred to be addressed as Madame President.

In the red mansion, Madame President moved through crowds like Moses parting the Red Sea. Everyone would scuttle to the sides, vice presidents and directors alike. The only person she reported to was Madame Chiang Kai-shek, Soong May-ling herself. Auntie Soong May-ling treated

her like her own daughter. Kung got whatever she wanted and did as she pleased, holding sway over the hotel for a time. In 1973, when the roof of the hotel's new building was completed, she decided that it looked too much like a large person wearing a tiny hat. She had the whole thing removed and rebuilt. The red mansion owes its present appearance to her supervision. After two generations of authoritarians came and went, the red mansion went through a number of changes of ownership. The little Western-style house became a storehouse for a spell, filled with bookkeeping records, guest ledgers, and discarded furniture. More recent owners, however, have been keenly aware that history makes for good business. The "storehouse" has been transformed once more into a museum, displaying the Second Miss Kung's black overcoat, her favorite Western liquors, and her collection of guns. The living room is amply furnished with tables, chairs, and cabinets in a style reminiscent of Chiang Kai-shek's residence in Shilin, save for the original fireplace in the corner. Atop the bureau is an old-fashioned gramophone that looks like it should be playing music, perhaps a vinyl record of the old Peking opera actor Li Huiliang. During the period when Chongqing served as the provisional capital of the Nationalist government, the Li Family Training Center was massively famous in Sichuan province. Li Huiliang played both the dignified Laosheng roles and the acrobatic Wusheng roles. With his extensive training, he could make performances come alive with incredible vigor, to the delight of Chiang Kai-shek, his adopted son Chiang Wei-kuo, and his niece Kung Er. In Chongqing, everyone said Kung Er looked very much like a man, and that she even resembled Li Huiliang to a degree.

Imagine a fire blazing in the fireplace. By the flickering light of the flames, you see Kung Er sitting on the divan on a winter's night, polishing her guns. On the gramophone, amidst the sounds of gongs, drums, and trumpets, you hear the great Wusheng Li Huiliang sing, "My country I shall serve faithfully, and for my Emperor I shall work tirelessly." A wind gusts outside the window of this little Western house, perhaps carrying with it the sound of an orchestra from the red mansion, where Soong May-ling and Chiang Kai-shek have invited foreign dignitaries to a banquet. Platters of ornately arranged appetizers, clear soup with bamboo mushrooms, shark's fin soup, braised chicken, mushrooms and Chinese cabbage, apricot milk, all manner of colorful fruits: this was what was on the menu when Chiang Kai-shek and Soong May-ling invited the president of the Republic of Vietnam and his wife to dine in 1962. At that time, this small island bearing the name of the Republic of China enjoyed diplomatic relations with more than one hundred countries, their flags fluttering high in the plaza before the hotel. The red mansion hosted parties once or twice a week, including the national day celebrations of various countries and Christmas balls for diplomatic envoys. The joyous laughter and music never ceased. During the White Terror, song and dance were forbidden everywhere in Taiwan except for this single place of unending merriment. The ambassadors and their wives would move to the rhythm of the music and dance until daybreak.

This fiery light welcomes you to the red mansion and its era of glory.

Chapter 1: The Shrine – An Era Before Opulence

The address is the intersection of Xuzhou Road and Shaoxing South Street in Taipei. The time is an utterly ordinary weekday afternoon. Beside the cheerfully bustling street is a residential apartment building of a sort that is ubiquitous in Taiwan: an old, unpainted cement walkup. It's hard to imagine that hidden among the ordinary flats of this building is a storage unit belonging to the National Taiwan Museum where priceless treasures are housed.

Visitors must sign countless forms and have their IDs checked repeatedly before entering the storage unit. The solemnity of the museum employees lends the place an atmosphere like something from a spy movie. The temperature and humidity of the storage space are adjusted to the level of precision required in an operating room. The museum staff unfurl one scroll after another before our eyes, displaying the ancient paintings on a table. The progression of time has not only rendered these paintings rare and valuable objects, but made them brittle with oxidization. Working in pairs, the staff gingerly move in concert, even taking care to breathe lightly, with the graceful elegance of Noh actors. The scrolls in question are Takebe Chikurei's *Miwa*, Kan'in Kotohito's *Yatagarasu*, and Nasu Masaki's *Nitakayama*. We admire the paintings from the sidelines while cross-referencing the inventory in our hands, which lists a total of 62 treasures that were retrieved from the Taiwan Grand Shrine following World War II.

In 1894, the 20th year of the Guangxu Emperor's reign, a Jiawu year in the lunar calendar, Qing Dynasty China and Japan went to war over the matter of Korean sovereignty. The First Sino-Japanese War thus became known as the Jiawu War in Chinese. The Qing Empire was defeated the following year, and diplomat Li Hongzhang was sent to Japan. On March 20th, he and his counterpart Ito Hirobumi signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki, ceding Taiwan and the Penghu Islands to Japan. Taiwan had become Japan's first overseas colony; after the Jiawu year, the calendar was reckoned in the years of the Meiji era. The Japanese colonizers constructed ports and railroads in a frenzy, planning to utilize the island's human and natural resources to their own advantage. In addition to visible infrastructure, the Japanese also transplanted the Yamato people's Shinto beliefs onto the Taiwanese. In the year 1901, the 34th year of the Meiji era and the sixth year of Japanese rule, Kodama Gentaro, the Governor-General of Taiwan, established the Taiwan Grand Shrine on Mount Jiantan, at the site of the present-day Yuanshan Grand Hotel. Just as the British had a passion for constructing schools in their colonies, the Germans hospitals, and the Russians churches, the Japanese went all in on shrines. By the end of World War II, the Japanese had built a total of 68 Shinto shrines to serve as spiritual symbols of their colonial empire.

The Taiwan Grand Shrine was dedicated to three deities: Okunitama-no-kami, Onamuchi, and Sukunahiko-no-mikoto. In Japanese mythology, these three gods are known for expanding the territory of Japan before the descent of the Grandson of Heaven, and thus they were usually important figures of worship in Japan's new territories. They were venerated at places such as the Sapporo Shrine in Hokkaido, the Karafuto Shrine in Sakhalin, and the Taiwan Grand Shrine in Taihoku, as Taipei was known under Japanese rule. Apart from these three deities, the Taiwan

Grand Shrine was also dedicated to Prince Kitashirakawa Yoshihisa, who died during the Japanese invasion of Taiwan. The shrine received money from the royal family during large festivals, and its operations were funded entirely by Japan as a designated *kanpei* grand shrine, the highest classification under Japanese State Shinto.

The Government-General of Taiwan supposedly selected Jiantan for the location of the shrine because of its excellent feng shui. According to local legends, Koxinga encountered a river spirit here and subdued it with his blade, thus earning it the name of Jiantan, literally “sword lake”. Some scholars say that the name comes from a story about a Dutchman sticking his sword in a bishop wood tree near the lake. Before the Japanese came, this geomantically ideal hillside was occupied by the estates of gentry from Dadaocheng, a cemetery for commoners, and the concession of the French consulate. Land ownership was a complicated issue. Under strong pressure from the Japanese colonial government, the estates of Dadaocheng were demolished and locals were forced to relocate their ancestor’s tombs with only a pittance as compensation. Nearly 80,000 ping of land (around 265,000 square meters) were thus cleared. Construction of the shrine began in 1899 and took two and a half years to complete. The entire shrine was made of cypress. “The project cost 536,358.14 yen; clearing of the property, operation fees, and construction of the Keelung Bridge were completed through the dedication of the military, officials, and civilians.”

The anniversary of Prince Kitashirakawa’s death was October 28. On October 24, his wife arrived in Keelung with his memorial tablet on the warship *Asama*. The wind and the waves were so strong that the vessel sent to greet the *Asama* found it impossible to draw near and Governor-General Kodama Gentaro “clutched the princess in a genuine panic”. Eventually they were able to board the sampan and make it safely ashore. Princess Kitashirakawa was the first member of the royal family to come to Taiwan. A woman of robust spirit, she took a private car from Keelung and traveled to the offices of the Taipei Government-General. Every household on her route hung a Japanese flag outside, and the streets were thronged on both sides with civil and military officials, Taiwanese advisors, representatives of various organizations, and mobilized students.

The enshrinement ritual on the 27th was even more grandiose. The princess wore a white ceremonial robe and carried an umbrella of white silk as she rode in a horse-drawn carriage with cavalry escorting her all the way to the shrine. This was the first time that so many people had gathered since Taihoku had come under Japanese rule. The Red Cross established an emergency clinic near the entrance to the shrine on Meiji Bridge (also known as Zhongshan Bridge over the Keelung River, now demolished). The wives of Goto Shinpei and Taihoku governor Murakami Yoshio, as well as those of high-ranking officials, aristocrats, and administrators, along with various famous young women, were all gathered in public, a rare sight indeed in Taihoku.

For Kodama Gentaro, this shrine was one of the greatest achievements of his tenure. In Japanese culture, there has always been a tradition of aristocrats making offerings at shrines. Kodama was a collector of calligraphy and antique paintings, and at the festival in 1902, he ordered his subordinates to offer two paintings by Nomura Bunkyo to the shrine. Year by year, the Taiwan Grand Shrine accumulated more paintings, works of calligraphy, porcelain, and other precious objects. The items that the aristocrats donated, the songs they sang, and the praises they

offered to the shrine all conveyed a strong imperialist will. For example, Suga Houjo's painting *Mount Jiantan* was intended to extol the spirits of the shrine. *Mount Jiantan* is a classical ink painting in the Japanese *nanga* style. Using only black ink, the artist depicts an otherworldly scene of a small mountain wreathed in clouds and fog. The painting is inscribed with a Chinese poem: *Northern snow joined with pungent rain / Greets the emperor's delegation / Where gods are enshrined / On eternal Mount Jiantan*

A single landscape can be expressed in so many different ways. Eight years later, the Taiwanese artist Kuo Hsueh-hu used Western painting styles to depict the same view in *Scenery Near Yuan-Shan*. Kuo's view of the landscape was executed through careful composition and meticulous brush strokes, bursting with greenery that, upon closer inspection, comprises over ten different shades of color. On the left side of the painting is a steel bridge set against a distant mountain. There's a vegetable garden at the foot of the hill where a delicate young woman is hunched over and busy at work, her reddish-brown belt suggestive of the metaphorical phrase, "A dash of red amidst endless green". A winding trail leads into the deep woods and foliage. A row of vermilion crested cockscomb flowers bloom beside the garden. The artist doesn't depict the Taiwan Grand Shrine, which was located on the other side of the mountain.

This painting was exhibited at the Taiwan Fine Arts Exhibition and later acquired by the Government-General of Taiwan for its collection, establishing Kuo Hsueh-hu's reputation in the world of the arts. The year was 1928. Political and social movements were flourishing. The Government-General had completed all its infrastructural projects in the colony. Land and sea transport and modern commerce were cutting edge. The Taiwanese people had been brought up to speed with the modern world, but were still in the process of feeling out its contours. By October 1908, the Western Trunk Railroad between Keelung and Kaohsiung had been completed and was in operation. It took twelve hours to travel from Taipei to Kaohsiung, and a third-class ticket cost ten yen – roughly a full week's salary for a mason.

In that same month, the Railway Hotel was completed across from Taihoku Station (where the Shin Kong Mitsukoshi skyscraper stands today). Occupying an area of 600 ping, or nearly 2,000 square meters, the three-story Neo-Baroque edifice was Taiwan's first Western-style hotel, the red brick of the exterior conjuring images of London. On the first floor was the grand lobby, assembly hall, billiards room, reading room, barbershop, and Western restaurant. Everything from the chandeliers to the cutlery and cups were exotic imports from England. The diplomat Chang Chaoying recalled in his memoir *90 Miyamae-cho* that when he was a sickly child, his grandmother often brought him to the hotel, "a place with an antique atmosphere, where the coffee cups were tiny and you could even enjoy the rare treat of pudding". Visits to the Railway Hotel remained one of his sweetest childhood memories.

A light meal cost three yen, the same price as the cheapest single room. A room for two cost sixteen yen. Given that a hundred *jin* (sixty kilograms) of Penglai rice cost only ten yen, those who could afford to dine or lodge here were incredibly wealthy. The politician Lin Hsien-tang and a member of the Freedom and People's Rights Movement established the Taiwan Assimilation Society here. Prince Kuni Kuniyoshi stayed here when he visited Taiwan. At the invitation of the

Taiwan Daily News, Chinese writer Yu Dafu came and gave a lecture here. Tan Teng-pho and Yen Shui-long, among other artists, founded the Taiyang Art Association here.

Of course, a hotel with such a storied past naturally comes with a profusion of gossip. The hotel barber who died overnight after a fit of vomiting and diarrhea was found to have been infected with cholera, throwing the entire city into a panic. Later, when health inspectors came to investigate, they confirmed that it was not a contagious disease and everyone at the hotel could breathe a sigh of relief. There was also an incident where a hotel staff member helped masked bandits steal from the guests and then make a break for it. The tale of the successful burglary became the talk of the town in Taihoku. Of course, even more titillating was the story of star-crossed lovers, the Japanese boy and his girlfriend who committed suicide at the hotel by morphine.