

THE RESTORER AND HER SWORD: THE ENCOUNTER

劍魂如初

A young antiques restorer who has just arrived in the historic city of Szu-Fang encounters the animated soul of an ancient sword. A myth-imbued romance in the vein of the Twilight novels.

After graduating from college, Ying Ju-Chu comes to the historic city of Szu-Fang to follow in her father's footsteps as an antiques restorer. Yet her very first days at work make clear that she is surrounded by more than just dead relics. Her restoration firm is among the most advanced in the world, yet its senior members are not only very young, but also exceedingly attractive.

Of particular interest is a street musician named Hsiao Lien, whom she meets quite randomly on a walk. He is handsome and affable, and the two instantly click. To her excitement, she discovers that he works as an appraiser at her firm. While his attitude towards her is inexplicably cold when next they meet in the office, their third encounter – accidentally, in an elevator – is reassuringly friendly. As the two fall into deep conversation, however, the frayed elevator snaps. As the car hurtles downward, Hsiao Lien produces a black sword from nowhere, which then propels them both to safety. As she is rushed to the hospital, Ju-Chu marvels at the appearance of the sword. Furthermore, who is Hsiao Lien, and how did he escape injury?

Fantasy author Huai Guan's second novel is a myth-imbued romance in the vein of the *Twilight* novels, in which the enigmatic power of ancient history amplifies the immediate force of love. Huai Guan's flawless prose style draws us smoothly but irrevocably into a world in which our reverence for the deep past finds a new, though tumultuous rebirth.



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Huai Guan 懷觀

Huai Guan was born in a small mountain town, and spent her childhood years among books. Cao Xueqin's *Story of the Stone* and George R.R. Martin's *A Song for Lya* ignited her love of fantasy, which no amount of travel or pressure – including a PhD in economics from the University of Chicago – could ever subdue. This is her second published novel.

THE RESTORER AND HER SWORD: THE ENCOUNTER

By Huai Guan

Translated by Anne Henochowicz

1. The Interview

Little wisps of cloud drifted through a translucent late-summer sky.

The sun hadn't yet begun to radiate heat, but its light was streaming through the window of a one-story house at the end of the alley, glinting on dozens of natural whetstones arrayed on a table. Rasps, welding torches, iron hammers, and other tools hung neatly on the wall, giving the impression that the workshop, which specialized in restoring antique weapons, was a quaint little factory, busy but not cluttered, lively and lonely.

Ying Ju-Chu swung slowly into the alley on a bike that was no longer new. She had big eyes, round and bright, that teared up when she laughed. They made you forget that she actually wasn't that good-looking, and that hidden deep in those eyes was a stubborn will.

But today she did not smile, and her body seemed tense. Ju-Chu went into the workshop and put on an apron, pulled her shoulder-length hair into a ponytail and walked to the table, where she unsealed a long, custom-made box and took out an ancient, sheathless sword. Holding the sword at shoulder height, Ju-Chu tilted her head to examine it.

This sword was about a meter long. When it first arrived it had been in terrible condition, covered from tip to handle in rust and blemishes. She'd spent more than half a year helping to restore the blade. She had removed all the rust, using both coarse and fine whetstones. Now it was smooth and shiny. And if you got close enough to it, you would instantly feel a chill sting your cheeks.

Weapons that had seen centuries of battle often had a murderous air about them, but Ju-Chu was used to it and didn't give it a thought. She raised the longsword and said in her usual soft tone, "Good morning."

The sword hummed, as if in response. This had never happened before. Ju-Chu went blank for a moment, then blurted out, "Hello?"

The sword made no more sound. Ju-Chu snapped back to reality and looked around her, not sure what exactly she had just been thinking. Luckily no one was there. However dumbstruck she appeared, she didn't have to worry that anyone would catch her that way. Ju-Chu calmly pulled out the swivel chair and started her daily routine.

At first she felt a bit too rattled to get to work, so she organized the tabletop and did other little tasks. Only when her mind had settled did she choose a fine whetstone, pick up the sword, and begin polishing.

The sun slowly rose. Ju-Chu bent over her work, her body motionless as her wrist went back and forth in one motion, over and over, keeping a rhythm neither hurried nor slow.

By nine-thirty the noise of cars and pedestrians had crescendoed, and her phone was playing one of her favorite old songs, but by now Ju-Chu didn't hear anything.

That's how absorbing this job was. It wasn't just that sounds didn't register. Even "I" disappeared – only the "thing" in your hands existed – and time changed its coordinates, so that one thousand years formed the new unit of measure, each moment stretching out to infinity.

More than two hours of labor had finally effaced one tiny scar on the sword. Only then did Ju-Chu still her hand and hear the knock at the door.

Ying Cheng, a slightly built man in his fifties, opened the door. Standing outside the workshop, he asked: "What are you doing here so early? Have you eaten breakfast?"

He sounded concerned. Ju-Chu turned around, not to answer her father's question, but to hold up the sword and say, "Look, Dad, it's almost done."

There was deep satisfaction in her voice, but Ying Cheng merely glanced at the sword, without giving it his customary inspection and critique. "I thought about it all night," he said. "That place is too far."

This was the first time he had said anything since she first received the invitation for a video interview with the Yu-Ling Cultural Relics Restoration Company. For a moment, Ju-Chu didn't know what to say. She put down the sword and said, "A direct flight is just two hours. That's not so bad, is it?"

"You'd be a stranger in a strange land."

That was true. But if Ju-Chu had to think through every single problem before she ever took a step, then she'd most likely spend her whole life right where she had started.

Ju-Chu didn't want to start a fight, so she gave a deliberate answer: "Yes, but I know some girls ahead of me at university who went to Hangzhou and Shanghai to work after graduation. Some of them only knew a few people there, and they went anyway. They say it's more important to have a good boss and good colleagues."

"Have a lot of people gone abroad for work?" Ying Cheng asked.

"More than a few. And also..." Ju-Chu paused. She couldn't stop herself from saying, "Dad, they haven't even made me an offer yet."

"Someone will. If not this one, then another."

Ying Cheng spoke with absolute certainty. Ju-Chu usually admired this quality in her father, but she was interviewing that afternoon, and to be honest, she wasn't quite so sanguine. All she could do was force a smile and nod. She said nothing.

Ying Cheng misunderstood her response. He stroked her ponytail and asked again, "If I take on a few more projects, or I retire a little later, how does that sound to you?"

Of course that wouldn't do. Without even thinking, Ju-Chu shook her head. "The doctor already told you four hours max in the workshop per day.... Wait, don't come in yet, I'll turn on the air purifier."

She got up and rushed to a corner of the room to turn on a machine nearly half as tall as herself. Ying Cheng sighed, put on a surgical mask, then finally stepped into the room.

He walked over to another long table, took out a Qing-era lancet and gently touched its point with the pad of his finger, pausing silently. A few minutes later, Ju-Chu noticed that the look in her father's eyes had sharpened in total concentration, as if nothing else mattered in his short time on earth. This signified that he'd gotten to work. Ying Cheng didn't wear gloves when he used the whetstone. Though he had cut up his hands through years of labor, yet he continued on like he always had. Ju-Chu couldn't do that. She looked down at her hands, turned her head, then picked up the whetstone again and moved on to the next imperfection on the sword.

Over the next two hours, father and daughter did not exchange one word. Though they were in the same room, each inhabited their own time and space.

At noon, one stopped her work, then the other. Ju-Chu hadn't managed to get her gloves off before she heard the approach of a moped, at last stopping in front of the doorway. Mama Ying, fair-skinned and petite, pulled open the door and craned her head towards her daughter. "Ready?"

Ju-Chu smirked and shook her head. Mama Ying shrugged. "Then you'll just have to brace yourself! Let's go. Leave your bike here. I'll take you home to change."

"You have to change?" Ying Cheng asked Ju-Chu in surprise.

Mother and daughter went silent. Then Ju-Chu groaned, "This is a job interview, Dad."

"In that case, you should dress as if it were any other work day. If they're professional, they'll understand," Ying Cheng replied without hesitation.

Ju-Chu agreed with her Dad's logic, but she didn't think it worked that way. She looked down at her thoroughly stained, patina-colored khakis. "But, nobody does that."

"Then never mind, don't risk it," Ying Cheng answered back.

Ju-Chu had heard that line countless times in her twenty-two years. She answered with a quick "got it" like she always did, then stepped outside and looked up at the inconceivably blue sky.

At two o'clock, Ju-Chu was sitting in front of the old vanity in her parents' room. Mama Ying stood behind her, wrangling disobedient strands of hair into a bun.

She triumphantly stuck in the last bobby pin, then clapped her hands and proudly said to her daughter, "Beautiful! You could be a stewardess."

"Do I have to be so formal? My friend said this company only cares about ability, nothing else," Ju-Chu asked the mirror.

The girl in the mirror wore a rice-white knit shirt and navy blue trousers. She had put on a little makeup, and her hair was coiled into a smooth bun at the back of her head. She looked elegant and therefore experienced – nothing at all like herself.

“It’s good that they care about ability, but anyway talk to them first.” Mama Ying sat down next to the vanity and leaned her cheek into her hand. “Did you ask, is everything good at this company?”

“Yeah, they cater to a high-level clientele, so they keep a low profile. They never advertise, that’s why you can’t find anything about them,” Ju-Chu said with a bit of uncertainty.

In fact, there was news about them, but in their official photos the company leaders were suspiciously young and good-looking. Antique restoration wasn’t exactly the entertainment industry. But the position was Ju-Chu’s dream job. She had to give it try, no matter what. She would see that strange place for herself before expressing any doubt to her mother. Perhaps, for appearances, they only sent their best-looking people to meet reporters. Yes, that must be it.

Ju-Chu took the keys to the moped, went out the door, and rode straight back to the workshop.

The call came at two-thirty on the dot. Ju-Chu clicked to answer. A handsome man of about forty at a spacious desk appeared on her laptop screen, sitting straighter than a soldier.

Ju-Chu could feel her body tremble faintly. She put her hands on her knees and methodically greeted the man in the screen. “Hello, I’m Ying Ju-Chu.”

“I am Tu Chang-Feng, head of the restoration shop at Yu-Ling. I’m pleased to meet you. Well then, please introduce yourself briefly. Three minutes.”

He spoke in a crisp, terse Mandarin without a trace of an accent, enunciating each and every syllable.

Ju-Chu drew in a shallow breath, then started to talk about herself. While she spoke, Tu Chang-Feng periodically glanced down at the résumé on his desk. As soon as Ju-Chu finished, he immediately followed up. “You did an internship abroad in your junior year, at a museum at Harvard?”

This was the most impressive part of her résumé. Ju-Chu said yes. “Hmm,” said Tu Chang-Feng, “What did you do there?”

“The Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies has the world’s most complete collection of pigments. I learned how to clean and restore color to bronze statues that were losing their surface layer to corrosion....”

Ju-Chu had prepared for this question. She kept on talking, confident in the clarity of her explanation. But after listening for a short while, Tu Chang-Feng leaned back in his chair and asked, “How old were those bronze statues?”

“Oh. A few decades to a couple hundred years.”

“Only a couple of hundred years? Do you have any other experience related to bronze?”

Tu’s tone was full of disdain. Ju-Chu told herself not to get flustered. “I do. In senior year I cleaned a hanging lamp made of bronze and crystal dating from the reign of Louis XV of France. Of course, I wasn’t in charge of the restoration. Also a pair of nineteenth-century German goblets. No, wait, those were brass....”

Sweat beaded at her temples. Ju-Chu knew she had flubbed, but she didn’t know how to turn it around. On the screen, Tu Chang-Feng had already started to thumb through a different

file, as if he were waiting for her to stop talking so he could end the interview. Ju-Chu clenched her hands into fists. Then, suddenly, the sound of knocking on a door emanated from the laptop.

“Just a moment.” Tu Chang-Feng disappeared from the screen. Then she heard the sounds of a door opening and closing and of chatter. Tu quickly returned to his seat, explaining to Ju-Chu, “They just excavated another King of Yüeh sword, and our appraiser was sent to have a look. He just came back.... Right, now where were we?”

“Bronze.” Her eyes drifted over the table, and an audacious thought floated into her head. Ju-Chu brought out the sealed box and said to the screen, “I don’t have any other experience with bronze. However, over the past six months I’ve been trying to restore a Han Dynasty sword.”

“Oh? What kind of sword?”

Tu Chang-Feng leaned forward as if something had finally piqued his interest. Ju-Chu pulled out the longsword. “A ‘four-sided’ Han sword. According to my research, this sword was probably forged in the late Eastern Han period and was paired with a shield. It may be one of the last swords in history to see battle.”

“Ironware.” Tu moved his eyes over the sword. “How are you restoring it? I’m listening.”

Ju-Chu fumbled for her phone, then pulled up a photo and showed it to Tu Chang-Feng. “This is from when it first came to the shop. It was disfigured by rust, the result of years of neglect after being excavated. In some places the rust actually stuck out like tumors.”

She swiped to the next photo and continued. “First, I soaked it in deionized water, but that only got rid of the rust caused by mud. Then I tried a steel needle, a scalpel, waterproof sandpaper. Everything got a little bit more of the rust off....”

Explaining each step she had taken put her at ease. Without her realizing it, her mind calmed, and her speech took on a rhythm that evinced the persistence of an expert and the yearning of a total beginner.

“Every antique weapon has its own life, and each has its own grain. To devise a unique polishing method for this sword, I started by studying its history. Only from reading did I realize that the Han sword is truly made for killing....”

A quiet laugh came through the laptop, but not from Tu Chang-Feng.

Ju-Chu’s mouth hung half-open. She completely forgot what she had been talking about. Tu lifted his gaze toward the laugh, then addressed her. “Never mind. Our appraiser thinks what you’re saying is, um, very interesting.”

Was it really not that she had misspoken?

She wanted to ask this very question, but all she could do was laugh stiffly at the screen and hesitantly answer, “Thank you....”

“Of course.” The voice of a young man, ringing like a bowstring, replied with a smiling sound, “You’ve done very well. I ought to thank you on the sword’s behalf.”

It didn’t sound like he was joking. Thinking that he was the appraiser, Ju-Chu couldn’t help asking, “If I may, do you have any way of determining the provenance of this sword?”

“Send that photo to the company email and I’ll have a look,” he replied.

“Send it now,” Tu Chang-Feng added.

Ju-Chu followed orders. After a minute, that clear voice sounded again: “These were forged by the Ministry of Iron of Nan-yang Prefecture, primarily for conscripted soldiers who couldn’t afford their own weaponry.”

This implied that the sword was a mass-produced weapon of little value.

“But, it’s beautiful....” Ju-Chu mumbled.

“I think so, too.”

After this exchange they fell silent. Ju-Chu realized that she was still being interviewed, and that she’d gone completely off-topic. She looked uneasily at Tu Chang-Feng, who rubbed his chin and said, “Interesting.”

“Thank you.”

Ju-Chu laughed in embarrassment. She heard Tu Chang-Feng ask, “Now, would you like me to tell you a little about Yu-Ling?”

The remark felt sudden. Ju-Chu sat stupefied for several seconds before nodding profusely. “Okay, yes, of course, thank you.”

In the ten minutes that followed, Tu Chang-Feng explained the guiding principles of the company. They sought perfection, no matter how long the restorer took to complete the job. They refused to sacrifice quality for speed. Even flaws invisible to the naked eye must be expunged.

Finally, Tu Chang-Feng said, “We’ll make a decision soon after we’ve talked it over. If we make you an offer, you must respond within three days. Does that work?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any other questions?”

“Um, you’ve already answered all my questions.”

Her cheeks reddened, but she was being honest. Tu Chang-Feng’s opinion of Ju-Chu improved by a few points. He smiled and said, “If any come to mind, you can write to me. Stay in touch.”

“I will, thank you.”

After a simultaneous “goodbye,” Tu Chang-Feng shut his laptop and lifted his gaze. “What’s so funny about a Han sword?”

A man of twenty-six or twenty-seven with dagger-like eyebrows and shining eyes sat on the sofa opposite Tu. He was poring over the image of the sword on his cell phone. At Tu Chang-Feng’s question he lifted his head and answered absentmindedly, “The Han sword truly is a weapon made for killing.”

That was what Ju-Chu had just said. Tu Chang-Feng took no offense. He crossed his legs and remarked, “So that’s what you were laughing at. The girl’s lack of experience isn’t important. The most important thing is having the right mindset.”

“It’s not that. I agree with her; the Han sword is truly suited to the battlefield.” The man put away his phone and said calmly, “It’s exactly the sword I used in my first two years as a soldier.”

Their attention did not linger on the ancient past. Tu Chang-Feng pointed to the résumé on the desk. “Give me a hand, run this up to the thirteenth floor and have Ting-ting look at it again.

If she has any objection, come get me. If she doesn't, send the offer letter right away. Don't always give me that 'perfection or nothing' line. Being chronically understaffed isn't a solution."

The young man nodded, uncrossed his bluejeaned legs, and stood up. He walked over to the desk and picked up the document, then left the office without a word.

The bright sky outside the window was as clear and blue as if it had been washed clean. Another day over. Just like that, his nervousness dissipated. There really is nothing new under the sun. He looked out indifferently onto the empty street below, then strode into the elevator.

2. First Impression

Fall came late that year, in mid-September. The sun blazed on like fire. Holding a thin, half-worn overcoat and carrying two large suitcases bound shut with rope, Ju-Chu set off for the airport with her parents.

Mama Ying offered her daughter ample parting advice, but all she was really saying was, "If it doesn't feel right, come home." Her dad said less, but had the same idea. Ju-Chu immediately promised that she would. It was only after she'd boarded the plane and watched a movie, at the very moment when she took off her headphones, that she suddenly realized what those vague words, "doesn't feel right," really meant. Given her temperament, she would probably take whatever she got until it broke her, right?

Never mind. She was already here, so she might as well make herself comfortable.

The pilot came on the loudspeaker and asked the passengers to take their seats and prepare for landing, they should land in Szu-Fang City at two o' clock. Filled with uneasy anticipation, Ju-Chu turned to look out the window.

Green mountains undulated from the interior all the way to the sea. Directly below her, a large bridge wriggled along the coast like a long queue, curving over the crisp, green-gleaming waves. This, this place was where she would be working.

Before her arrival, Ju-Chu read that mountainous Szu-Fang City was located along the southeastern coast of the mainland, that Mount K'uo-ts'ang lay behind the city and the Liu-pi River ran before it. The city included nine administrative districts, occupying a total area of seventeen thousand square kilometers. The city proper took up five thousand square kilometers, a metropolis of nearly ten million permanent residents.

There was more information about the city on her phone, but no statistics could compare to her first glimpse of these inspiring surroundings.

Her trip went smoothly. The cab dropped her off at the fork of a long lane. Ju-Chu walked down the tree-shaded street, clutching her luggage.

The lane was lined on either side with old-fashioned, Western-style buildings. The whirring of late-summer cicadas threw into relief the desolation of this place. The company had booked her a hotel at the end of the lane. Stepping through the wrought iron gate, she finally set foot on the grounds, where a French-style building five stories tall shocked her eyes.

The light of the setting sun and the slanting shadows of the trees set off the building's semicircular facade and charmingly misaligned balconies. It was as beautiful as a dream, completely unreal. Ju-Chu took a few steps forward without moving her gaze. Closer scrutiny destroyed the dream.

The walls were striped with water stains. Parts of the eaves had fallen off, while ferns and weeds filled every gap in the structure. The door, its paint peeling, hung wide open, but there were no lights on inside or cars outside. She found no sign of a single person anywhere. Could she really stay here?

She came to a stop. Then a boy in a roomy T-shirt and baggy jeans sauntered out of the darkness and through the door. He doffed his baseball cap and said courteously, "The towns are bordered and the country ordered, but the riffraff just keep coming in. Welcome to the Town and Country. Miss Ying Ju-Chu, I presume?"

What a dramatic entrance. Ju-Chu nodded subconsciously, but her feet stayed planted. She didn't know what to do. The handsome-faced young man grinned at her. He came forward and took a suitcase, then asked her again, "Come on in. Why are you just standing there? I'm Pien Chung. You can just call me Pien Ke."

"Hello, Pien Ke."