

# WITCH WAY

## 巫旅

Mei-Wan was born into a family steeped in witchcraft. Her father, Mr Ha-Wu, always has his nose buried in books about sorcery. But Mei-Wan is just like any other teenager, her thoughts confined to exams, having fun with her friends and the latest object of her affections. She is distinctly not interested in the family history and her father's esoteric research.

But just as her final exams are drawing to a close, she begins to see and hear things. Is she going mad? But after talking to her father and her Taoist-trained headmaster, she comes to a most shocking conclusion: she is beginning to wake up to her own magical powers! A most unusual occurrence for a girl of her age. In order to prevent a disaster of mega proportions, Mr Ha-Wu decides to try to harness and guide his daughter's newly developing powers. But she is soon performing beyond her father's capabilities, not only communicating with ghosts, but learning tricks such as transcending space and time and mediating in disputes between tree spirits. Then, one day, her time travel goes wrong and she ends up going back to 1636, where she becomes witness to a mysterious event in her ancestral village...

*Witch Way* is the first in a series of novels which take witchcraft as its central theme. Badai rewrites ancient legends and folklore in a fluent and confident prose, mixing tension, adventure and tradition in a thoroughly modern way.

## Badai 巴代

Badai was born in 1962 in the town of Beinan, south of Taitung and belongs to the Puyuma minority. He spent over twenty years in the army before going back to his first love, writing, and reflecting on the predicament facing many of Taiwan's indigenous peoples and their cultures. He started with reportage, but soon discovered this was not enough, and after his retirement in 2006, began on a plan to write some thirty novels with a true army discipline. He hopes his writing can introduce Puyuma culture, and in particular its traditions of witchcraft, to a wider audience. He has been awarded Golden Tripod for Best New Writer and the Indigenous Writers Literature Award, among others.



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By Badai. Translated by James Laughton-Smith.

## Excerpt from chapter 8: A Voyage across Realms

For the past month, Mei-Wan had been busy with exam revision. But whenever she had a spare moment, her thoughts would turn to the mystery of Yigule. She had come up with a few different methods for solving it, from trying to jog Yigule's memory, to asking for information on past students from the Academic Affairs Office, to searching reports on microfilm at the municipal library, but none of them had borne fruit. In the end, she realised she would have to use witchcraft. But there had been a problem. Nothing in Ha-Wu's research mentioned the possibility of using witchcraft to journey to a different time and place. In fact, Ha-Wu insisted that it was an impossible feat according to today's science, and even taking into account metaphysical possibilities such as religious belief, there was probably no way to transcend the laws of time and space.

'So why do deceased ancestors visit us seeking out inheritors? If it's impossible to traverse time and space, then there would be no way for a spirit medium to pass on her skills to another generation, and it would also be impossible for these spirits to exercise their powers here,' Mei-Wan said, one day deciding to challenge her father's beliefs.

'That's not the same! Ancestors don't appear in physical form; they manifest as spirits, or sometimes as a feeling or vision,' Ha-Wu explained.

'Pa, whether they appear as spirits, visions or feelings, they still possess power. With that kind of awesome power, what difference does it make whether they have physical form or not? What's more, as long as they can travel to their desired time and place to gather knowledge of the things they want to know, then they only need to manifest as visions or feelings!' Mei-Wan was struck by the strength of her conviction and unusual clarity of thought.

'Hang on, why have you been thinking about all this? Shouldn't you have been preparing for your exams?' Ha-Wu regarded Mei-Wan for a moment. There is something to what she says, he thought to himself. If ancestral spirits can voyage across several generations to the present day to seek out a relative, then it would appear that these visions or feelings aren't bound by time and space.

'What you're saying does make some sense, but I don't know how it would be done. I've only heard tell of tribal witches travelling this way in legends. I've never heard of anyone who actually knows how it's done. At least, in my research I haven't come across any clues that this might be the case!'

'Well Pa, maybe your research hasn't been thorough enough!'

'Wait a moment, are you making fun of me? Okay, you put some more effort in to discovering how it's done and let me know when you've found the answer!' Ha-Wu said, sounding a little injured.

'Pa, are you upset?'

'No!'

'Yes you are!'

'No, you just hurt my feelings a little, that's all!'

'Pa, you're a top witchcraft researcher. But some of the problems I've been thinking about are related to long-lost witchcraft lore. It isn't any wonder that there's no information about it. I'm winding you up on purpose!'

'You're right. Some phenomena I still haven't been able to explain fully. That's why witchcraft is such an intriguing subject for research. If spirit ancestors can visit us, then it must be possible for them to traverse time and space. But the question is, in what form do they make the journey? Perhaps it could be through dreams.'

'Dreams?' Mei-Wan felt like she had just had a sudden epiphany, but she was unsure of how much she understood just yet.

'Yes! There are many modern theories explaining the science of dreams, how they are formed, how we dream et cetera, but in essence they are self-contained worlds where we feel real emotions of joy, sadness and fear. They have special rules. They can affect reality but at the same time they are removed from reality. Dreams are a crossing point between coexisting worlds, through which we move between sleep and wakefulness. It's via these crossing points that time and space can be traversed, and through which spirits are able to come and go, or even linger. There must be rules to how it works. It's just nobody has discovered them yet. I admit, my knowledge in this area is lacking. It's going to be up to you to figure out these mysteries!' Ha-Wu smiled suddenly.

'Me? Okay, I will figure it out and I'll tell you what I discover. But why are you smiling? You shouldn't look so smug considering you are pushing me into this difficult area of research,' Mei-Wan said.

She felt a little at a loss, but Ha-Wu had given her some ideas.

The boundary between our world and the dream world lies between sleep and wakefulness. A careless person could accidentally slip between them. Suppose the ancestors live in a realm parallel to our own? During a witchcraft ritual, the boundaries between the two worlds form a sacred space where spirit mediums and spirits can exchange thoughts and mortals can make contact with spirits.

'So,' said Mei-Wan, recalling something she'd read in Ha-Wu's research paper, 'the ritual becomes a junction, or tear, between the two worlds. Spirits can be summoned into the space created by the ritual allowing beings from either side to pass into the other.'

'Yes! That makes sense. You really are my daughter. I suspect you've become too involved in my research and have been neglecting your revision.' Ha-Wu looked at Mei-Wan with a disguised smile. He felt very proud of her.

'Hey, here I am helping you to write your conclusion and you're picking on me. You never give your daughter encouragement,' Mei-Wan snapped.

'Alright, alright, you've done very well! In theory, when witches use their powers to summon spirits, they are traversing time and space. But this is just us letting the spirits enter our world and time. I've never heard of any instances of humans entering their world,' Ha-Wu said.

'Ah, I understand now!' Mei-Wan nodded.

In fact, Mei-Wan was really guessing more than she understood. She had been gaining more experience of actual witchcraft practices over the past few months. She knew the spirit medium's role and spells, and that they had the ability to bridge different worlds. As for people alive today entering other spaces, her gut was telling her it was possible. She had once taken part in a soul-calling ritual conducted by her grandmother A-Wu and had experienced her own soul crossing over a body of water and a mountain range before it had been called back. She had experienced

the perils and extreme weather of the voyage as if it had really happened. In the past month, she had even summoned the spirit of her shaman grandmother as a power source while practising soul calling herself. Therefore, she reasoned, it should be possible to journey to particular times and places in soul form. The key would be whether she could use spells and rituals to keep her soul under control by maintaining force of will and power equivalent to that of her physical body, like summoned ancestors. Ha-Wu didn't have any experience of this particular practice, and Mei-Wan didn't want to explain her theory to him before she had made a successful attempt.

The next day, when opportunity arose, Mei-Wan wrote a spell. Then, with Yigule watching over her, she began practicing daily, urging her soul to leave her body while carrying her consciousness with it. One weekend Mei-Wan succeeded. It was evening and she had told her family she was tired so that she might go lie down in bed, that she might leave her body on a shamanic voyage. In an instant, she was transported to the disused toilet at school, making Yigule panic and shoot back into the drainage pipe, where she had hid first of all.

'What's wrong, Yigule?' asked Mei-Wan.

'You scared me!' the sound of Yigule's voice echoed from inside the drain pipe.

'How did I scare you?'

'There's a chill in the air about you. Just like the spirits that used to linger around you.' Yigule's voice held a slight tremble. Then she said, 'Wait, you're not Mei-Wan!'

'I'm not Mei-Wan? Am I a ghost? Were that the case, I'd be a most lovely one, and you wouldn't need to be afraid. Come out and have a look for yourself.' Mei-Wan bent forward and peered into the drain pipe. 'I won't hurt you.'

As soon as Mei-Wan finished her last sentence, Yigule's fist-sized head popped out. Eyeing Mei-Wan, she said, 'I believe you, but what's happened to you?'

'What do you mean?' Mei-Wan inquired, staring back at Yigule.

'You feel like a spirit or a ghost. You're not the regular Mei-Wan!'

'Of course I'm not! The regular me is still at home, fast asleep. The Mei-Wan you can see now is the form my spirit has taken. But I look the same, don't I?'

'Spirit? So... you've found a way to transport yourself through space?' Yigule still seemed somewhat sceptical.

'I'm not sure. But I'm here aren't I! If it's true, that I'm a spirit or a ghost as you feel, that means it's worked. I can transport my spirit across time!' Mei-Wan looked at Yigule and smiled excitedly.

'Really?' Yigule spoke with a passive tone, and a look of fear started to creep across her face.

'You don't believe me? Or does my spirit form make you uncomfortable? You know, you did this once before! That's why I didn't let you leave. I was afraid you'd hurt someone. Do you understand now?'

'Um...' Yigule was momentarily tongue-tied, but smiled reluctantly.

'You don't believe me. Come on. Come with me back to my house. You can live with me there!'

'How? Your house is protected by your grandmother's witchcraft. How can I go there?'

'What? You've been to my house before without me knowing?'

'Yes! I went on the first day the perimeter wall of the school was demolished. But as soon as I got within a metre of the wall around your house I was impeded by a magical force cast by your grandmother. It felt just like a strong electrical current, except it was many times stronger than the spell at the school. I almost fainted. It took a long time for me to recover my strength and get back to the school.'

'Really?' Mei-Wan asked, craning her neck, eyes wide.

A ray of evening sun shone through the window and reflected off Mei-Wan's eyes, making her look most strange. Anxious that Mei-Wan didn't believe her, Yigule hastened to add, 'I'm telling the truth. I'm not lying. After I came back my whole body hurt so much I had no energy to move at all. It took me three days to recover properly. It was dreadful.'

'You mean that you were able to move about freely before?'

'I thought you already knew?'

'But spirits and ghosts are always restricted to one specific place, unless they are summoned by a shaman or sorcerer using witchcraft or a spell. Then they can appear instantly at another location. It's over twenty kilometres from Kangshan to Kaohsiung, but you can move instantly between the two places? Just like I did?' Mei-Wan was speaking louder now.

'Yes. I've always been able to do that. I haven't tried since your grandmother placed a seal around the school's perimeter wall. Let me tell you something, I'm not like the other ghosts on the school campus or those wandering souls. I don't know how I do it. But it's true that I can.'

'Oh my, why didn't you say so before? Then you should be able to go back to the time of your accident and see who your family were. You'll have a place to go to!'

'I... Oh, I hadn't thought of that. After you started turning up, thoughts of finding my family seemed to fade away. Even if I found them, what would I do? What's more, I started to realise that I'm not really a ghost, or even some kind of fairy. Don't you think so too?' Yigule gazed forlornly at Mei-Wan as she spoke.

'I do! I don't know exactly what you are either, Yigule! But I've been racking my brains recently trying to figure it out. I just thought that by going back to the past you would be able to know more about what happened to you, and it would help you be reunited with your family. That's why I've been spending so much time researching voyaging between realms!'

'Thank you so much, and sorry, Mei-Wan!'

'There's no need to be sorry. If it wasn't for you I wouldn't have stumbled upon this long-lost witchcraft. Perhaps in the future I might discover its other powers! I might be able to work out what you are exactly sooner than you think. All right, come back with me now to my house. You can live with me and keep me company until we clear this all up! You're Yigule remember, the little tag-along!'

'Can I really? What about the protective spell on your house? How can I pass through it?'

'You're not a ghost, remember! Also, I've already removed the negative *qi* from the ghosts that clung to you. The spell won't harm you unless you have malicious intent.'

'Really?'

'Really!' Mei-Wan had hardly finished the word when she began to shrink back into the empty space behind her. She just had time to grab Yigule's hand and they disappeared together.

Scarcely had Yigule let out an exclamation of surprise when she found herself on Mei-Wan's bed with Mei-Wan lying on it looking up at her.

'See! I didn't lie to you, did I?' Mei-Wan said as she got up from the bed. Noticing that Yigule had been stunned into silence, Mei-Wan pointed to a low open cabinet and said, 'You should feel at home in there, right?'

'Oh, Little Miss Witch, you are truly powerful. You must have made all the correct arrangements. I need to think all this through.' Yigule clambered up towards the cabinet as she spoke, an expression of utmost confusion on her face.

'Well, Yigule, I haven't figured everything out completely yet. But this power is just so much fun. I need to really study it properly. Rest assured, there must be a solution to your problem. I'm going to go have dinner with my parents. You have a rest or have a walk around.'

As Mei-Wan left the room, Yigule experienced a sudden sense of faint unease. She didn't know the ways of witchcraft, but she felt like solving the question of her origin was bound up with an important event to come, in preparation for which Mei-Wan was building up her power. What that event was neither Mei-Wan nor Yigule knew, which is why Yigule felt a slight apprehension, but also excitement. After all, she had left the abandoned toilet where she had lived for the last fifty years and now she had a chance to witness a real witch exercise her powers to journey through time and space.

Mei-Wan suddenly pushed open the door, and said in hushed tones, 'Let's go on a real shaman's journey tomorrow.'

That night, the ancestors who had been visiting Mei-Wan recently came to her in her dream. Her grandmother was among them. At first, she thought that perhaps it was because she had been practising the shamanic summoning too often recently, causing the spirits to linger. However, as she slept, she watched as they moved on towards a large peak in a mountain range to the northwest. Occasionally, she glimpsed strange beings and fantastic shadows on the mountain moving between treetops and sinking into the mist.

But Mei-Wan didn't pay it much attention. The next morning, she went to the study to prepare for exams as she usually did at the weekend. After lunch, she was feeling unusually studious and went back to her books. At around three in the afternoon she stretched and told her mother she was going to take a nap. Yigule was sitting on top of the small cabinet, dangling her legs over the side when Mei-Wan walked into the room holding a notepad.

'Yigule, I've written a spell. Let's go on a voyage!' Mei-Wan said with a smile on her face.

'Are you sure this is okay? You seem very sure of yourself.'

'Let's give it a try! I was able to come and go so easily yesterday, was I not?'

'Yesterday? Um, yes, but where are we going today?' A look of confusion crossed Yigule's face.

'Don't be so scared. You're not even of this world, what have you got to be afraid of?' As Mei-Wan spoke, she dressed in a pair of jeans and a thick cotton hoodie. She grabbed a bag with some equipment used in shamanic rituals and took her coat out of the cupboard. Then she put on her shoes and lay down in bed, pulling the light summer blanket over her. 'Come on! Come under the covers and grab my arm. Let's go!'

'You haven't said where we're going!' Yigule said as she dived under the cover.

'Last night, I dreamed of the spirits of my shaman ancestors. They were moving towards a mountain. We are going to go to the forest on that mountain!'

'What's there? Are we going to meet someone you know?'

Mei-Wan ignored the questions and started to chant the spell she had spent the day writing and re-writing on her notepad.

Space around her started to become cloudy and distorted. Sounds and light slowly began to fade away. Mei-Wan

experienced a surge of power wash back and forth over her, growing stronger and stronger. Her body seemed to float up and sink down simultaneously and she felt a force pulling her in both directions.

Which forest are we going to? Mei-Wan heard Yigule's muffled voice.

Mei-Wan felt hyper aware, but all was all fuzzy at the edges of her consciousness. She felt only an enormous force, propelling her forward, faster and faster as it grew more and more powerful.

Where are we going? The muted sound of Yigule's voice again assailed Mei-Wan's ears as it cut through the great silence surrounding her.

Mei-Wan opened her mouth to respond but no sound emerged. In her mind she saw an open book float up in the reading room and a stream of four hundred Arabic numbers swirl into the air. In an instant space seemed to explode in all four directions and a profusion of green as far as the eye could see opened up before her. Mei-Wan felt her feet touch down on solid ground. She was surrounded by a myriad of trees with dark, glistening trunks. She could discern trees of all different thickness and sizes stretching out around her, enveloped in mist.