

THE LANTERN MAKER'S SECRET

AN INSPECTOR GONG SOLO MYSTERY

THE QING DYNASTY MYSTERIES



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Red Empress Publishing
www.RedEmpressPublishing.com

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CHAPTER ONE



The night sky above Peking shimmered like silk soaked in gold. Lanterns of every size and shade floated gently on the autumn breeze—crimson koi, yellow peonies, fierce dragons breathing curls of clouded smoke. Children dashed through the crowds, clutching paper rabbits and spinning wheels, their laughter trailing behind them like kite ribbons. Vendors barked over the din, hawking candied hawthorn, roasted chestnuts, and fluted porcelain teacups painted with chrysanthemums. All around, the capital thrummed with the joy and chaos of the Mid-Autumn Festival.

Inspector Gong stood at the edge of Jinshi Street, arms crossed, watching the procession pass beneath a pale harvest moon. He wasn't on duty—not officially. But something about festival nights put him on edge. Too many lights, too many masks. Revelry hid as much as it revealed.

He reached for the flask tucked into his sleeve. The baijiu was warm from his body and bitter on his tongue. He had just capped it when the screaming began.

Above the main avenue, a floating lantern wobbled unnaturally, its paper skin scorched and curling. Someone gasped as the gentle flame inside flared too high. The lantern listed sideways in the breeze, trailing smoke like a wounded bird. It drifted lower, its embers catching the edge of a red silk canopy, which erupted in flame.

Screams tore through the air as sparks leapt from awning to banner. One flaming scrap tumbled from the canopy and landed squarely on the wooden roof of a shuttered lantern workshop.

Within moments, the dry shingles crackled and caught. Smoke poured upward, dark and choking, and the crowd surged back in panic as the fire grew. Then came the unmistakable sound of something collapsing inside—timbers giving way. A second scream followed, not from the crowd, but from within.

“Back! All of you!” Gong shouted as he pushed through the throng.

The paper sign above the scorched door swung from one nail—*Hu’s Lantern Studio*.

Flames licked through the broken windows, casting orange light against the alley walls. The air reeked of oil and varnish. Two boys in padded tunics were tossing buckets of water over the low side wall.

One of them turned, his voice cracking. “Sir! There’s someone inside!”

Gong didn’t hesitate. He tore a strip of cloth from his robe, tied it over his nose, and charged the half-burnt frame of the door. A single kick sent it collapsing inward.

Inside, heat slammed into him like a furnace. Shelves of half-finished lanterns curled and melted in the rising flames. Gong shoved aside a fallen stool and stumbled over scorched paper and lacquer fragments. In the far corner, half-

shrouded in smoke, he saw the shape of a man crumpled beside a blackened altar table.

He rushed to the body, grabbed the arms, and hauled it over one shoulder. The skin on the man's neck was hot to the touch. No sound came from his lips. Still, Gong heaved the figure up and stumbled back toward the door.

Once outside, he lowered the body to the cobblestones.

People gasped. Someone handed him a cloth. Another person offered water. Gong waved them off and turned his full attention to the man he'd carried out of the flames.

The face was barely recognizable, the hair gone. But it wasn't just the burns that caught his attention. There was no soot around the nose or mouth. No sign he'd inhaled smoke. Gong's eyes narrowed. He gently pushed back the sleeve and saw faint bruises ringing the wrist. Around the neck, hidden beneath blistered skin, was a clean slice—a wound made not by fire, but by steel.

"Already dead," Gong whispered. He stood slowly and turned to the watching crowd.

The man hadn't died in the fire.

He'd been dead before it started.

Gong stood slowly. The crowd was silent now, the revelry drowned beneath the weight of smoke and death.

"Fetch the night patrol," he said sharply to the nearest boy. "And someone inform the magistrate. Tell him Inspector Gong is taking over the scene."

The boy nodded and took off running.

Gong turned back toward the smoking doorway. Fire still smoldered at the edges of the rafters, but most of the worst had been doused by water and collapsed timbers.

He stepped back inside. Charred paper crunched underfoot. Shelves had collapsed in a heap, and a trail of half-melted lacquer dripped down the far wall. Gong scanned the remains—carefully now, not just for fire, but for answers.

Amid the ruin, one object stood untouched.

A lantern.

It hung askew from a blackened beam, its pale blue silk somehow spared by the flames. He reached up and unhooked it. He turned the lantern in his hands, letting the silk shimmer in the glow of the remaining embers. The dragon was not just decorative—it was five-clawed, unmistakably imperial. That alone was cause for concern. And the poem painted along the rim—too carefully placed to be a coincidence.

Within the flame, the shadow speaks.

Not just a line of poetry. A message—hidden in plain sight. A warning? Or a confession?

Gong stepped back outside just as the yamen runners—the magistrate’s footmen—arrived. They began pushing back the crowd and questioning the boys. The older one pointed back toward the body, his face pale with smoke and fear.

Gong crouched once more beside the corpse, careful not to disturb the soot. The man’s features were unrecognizable now, but the hands were ink-stained. A scholar’s hands. The wrists bore faint bruises—restraint marks, perhaps. The neck wound was precise. Ritualistic? Or simply efficient?

“Who were you?” he muttered. “A craftsman? A disgraced court scribe? A eunuch they forgot to bury properly?”

Whoever he had been, he’d once known something dangerous. Something forbidden. And someone had wanted to silence him before he could speak—permanently.

He looked down at the lantern once more. It shouldn’t have survived. And yet it had, untouched amid the blackened wreckage.

“This wasn’t an accident,” he said, not to anyone in particular. “And this man didn’t die in a fire.”

He looked in the direction of the Forbidden City. The

walls were invisible from here, swallowed by rooftops and haze, but he felt their presence—looming, silent, watching.

Trouble, he knew, had a way of drifting down from behind those walls.

Like ash.

CHAPTER TWO



By morning, the embers were gone. All that remained of Hu's Lantern Studio was a blackened shell, still steaming slightly in the corners. The crowd had moved on. Only the soot lingered.

Gong stood under the pale light of dawn, hands tucked into his sleeves, staring up at the half-collapsed doorway. One of the yamen runners approached him with a scroll in hand.

"The shop owner is Hu Shiren," the man said, a bit breathless. "But the body you pulled out last night wasn't him. Different build—smaller, younger."

"Where is Hu?"

"No one's seen him," the runner replied.

Gong took the scroll and scanned the neat columns of brushwork. Hu had no apprentices listed, no family in the city. Formerly a student in the southern provinces, he had arrived in Peking six years ago. He ran the lantern shop alone.

He handed the scroll back. "Get me a full list of his

permits. And check with the Ministry of Rites. If he ever sat the palace exams, there'll be a record."

"Yes, sir."

As the runner bowed and turned away, Gong motioned to one of his own men, a deputy named Fan. "Canvas the neighborhood. I want to know what people thought of Hu. Where he went. Who he spoke to. Who hated him enough to burn him out."

Fan nodded and disappeared down the alley.

Gong turned back to the workshop. Despite the damage, he could still make out traces of the shop's former elegance. Burned shelves clung to the walls like ribs. Charred paper littered the floor, each piece once folded into a vessel of light. Some lanterns had survived as cracked skeletons—frames of bamboo and ash. But others, Gong noticed, had been more than decorative. Their designs were meticulous, layered with poetry and symbolism.

He picked his way carefully through the debris and found a low drawer partially shielded from the fire. Inside were sheets of thin paper, smudged with charcoal but mostly intact. Diagrams. Lantern patterns. Measurements in fine brushstrokes. And beneath one bundle—verses.

One caught his eye immediately. He read it again, slower this time.

The light reveals what the court hides.

Another design showed a lantern shaped like a lotus with a flame in the center—nothing unusual at first glance. But the flame was drawn as a stylized eye. And each flower had five petals. Perhaps it meant nothing, but after finding the five-toed dragons earlier, this seemed like too much of a coincidence.

"This man was playing with fire long before the blaze," Gong murmured.

He rolled the papers and tucked them into his sleeve.

Outside, Fan was already returning with word from the neighbors.

“They say Hu Shiren kept to himself,” the officer reported. “Didn’t speak much. Would open the shop at irregular hours. But a few remembered him from years back—said he used to be a student. Brilliant, apparently. Failed the palace exam three times and gave up. They said it broke him.”

Gong nodded slowly. “And he turned to lanterns.”

Fan hesitated, then added, “A few said he still wrote things... strange things. Poems about shadows and silence. One boy said he saw him burning papers behind the shop late at night.”

“Did anyone see him yesterday?”

“Not since the day before the festival.”

Gong looked up at the smudged remnants of the shop sign. *Hu’s Lantern Studio*. A poor shop, maybe. But not a careless one. The scrolls and diagrams were too exacting.

This wasn’t just a craftsman’s obsession. It was a scholar’s mind turned inward—and perhaps, turned sour.

Later that day, Gong made his way through the back alleys of the Inner City to the Bureau of Examinations—a soot-stained hall tucked between a burned-out bookstore and a pawnshop that had seen better dynasties. Inside, the air smelled of dust, ink, and old ambitions.

He presented his badge to the sleepy clerk behind the barred window. The man blinked, straightened slightly, and disappeared into a side room with a reluctant grunt. Gong waited, his eyes tracing the fading calligraphy framed behind the counter: *Knowledge elevates; service ennobles*.

When the clerk returned, he slid a single scroll across the worn countertop.

“Hu Shiren,” the man said. “Originally from Guangdong. Passed his xiucai at seventeen. Juren by twenty-one. Promising, by all accounts. Came to Peking for the metropolitan

exam." The clerk's mouth twisted into something like sympathy. "Failed. Three times."

Gong unrolled the report. Sparse, but telling. The last exam was six years ago—the same year Hu opened the lantern studio.

"Any remarks?" Gong asked.

The clerk scratched at his ear. "Just the usual. 'Too bold in style. Excess sentiment. Lacked orthodoxy.' That sort of thing. Not uncommon."

Too bold. Gong had seen that before. Students who wrote like they wanted to be remembered instead of approved.

He tucked the scroll into his sleeve. "Thank you."

Outside, the wind picked up, scattering a few pages from a public notice board. Gong paused, thinking not just of failure—but of how failure, when sharpened, sometimes glowed like flame.

Gong followed up with a visit to the man listed as Hu's final examiner—a retired scholar-official named Xue, now living in a quiet courtyard villa near the Summer Palace. It was the kind of place where everything—from the gravel paths to the faded scrolls—spoke of a life spent in ink and measured speech.

Xue received him with careful politeness and a pot of jasmine tea poured with a slightly arthritic hand.

"Hu Shiren?" the old man said, stroking his beard as he searched the shelves of memory. "Yes. I remember him well. Talented. Perhaps too much so."

Gong raised an eyebrow. "Too much?"

"In the examination halls," Xue replied, "excess is as dangerous as ignorance. The imperial exams were meant to find men who could *uphold* orthodoxy—not challenge it. Hu's essays were always clever, but not always...deferential. There was a bitterness to his style. A disdain for convention, barely veiled by metaphor."

Gong nodded. Most citizens knew the basics: the examination system—*keju*—was the narrow, treacherous path to officialdom, a ladder stretching from village schoolhouses to the gates of the Forbidden City. Candidates memorized the Confucian canon, crafted essays in stylized prose, and were judged as much for tone and temperament as for argument.

“Did he ever serve in the palace?” Gong asked.

Xue shook his head. “No. He was blacklisted after his third failure. I recall whispers—nothing written, of course—but enough to bar him from future attempts. He wrote a final piece, one of those ‘consolation essays’ they let the defeated pen, and in it he... questioned things. Not outright. But the implication was clear.”

“Corruption?”

Xue’s eyes glittered. “What else? Nepotism, favoritism, the buying of ranks. We all knew of it. But most were wise enough to keep their frustrations behind closed doors. Hu tried to slide it into his prose, dressed in allusion. The court does not like veiled insults—especially from a man too clever for his station.”

“Would he have reason to hate the court?”

Xue gave a dry chuckle. “Every failed scholar does. Some drink themselves into oblivion. Some teach in provincial academies. Some compose poems no one reads, lamenting a world that won’t reward their brilliance. But Hu—he disappeared. No teaching post. No mention in journals. I always wondered where he’d gone.”

“He opened a lantern shop,” Gong said quietly.

“Ah.” Xue gave a thin smile. “When the gate to office closes, many turn to ink or brush to ease the wound. A failed scholar might carve woodblocks or paint fans—something still tied to refinement, but free from scrutiny. Lanterns... They’re poetry in disguise. Light without danger. Unless, of course, you aim them at the court.”

Gong bowed in thanks, then made his way back into the city.

As the sun dipped behind the haze of rooftops, he returned to his quarters and unrolled the scrolls from Hu's workshop. He studied the diagrams, the verses, the veiled symbols. One lantern resembled a stylized map—the spine of the lantern forming a narrow street, its ribs marked with sequences of stars, or maybe dates. Another design incorporated lines of Confucian text—until one line diverged sharply, referencing not filial piety, but the fall of dynasties.

Each lantern was a kind of puzzle. A whisper of truth shaped into flame and silk.

“Find Hu Shiren,” Gong told Deputy Fan that night. “I want him alive.”

He spread the papers across his table, the faint brushstrokes glowing in the light of his own lamp.

A craftsman. A scholar. A dissident.

And now—missing.

CHAPTER THREE



Behind Dr. Xue's apothecary, the air reeked of camphor and old blood. Dried herbs hung like withered warnings from the rafters. A long table—once a merchant's altar, now scarred and scored—waited beneath a flickering lantern.

Inspector Gong stood in the doorway as Dr. Xue peeled back the linen from the corpse with clinical indifference.

"Still warm when you found him?" the doctor asked, not looking up.

"You could say that," Gong replied. "Burned all over. But the neck wound was clean. Too clean."

Dr. Xue hummed. "Then we agree. The fire came after. Minimal soot in the trachea, no scorching in the lungs. Cause of death was earlier—throat cut. Neatly." He nudged the body with practiced fingers. "And this," he added, drawing the sheet lower. "Genital scar tissue. Full castration. Old. Healed long ago."

Gong's expression didn't change. "A court eunuch."

The doctor nodded. "But not in recent service. No sign of costly personal maintenance. Tunic was coarse. Fingernails

ragged with soot. Whoever he was, he'd been living far from the palace for some time."

"And the neck wound?"

"Quick. Precise. Not a brawl. Not a robbery. This was clean work."

"A professional."

Xue stepped back and wiped his hands on a bloodied cloth. "If you want my opinion, Inspector—this wasn't just a killing. It was an erasure. Burn the shop, destroy the evidence. A tragic accident, they'd say."

Gong exhaled slowly. "The only accident was that I happened to be passing when the lanterns caught flame."

Xue nodded once, then pointed toward a small tray of catalogued remnants. "Two molars filled with southern lacquer. Pricy work. A jade disk hidden in the heel of his shoe—a charm against betrayal. And this—" He held up a scorched scrap of fabric. "Looks like the hem of a palace sash. Imperial red. Faded, but still speaks loudly."

Gong took the fragment carefully between his thumb and forefinger. "Thank you, Doctor."

Dr. Xue watched him for a moment. "Keep your neck down, Gong. The court forgets fast—but not kindly."

Gong tucked the charred sash into his sleeve and stepped into the Peking dusk, the scent of camphor still clinging to his coat. He walked in silence, past hawkers folding up their wares, past temple beggars murmuring prayers for coin. His steps turned east, toward the Ministry Quarter, where records whispered louder than witnesses.

In the third building down an alley lined with swallow-nested eaves, Gong entered the Bureau of Palace Archives. A narrow-eyed clerk looked up from behind a lacquered desk, his inkstone still wet.

Gong said nothing. He placed a small folded pouch on the

desk and opened it with one finger. Two silver taels nestled inside—clean, unmarked, unmistakable.

The clerk hesitated, then slid the silver into his sleeve without a word.

“What name?” he asked.

“I was hoping you could tell me,” Gong replied, placing the charred cloth beside the pouch. “A eunuch’s been killed. Out of service for a while. Anyone on your list who’d have worn this?”

The clerk’s gaze sharpened. His eyes flicked to the sash, then to Gong. After a pause, he stood and disappeared into the rows of bamboo tubes and brittle scroll racks. A moment later, he returned with a yellowed roll bound in faded ribbon. He unwrapped it carefully and flattened it on the table.

“Shen Qiwen,” he murmured. “Personal attendant to Prince Cheng.”

Gong’s eyes scanned the notations—two sets of handwriting. One read “absence without leave.” The second, added later, simply said, “file sealed.”

“You’re certain?” Gong asked.

The clerk tapped the red fabric. “This weave—see the stitching along the edge? That pattern’s exclusive to the Cheng household. It’s subtle. But it’s there.”

Gong frowned. The motif looked like any other to him—interlocking clouds, faded embroidery. But as a Han commoner, he knew better than to question the codes of rank hidden in silk. He turned back to the scroll.

Prince Cheng had died of a sudden fever in the third month of the twelfth year of Daoguang’s reign. A court physician’s note stated, “death natural, no further inquiry.”

Gong had heard enough court tales to know: “no further inquiry” was the most damning phrase in the imperial lexicon.

He folded the scroll and handed it back. "I was never here."

The clerk nodded once, already returning the parchment to the shadows of the archive.

Outside, the wind stirred dust along the tiled street. Gong narrowed his eyes into the breeze. He had the name.

Now he needed the reason.



THE RESIDENCE of the late Prince Cheng sat behind lacquered gates and carved stone lions, half-shadowed by ginkgo trees too old to bend. The household bore the stillness of money long sheltered from scrutiny.

Inspector Gong approached on foot, his robes dusty from the road. He presented his badge at the outer gate.

The guard, a eunuch with lines around his mouth, took one look and narrowed his eyes.

"This is not a place for inquiries," he said. His voice was smooth, but his posture was steel. "The prince passed many years ago."

"I'm aware," Gong replied evenly. "But a former servant of this house has been identified—murdered. I need a word with the steward."

The eunuch didn't blink. "There are no stewards to spare. The household is in mourning for a cousin's passing."

Gong let the silence stretch, then added, "It was Shen Qiwen."

That name landed like a stone dropped into a pond—barely a ripple, but the surface changed all the same. The eunuch's hands tightened around the gate's beam.

"Shen Qiwen hasn't served this house in over a decade. His records were closed by palace order. You would do well to respect that."

“Dead men don’t close files,” Gong said quietly. “Living men do. And the one with answers may still be in this house.”

The eunuch didn’t answer. Behind him, a shadow stirred—another servant, the glint of a hair ornament vanishing behind a carved screen.

“I won’t leave until someone speaks with me,” Gong said.

At last, the eunuch inclined his head. “Then wait.” He vanished inside.

Gong stood beneath a ginkgo’s rustling shade. Ten minutes passed. Then fifteen. No one returned. He knew what this was. A quiet walling-off. A warning cloaked in courtesy. He turned to leave.

As he walked along the outer wall toward the street, he noticed a narrow side path leading to what looked like servants’ quarters. The sound of water splashing drew his attention—someone washing clothes in a wooden tub. A young maid, her sleeves rolled up, scrubbed a silk robe with practiced efficiency.

She glanced up as his shadow fell across her work. Pretty, but with the careful blankness servants learned to wear around strangers.

“Hot day for laundry,” Gong said, offering a slight smile.

“Every day’s hot when you’re working,” she replied, not quite meeting his eyes but not entirely dismissive either.

“I’m looking for someone who used to work here. Shen Qiwen. Perhaps you knew him?”

Her hands stilled in the water. “I know that name.” She glanced toward the main house, then back at him. “You’re the inspector.”

“Word travels fast.”

“Servants hear everything.” She resumed scrubbing, but her movements were tense now. “Shen Qiwen was kind to the girls like me. Some of the older eunuchs... they forget what it’s like to be young and powerless. He remembered.”

"I'm trying to find out what happened to him."

She was quiet for a long moment, working soap through the fabric. Then, quietly: "He used to slip me coins when I had to work late. Said a girl shouldn't walk home in the dark with empty pockets." She looked up at him directly for the first time. "If someone killed him, they killed a good man."

She wrung out the robe and stood, lifting the basket. "There was a teahouse he liked. Behind the scholar's quarter, three lanes east of the Examination Hall. The House of Verdant Steam." She paused. "But it's been closed for years. Since the prince died."

Gong nodded his thanks.

The girl started to turn away, but then added quickly, "If anyone asks, we only talked about the weather."

"Warm enough to make a pretty girl's hair curl at the temples," Gong said with a slight smile.

She almost laughed at that, then caught herself and walked toward the clothesline. Gong watched her hang the silk robe with careful precision before he turned and made his way back to the street.

As he walked away from the Prince Cheng residence, he could feel eyes watching from behind the latticed windows. The household might be in mourning, but they were very much alive to danger. The maid had taken a risk telling him about the teahouse. He hoped it would prove to be worth it.



THE HOUSE OF VERDANT STEAM had once stood tucked behind the scholar's quarter, just three lanes east of the Examination Hall. It had been a quiet place—no music, no girls, just chessboards, good dumplings, and whispers thick as steam rising off oolong.

Ten years ago, it closed overnight. The official story was

bankruptcy. Gong, even as a junior patrolman then, had heard different rumors.

Sedition. Hidden scrolls. A sealed room.

He found the gate half-collapsed, ivy choking the lintel. The name board had been removed, but the grooves of the calligraphy remained, like a forgotten wound.

Inside, the room was dim. Dust lay like snow. Moth wings fluttered in old teacups. But there was something beneath the silence. Gong stepped behind the counter and old floor beams creaked. He stepped back and found a hatch. Hidden well, but not perfectly. He pried it open.

Stairs descended into the earth. He drew a lantern and went down.

The air was wet and close. The walls were lined with scroll tubes—many split and blackened. Most were empty, but there were a few charred fragments of poetry, family histories, and radical broadsheets. The place had once clearly been a meeting room for dissidents. Dissidents like Hu Shiren? Possibly. But what was the connection between Hu Shiren and Shen Qiwen?

In the center of the room, discarded long ago, a lantern frame, half-burned. Still bearing the ghost of a painted line: “The light reveals what the court hides.”

Gong straightened slowly, the flame in his hand flickering as if breathing the words.

Gong emerged from the cellar just as the sun dipped below the rooftops, staining the dust in the entryway with the color of old blood. He closed the hatch quietly and stepped outside.

A figure stood waiting by the broken gate. Young, slim, and unmistakably a eunuch—the high voice and clipped hair marked him even in the fading dusk. His robes were modest but carefully pressed, and he smelled faintly of camellia oil and sweat. Grief clung to him like humidity, heavy and close.

"Who are you?" Gong asked.

His eyes were red-rimmed, the lashes still clumped with tears. "I saw you try to enter the Cheng household. But I couldn't speak to you then."

Gong studied him. "What's your name?"

"Jian," the boy said. "I'm a scribe, tending to the family's correspondence. And Shen Qiwen... he helped train me."

"You knew him well?"

"He was like an older brother," Jian whispered. "Not just in service, but in thought. Most of us live quiet lives. Serve, obey, disappear. Qiwen... He wanted more. He believed we *were* more."

"He left the household. That alone was dangerous."

Jian nodded. "We're not supposed to leave our masters. Not ever. But after the prince died, Qiwen vanished. They said he stole something. That he was disgraced. But I knew better. He was writing. I saw the pamphlets—carefully worded essays, printed under false names. But I knew his style. He told me once about Zheng He, the great admiral. Said, 'If a eunuch could command a fleet and cross the world, why must we lower our eyes and bow?'"

He paused, gaze drifting toward the ruined threshold. "When Prince Cheng was alive, Qiwen had protection. The prince admired cleverness, even when it strayed close to danger. He encouraged Qiwen to read widely, to write boldly. There were even nights they would stay up discussing reforms—new ways of administering justice, easing burdens on the poor. But when the prince died... everything changed."

"The son?" Gong asked.

"Traditionalist. Obedient to court expectations. He saw Shen's independence as dangerous. Qiwen was afraid of being charged with sedition. Executed. So he slipped out in the night. Usually, when such a thing happens, a warrant for

the eunuch's arrest would be sent out. But this time, there was nothing. Just... silence. I think the prince's son was glad to be rid of him."

His voice caught. "Shen believed change was possible. That we didn't have to live as ghosts."

Gong was silent for a long moment. "And now?"

"Now, he's dead." Jian's hands clenched into fists. "And whoever did this wants us all to forget him."

"But you remembered," Gong said.

"I remember everything," Jian whispered. "How he spoke. How he smiled when he read. How he dared to hope. His death will silence many—but not all. Not if someone like you listens. Not if his story is told."

He reached into his sleeve and pressed something into Gong's hand—a rolled piece of paper, brittle at the edges. It was not just a verse, but a full page of delicate script—Shen's final article, never published. The characters were dense, urgent, the ink still fragrant with burnt resin. Gong held it reverently, the weight of it far heavier than its form. "I believe the light he lit still burns," Jian said, "even if the wick is hidden."

He bowed, deep and low, then turned and slipped into the alley's shadows, his footsteps vanishing with the dusk.

Gong stood in silence and quickly perused the article Jian had given him. The title, "The Jade Barrier," was a poetic nod to the illusion of upward mobility—the idea that virtue and skill can ascend through exams, only to be stopped by invisible walls. He rolled up the article and placed it into one of his sleeve pockets. He then looked up at the sky—dusky blue, tinged with ash—and turned toward the road.

The streets were quiet now, Gong's footsteps echoing off the narrow alley walls as he made his way back toward the main thoroughfare. Three blocks from home, he heard it—the soft scuff of footsteps behind him, matching his pace too

precisely to be a coincidence. When he paused to adjust his sleeve, the sound stopped. When he resumed walking, it started again.

Gong continued for another block, then ducked suddenly into a doorway shadowed by overhanging eaves. He pressed himself against the wooden frame and waited.

The footsteps approached, hesitant now. A small figure appeared at the mouth of the alley—a boy, hunched and cautious, peering into the darkness where Gong had vanished.

Gong stepped out behind him and grabbed his shoulder. The boy yelped and spun around.

"You're following me," Gong said, not releasing his grip. "Why?"

The boy was small and thin, his face half hidden by the brim of a soot-black cap. One side of his jaw was slick with scar tissue, the skin glossy and stretched—burn scars, Gong realized.

"I... I saw you at the workshop. The night it burned." The boy's good eye flicked up at him, then away. "You pulled someone out."

"You were there?" Gong loosened his grip on the boy, confident he wouldn't run since he had started talking.

The boy nodded. "I worked for Master Hu. Swept floors, tended the fire for melting wax." His hand unconsciously touched his scarred jaw. "Got too close to a brazier once. Master Hu said I was still useful, even marked up."

"Why follow me?"

"Because you're asking about Master Hu. About what happened." The boy's voice grew urgent. "And nobody else seems to care that he's missing."

"I care," Gong said. "I need to find him. What happened the night of the fire?"

The boy's good eye darted to the ground. "I was at a

window, watching the lanterns float over the city. Then I heard shouting. Not Master Hu's voice. Someone else."

"Did you recognize the voice?"

The boy nodded. "The eunuch. He was a frequent visitor. But this time they fought. I don't know why. Then, one of them screamed." His hands twisted in his sleeves. "Master Hu pushed me out the back. Told me to run. Said if I lived, the light would live too."

Gong's brow furrowed. "Hu was alive then?"

The boy nodded. "He locked the door behind me. I didn't see what happened next."

Gong knelt so they were level. "Do you remember anything else? Symbols? Phrases?"

The boy fumbled in his boot and drew out a charred strip of paper. "He shoved this into my hand before the door slammed. Said if anything happened, give it to someone who still asks questions."

He handed the paper to Inspector Gong, then ran off into the night. The ink had bled and scorched—but one line still breathed: "Where bells never ring and silence becomes confession." A chill licked along his spine. Shen Qiwen had been killed, but Hu Shiren had been present. Did Hu kill him? Or had it been someone else? Did he then burn down his own shop to cover up the murder?

Shen Qiwen had died for something.

And Hu Shiren had vanished in the smoke.

CHAPTER FOUR



The wine shop sat halfway down Dagger Alley—a place where the wine was cheap, the opium thicker than the air, and no man asked questions unless he wanted to be stabbed with the answer. Men came here to lose coin, memory, and sometimes names.

He slipped inside long before dawn. Smoke curled from a brazier in the corner, where sweet potatoes roasted alongside burnt chicken skins. Gong nodded at the barkeep and took his usual seat in the farthest booth.

“You’re late,” a voice purred.

He looked up and saw her.

Lianhua.

Her face was powdered light, her lips like red lacquer, but her eyes were always honest. Too honest for the trade. She slid in beside him without asking, their thighs brushing beneath the table as she set down two cups and a chipped wine jug.

“For what?”

“For remembering you’re human.”

He poured. She leaned in close as they drank, her perfume mingling with the sharp bite of the wine.

For a while, the noise filled the space between them. Dice clattered. Lianhua's hand found his thigh under the table, her fingers cool and confident. She turned slightly toward him, her knee brushing his. "You always come here when you're seeking answers," she said.

"You seem to always have them," he replied.

She tilted her head, smiling faintly. "Among other things."

He met her gaze then, longer than usual. Something softened. Her eyes lingered on his mouth, and his on hers. Then she looked away, laughing lightly to break the tension.

"You going to tell me the rest, or am I meant to divine it from the bottom of your cup?" Someone played a sorrowful tune on a two-stringed erhu. Her shoulder rested against his, deliberately unshifted. Gong stared at the wine's surface like it might show him the answers.

"You look like a man who's chasing ghosts," she murmured, her breath warm against his cheek.

He snorted. "Worse. I'm chasing silence."

She tilted her head, her fingers lightly circling the rim of her cup. "Is this about the fire? That lantern-maker?"

He ran a finger along her jaw—slow, deliberate. She was a woman touched by men daily, yet he saw the gooseflesh rise on her skin. Whether it was the effect of his hand or the habit of her trade, he couldn't say—and he wasn't arrogant enough to assume.

"What have you heard?" he asked.

Lianhua's eyes narrowed with interest. "You know girls like me—pretty faces, sharper ears."

She sipped her wine slowly, watching him over the rim. He waited for her to continue. "They say he wasn't alone that night. That someone else was meant to die. Or maybe someone else did. No one seems quite sure."

"They're right," Gong murmured. "Just not how they think."

Lianhua leaned in, voice like silk. "Isn't it always like that?"

Her foot brushed his under the table—playful, searching. "Tell me more. A whisper for a kiss."

He glanced at her, lips twitching. Half hesitating, half tempted.

"All right, all right," she laughed. "A game, then. What about this case has you seeking answers at the bottom of a wine cup and in my bed? If I know the answer, you pay me double."

"And if you don't know the answer?" he asked.

"You pay me double," she whispered, "and I make it up to you in other ways."

"With such a fair gamble, how could I lose?" he asked, knocking back his drink.

Lianhua leaned in closer still. "What is it this time? A code? A threat?"

"A line," he muttered. "From a poem. 'Where bells never ring and silence becomes confession.'"

She blinked slowly, then smiled. "Hmm, well, it sounds like a place."

He nodded at her. She rolled her eyes.

"Give me a moment," she said, swirling her cup lazily. "Not all of us grew up with private tutors and pocket copies of *The Analects*."

Gong raised an eyebrow. "So what did you grow up with?"

"Eavesdropping. Loose coins. Drunken monks who talked in riddles." She leaned in. "But bells? Bells ring in temples, towers, monasteries... anywhere people want to sound important."

"And what about confession?"

She tilted her head. "Now that's different. Confession means quiet. Shame. Someone listening, but not speaking. That's not a watchtower. That's incense and bare feet. A monastery, maybe even a nunnery."

He nodded slowly. "Which doesn't exactly narrow it down."

She gave him a sly smile. "Then give me more. You always hold back your best clues."

"The lantern maker. A eunuch. Prince Cheng."

Her expression changed at that. "Prince Cheng... That narrows it. He funded a few temples back in the day. One west of the city that no one visits now."

"Why?"

"They say the bell cracked during a summer storm, an ill omen. Temple fell out of favor after that."

Gong leaned forward. "You remember the name?"

She tapped her chin. "Something poetic. Sad. Empty..."

"The House of Empty Sound," Gong finished.

Lianhua nodded. "That's it. Used to be a place for girls like me, once we were too tired to smile but still wanted to burn incense for forgiveness. You think your ghost is hiding there?"

"I think someone's waiting."

She topped off his cup, then touched his hand again—lingering this time. "Then don't go at night."

He gave a wry smile. "What should I do until dawn?"

"I have a few ideas." She took his hand and led him to her room. His mind was not entirely focused on the lovely creature before him, though. In his mind, a path was already clearing.

He would soon find answers, he was sure.

CHAPTER FIVE



Inspector Gong arrived just after dawn.

The road to the ruined monastery wound through hills cloaked in dry pine and nettle-grass. Few traveled here anymore. The bell tower, long silenced, leaned slightly to one side, its bronze tongue stolen or forgotten. Moss crept along its base like mold over old bread.

He passed the threshold quietly, footsteps muffled by wind and dust. Inside, the hall was stripped of its icons. Ashes filled the altar bowls. But in the far chamber, where incense once curled before the Buddha, there was light.

A man hunched over a table, sleeves rolled, brush trembling in hand. He was carefully gluing paper to a wooden frame. A half-finished lantern stood beside him, delicate as breath. Five others lined the wall behind, unlit. Waiting.

Hu Shiren.

He did not look up. "You took longer than I expected."

Gong remained in the doorway. "I wasn't sure you were still alive."

A tired smile. "Some days, I'm not either."

Silence stretched between them. Finally, Gong stepped forward, careful. "You killed Shen Qiwen."

Hu nodded once, no denial. "Yes."

"Why?"

Hu placed the brush down. His hands trembled faintly. "He wanted to make everything public. The documents. The old prince's letters. His notes from the reform circles. Even the final decree. Everything that mattered."

Gong frowned. "Why would he risk that?"

"Because he was tired of being forgotten. We both were. But I—" Hu looked at his hands. "I have a son. Studying now. Taking his first exam this winter. If Shen had dragged our names back into the court's memory, what future would that boy have?"

"What was in the documents?" Gong asked quietly.

Hu gestured toward the lanterns on the wall. Each bore different inscriptions—some in classical verse, others in bold proclamations. "Plans for reforming the examination system. Proposals to limit eunuch power. Evidence of corruption in the Ministry of Rites. Prince Cheng believed the empire could change from within." His voice grew bitter. "Shen wrote it all down. Every meeting, every idea, every name. 'The Jade Barrier' was just the beginning—a manifesto calling for merit over birth, transparency over secrecy."

"And you thought killing him would keep it buried?"

"I thought it would keep my son alive." Hu stood and walked to the nearest lantern, running his fingers along its delicate frame. "Do you know what happens to the children of traitors, Inspector? They carry the stain forever. No examinations. No appointments. No future except exile or death."

Gong studied the lanterns more carefully now. One bore the image of a caged bird with broken wings, the cage door standing open—freedom offered but flight impossible. Another showed a garden where all the flowers had been cut

down, leaving only thorns. The craftsmanship was exquisite—each brushstroke precise, each symbol layered with meaning.

“These aren’t just lanterns,” Gong said. “They’re a record.”

“Of everything we dreamed. Everything we lost.” Hu’s voice cracked. “We lit the way for emperors once. We who studied late by candlelight, who poured our dreams into scrolls, who held our lanterns high like beacons in the dark. But now... we’re shadows. The truth doesn’t free people anymore. It brands them. Marks them for ruin.”

“So you became executioner instead of martyr.”

“I became a father.” Hu turned and picked up the last lantern—the one he’d been working on. Painted across the paper, in bold, spare strokes: *Let the people see.*

Hu held it out. “Take it. During the next Lantern Festival, hang it where it can’t be ignored. The court may never change. But someone will read it. Someone will remember.”

Gong accepted it slowly, feeling the weight of more than paper and wood. “What about the others? These lanterns you’ve made here?”

“Burn them,” Hu said simply. “I won’t have them used as evidence against my son. But that one—” He nodded toward the lantern in Gong’s hands. “That one carries no names. No specific accusations. Just a hope that someday, someone will want to see clearly.”

Gong looked around the ruined chamber one more time. Dust motes danced in the morning light streaming through broken windows. The monastery had once been a place of learning, of contemplation. Now it was a tomb for abandoned dreams.

“You could run,” Gong said. “I could say I never found you.”

Hu shook his head. “Running won’t change what I’ve done. And my son... he needs to know his father faced the

consequences of his choices.” He straightened his shoulders. “Besides, some truths are too heavy to carry alone.”

“You’re under arrest, Hu Shiren.”

Hu didn’t resist. He bowed his head, then carefully extinguished the small oil lamp that had lit his work. “Will you tell him?” he asked as Gong bound his hands. “My son? Will you tell him I tried to protect his future?”

“I’ll tell him his father was a man who loved him more than his own principles,” Gong replied. “Some might call that the highest wisdom.”

Outside, the wind shifted through the abandoned bells, creating a hollow music that sounded almost like mourning. The silence of the old monastery deepened as they walked away.

Gong left with Hu in custody and the lantern pressed carefully against his chest, wondering if the light it promised to bring was worth the darkness it would first reveal.

CHAPTER SIX



The official report was brief. The lantern shop: destroyed in an accidental fire. The body: unidentified. The prisoner: Hu Shiren—arrested for murder.

No mention of Shen Qiwen's name. No mention of imperial sashes or the hidden cellar beneath the House of Verdant Steam. No record of the article tucked into Gong's coat, or the lantern sealed away in the evidence room—now missing.

Gong had written the report himself.

He had stared at the final line for a long time, brush suspended, unsure whether he was recording history or erasing it.

That night, Gong stood near the southern wall of the Forbidden City, where moonlight silvered the glazed tiles and the air smelled faintly of incense and coal ash. Behind those walls, mandarins plotted, emperors dined, and records were rewritten before the ink dried. Behind those walls sat the throne that Shen Qiwen had hoped to influence through his writing.

Gong drew a scroll from inside his coat. The paper was

stiff with smoke, but the calligraphy remained legible: Shen's final essay, "The Jade Barrier."

He read it again by lantern light.

"The Jade Barrier" was more than a critique of the civil examination system. It was a lament. A truth spoken too clearly to be tolerated: that the exams had become a trap, promising merit but rewarding obedience. That brilliance without birth meant little. That dissent was the surest way to obscurity.

It was a truth Gong had lived his whole life. Han-born. Raised on the outskirts of privilege. Talented enough to enforce the rules. Never welcome to question them.

In the past, he might have tucked the essay away. Hidden it like the rest. But something in Hu's last words had stayed with him.

Let the people see.

He rolled the scroll tight and turned away from the wall.

Two alleys over, a quiet press operated behind a noodle shop. Gong passed no names, made no promises. He left the essay wrapped in plain linen, tucked beneath the door along with a few taels.

Within a few days, whispers of "The Jade Barrier" were already making their way through the student quarters. Copied by hand. Passed between scholars. Quietly debated behind teacups and closed doors.

That evening, he returned to the southern wall. Watched as children lit sky lanterns and sent them rising into the wind. A few caught briefly on the current, then soared above the rooftops, their light flickering against the stars.

He thought of Shen Qiwen's words. Of Hu Shiren's silence. Of the boy with the burn-scarred cheek who had saved a strip of truth in his boot.

He thought of Lianhua.

Then he looked up at the palace wall, its shadow cutting the city in two.

“One day,” he said, barely above a whisper, “I’ll find someone who walks behind those gates. Someone with a sharp mind... and sharper eyes.”

And maybe then, the truth wouldn’t have to burn.

EPILOGUE



A week later, Gong found himself wandering a quiet lane just east of the imperial gardens. He wasn't chasing rumors or fugitives this time—just clearing his thoughts. A faint drizzle dusted the eaves. Nearby, a few noblewomen descended from a lacquered sedan chair outside a silk shop.

One of them lingered behind, adjusting her slate-blue shawl. Her hair was gathered in a modest knot, secured with a single ivory pin—no rouge on her cheeks, no lacquer in her nails. A widow, no doubt. Her movements were graceful but precise, like a calligrapher finishing the final stroke of a difficult character. As she turned, something slipped from her sleeve—a folded fan, tassled and delicate.

Gong was close enough to see it fall. He stepped forward, bent down, and handed it back to her with quiet efficiency.

"Thank you," she said, her voice even, measured—yet not cold.

He gave a slight bow. "A single wisp of silk in the gutter," Gong said lightly, echoing an old poem. "Even beauty may wander low, but still catch the eye of heaven."

That earned him the hint of a smile. Not flirtation, not formality—something more elusive. Recognition, perhaps, of a kindred mind.

She tucked the fan away and turned back to her companions. He watched her go.

She disappeared into the silk shop.

He disappeared into the mist.

Neither gave the moment a second thought.

CENSORSHIP, SCHOLARSHIP, AND THE RISK OF TRUTH



THE HIDDEN SCROLL: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE IMPERIAL EXAMINATION SYSTEM

For centuries, the Imperial Examination System (科举, *kējǔ*) promised a ladder of merit in a world ruled by lineage. It was a radical idea: that a poor scholar from the provinces could rise to power not through blood, but through brushstrokes. Ink over inheritance. Essays over ancestry.

And yet—like many promises in the empire—it was both true and not.

Established in the Sui dynasty and refined across the Tang, Song, Ming, and Qing, the exams became the heart of imperial bureaucracy. Civil servants were selected through rigorous tests on Confucian classics, historical analysis, poetry composition, and moral philosophy. In theory, brilliance could outshine birth. In practice, the path was perilous—grueling memorization, years of study, political favoritism, and a high toll on body and spirit.

By the Qing dynasty, the exams had ossified. The questions became formulaic. The answers rewarded deference over daring. Reformers grumbled. Writers satirized. Some, like the fictional Shen Qiwen, saw the system not as a bridge to justice—but a barrier dressed in jade.

This brief account explores that paradox: the noble ideal of meritocracy, and the quiet tragedies of those it left behind.

From Sui to Qing — The Evolution of the Imperial Examination System

581–618: SUI DYNASTY—THE SEED IS PLANTED

The Sui dynasty laid the first foundations of a merit-based civil service. Though early appointments still relied on recommendation, Emperor Wen of Sui introduced written tests to assess moral character and classical knowledge—marking the beginning of institutionalized examinations.

618–907: TANG DYNASTY—THE SYSTEM BLOSSOMS

The Tang dynasty formalized the exam system into three main routes: *jinshi* (advanced scholar), *mingjing* (illuminated classics), and *mingshu* (understanding of documents). Success in the *jinshi* exam became especially prestigious. A poet's pen could now open palace doors. But access remained limited—mainly the sons of wealthy families could afford the years of study required.

960–1279: SONG DYNASTY—GOLDEN AGE OF SCHOLARSHIP

The Song dynasty democratized the system more than ever before. Regional quotas ensured broad participation. Printing innovations allowed the classics to be more widely

studied. Exam content emphasized Confucian ideals and essay composition. Civil appointments increasingly relied on exam performance rather than aristocratic birth.

1279–1368: YUAN DYNASTY—MONGOL INTERRUPTION

Under Mongol rule, the examination system faltered. The Yuan rulers distrusted Han officials and often prioritized foreign administrators. The system continued in name but lost much of its prestige. A generation of scholars found themselves excluded or ignored.

1368–1644: MING DYNASTY—REVIVAL AND RIGOR

The Ming emperors revived the exam system with intensity. A strict three-tiered system—local, provincial, and national—was enforced. The eight-legged essay (*baguwen*) became mandatory, valued for its rigid structure and moral orthodoxy. Cheating was punishable by death. Scholars spent decades preparing, knowing one failure could end their hopes.

1644–1905: QING DYNASTY—THE LONG DECLINE

The Manchu rulers of the Qing preserved the exam system, both to solidify their rule and co-opt Han scholars. Though still powerful, the system became increasingly conservative. The same Confucian passages were studied, recited, and rewritten endlessly. Reformers began to criticize its stifling effect on innovation and governance. By the late 1800s, the system had become a symbol of stagnation.

1905: OFFICIAL ABOLITION

After over 1,300 years, the examination system was formally abolished in 1905 under the late Qing reforms. Its legacy, however, endures—in Chinese education, in civil service ideals, and in the dreams of millions who once sought justice through ink and paper.

What Was Tested: The Content of the Imperial Examinations

FOR OVER A MILLENNIUM, the Chinese imperial examinations upheld the idea that moral clarity and literary skill—not lineage—should guide a man's rise to power. But the path was narrow, and the material demanded total mastery.

THE CONFUCIAN CORE

At the heart of the exams lay the Four Books and Five Classics, sacred texts attributed to or compiled around Confucius and his disciples. These included:

- *The Analects* (Lúnyǔ): Sayings of Confucius
- *The Mencius* (Mèngzǐ): Philosophical dialogues
- *The Great Learning* (Dà Xué): Guide to personal and political ethics
- *The Doctrine of the Mean* (Zhōng Yōng): On balance and virtue
- *The Book of Changes, Book of Songs, Book of Rites, Book of Documents, and Spring and Autumn Annals* (The Five Classics): History, poetry, ritual, and cosmology

Candidates were expected not just to memorize these texts but to interpret them in highly structured essays that

reflected moral integrity, political loyalty, and logical precision.

THE EIGHT-LEGGED ESSAY (*BĀGŪWÉN*)

By the Ming and Qing dynasties, the centerpiece of the exam became the eight-legged essay, named for its rigid structure of eight parts. These essays were not creative compositions—they were moral demonstrations. A successful candidate had to:

- Open with a quotation or topic sentence from the classics
- Explain the quote using orthodox Confucian reasoning
- Structure each paragraph with meticulous symmetry
- Reinforce loyalty to the emperor and social harmony

Originality was discouraged. Style and obedience to form were paramount.

POLICY QUESTIONS AND GOVERNANCE SCENARIOS

At the national level, high-level exams sometimes included policy questions: how to handle famine, border unrest, or taxation. But answers still had to draw from the Confucian canon, even if the problem was practical.

CALLIGRAPHY AND COMPOSITION

Handwriting mattered. The script had to be elegant and

controlled—visible proof of a disciplined mind. A sloppy hand, no matter how insightful the essay, could mean failure.

FORBIDDEN TOPICS

Criticism of the emperor, dissent from orthodoxy, or references to heterodox philosophies (such as Buddhism or Daoism) were all grounds for disqualification—or worse.

THE IMPERIAL ECHOES IN THE GAOKAO

Though the imperial examinations ended in 1905, their spirit lives on in today's Gaokao—the grueling college entrance exam that determines university placement and, for many, lifelong opportunity. Like its imperial predecessor, the Gaokao is:

- High-stakes: A single score can shape a family's future.
- Rigorously competitive: Students study for years, often with intense pressure.
- Standardized and national: All candidates are judged by the same metrics.

Even the cultural reverence for test-takers mirrors the past: families offer incense, teachers give talismanic advice, and communities hush their streets near testing sites.

While the Gaokao emphasizes math, sciences, and modern essays rather than Confucian texts, the ideal remains hauntingly familiar: that the worthy may rise, regardless of background—if they can endure the test.

Social Consequences: Upward Mobility vs. Social Stagnation

THE IMPERIAL EXAMINATION system promised meritocracy: the idea that brilliance and virtue could elevate a man from poverty to power. In theory, any male—even a peasant's son—could become a magistrate or scholar-official if he mastered the Confucian canon. And for some, this dream came true. Families invested everything—money, hope, generations of sacrifice—for the chance at elevation through a son's success.

But in reality, the system also reinforced the social order more often than it disrupted it.

When fortune smiled upon a candidate, the transformation could be breathtaking. A successful examination taker could rise dramatically in status, bringing honor, wealth, and imperial connections to his entire clan. Villages would sometimes pool their meager resources to sponsor a promising scholar, hoping for collective benefit if he passed. The reverence for literary skill and moral conduct ran so deep that passing even a preliminary exam conferred genuine social prestige, marking a man as worthy of respect regardless of his origins.

Yet for every tale of triumph, countless others spoke of dreams deferred and hopes crushed. The preparation demanded years of private tutoring, access to rare books, and the luxury of time free from physical labor—advantages mostly available to the elite. Many brilliant candidates from humble backgrounds failed repeatedly, not from lack of ability but from lack of resources. Entire families could fall into what became known as "examination poverty"—driven into debt while supporting a son who never passed, their sacrifice yielding nothing but bitterness.

The system itself valued rote memorization and ideolog-

ical conformity over innovation or independent thought. True reformers, like Hu Shiren in our story, often found themselves blacklisted or forgotten, their insights dismissed because they challenged established doctrine. The examinations became not a ladder out of poverty, but a mirror reflecting the barriers that still held society firmly in place, rewarding those who could afford to play by rules designed to favor the already privileged.

The Pressure to Conform: Burnout, Madness, and Suicide Among Scholars

THE IMPERIAL EXAMINATIONS were not only a test of knowledge—but of endurance, obedience, and psychological survival. For the vast majority of candidates, the process was grueling, isolating, and often humiliating. While success could bring lifelong prestige, the costs of failure—repeated and public—could break the spirit.

RIGID CONFORMITY

Exams demanded mastery of the “Eight-Legged Essay” (八股文), a highly formulaic structure that left little room for creativity or dissent. Examiners expected exact quotations from the Confucian canon, with correct interpretation that aligned with court orthodoxy. Expressing originality was risky—scholars who hinted at reformist ideas were often failed or blacklisted. Even praise for the emperor had to follow stylistic and philosophical guidelines. A slight deviation in tone or structure could result in disqualification.

As a result, brilliance was not always rewarded—obedience was.

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PSYCHOLOGICAL TOLL

For many, the years spent studying in isolation took a devastating toll. Students lived in exam cells—tiny, windowless stalls with a bench, a board, and a chamber pot—sometimes for days. Failure was common; some men sat the exams a dozen times without passing. Shame, depression, and “examination madness” (考场疯) were noted in contemporary records.

Accounts tell of candidates who wept uncontrollably after posting days, or who wandered the streets muttering verses. Others burned their books—or themselves.

SUICIDE AND DESPAIR

Some left behind poems or suicide notes pinned to exam walls. One such verse, recovered in the Ming dynasty, read:

“Books stacked like mountains, ink spilled like blood—
Ten years of toil, a lifetime undone.”

These tragedies underscored the paradox at the heart of the system: the same Confucian ideals that emphasized duty, harmony, and mental cultivation had become the source of crushing personal ruin.

Notable Figures Who Failed the Imperial Exams but Became Influential

HONG XIUQUAN (1814–1864)—HAKKA (HAN CHINESE SUBGROUP) FROM GUANGDONG

An aspiring scholar from a modest rural family, Hong failed the imperial civil-service examination multiple times (four attempts by 1847) and suffered a breakdown after his final failure. This psychological crisis, combined with exposure to a Christian tract, led him to reject the Confucian

order that had spurned him. He subsequently proclaimed himself a divine leader and founded the Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864), a massive uprising against the Qing. Hong's exam frustrations directly fueled his radical vision—he denounced the examination-based Confucian elite as corrupt, and his Taiping movement sought to overturn the social system that had denied him. Though the rebellion was eventually crushed, Hong's life demonstrates how a failed exam candidate's resentment sparked one of history's bloodiest revolts (over 20 million deaths) and a profound challenge to Qing rule.

ZUO ZONGTANG (1812–1885)—HAN CHINESE FROM HUNAN

Zuo (known in the West as General Tso) began as a classical scholar but failed the provincial exams repeatedly in his youth, never attaining a degree after multiple tries. Disillusioned, he abandoned the official exam path and returned home to farm—where he avidly self-studied practical subjects like Western science and political economy. This unintended “failure sabbatical” proved fateful: Zuo's reputation for broader knowledge grew, and as the Qing grappled with internal uprisings, he was invited in 1852 to assist the Hunan governor. He went on to become a leading statesman-general, instrumental in suppressing the Taiping and other rebellions, and a key figure in the Self-Strengthening Movement (promoting modern arsenals, education, and cotton agriculture). Zuo's early exam failures thus shaped his trajectory—freeing him from orthodox confines and encouraging a more innovative, reform-minded outlook that he applied in service of the dynasty.

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KANG YOUWEI (1858–1927)—HAN CHINESE SCHOLAR FROM GUANGDONG

Kang came from a gentry family and had a traditional education, but he grew hostile to the imperial exams' antiquated content. After an early setback (he initially failed to attain the provincial Juren degree), Kang traveled and broadened his studies on his own. He became a fierce critic of the eight-legged essay format, arguing that the exam's rigid Confucian focus stifled creative and practical learning. Without a high official title at first, Kang instead built influence as a thinker and teacher. He later passed the Jinshi degree, but by then he was spearheading calls to overhaul the system. Kang emerged as a chief architect of the Hundred Days' Reform (1898), urging the Guangxu Emperor to modernize education (including replacing the old exams). His exam frustrations clearly informed his views—he believed China's weakness stemmed from the exam system's failure to produce capable, modern-minded officials, a conviction at the heart of his reformist work.

TAN SITONG (1865–1898)—HAN CHINESE FROM HUNAN

The son of a high official, Tan was a precocious talent who nevertheless refused to conform to the orthodox exam curriculum. He openly objected to the formulaic essays required by the imperial exams, with the result that he never progressed beyond the lowest exam tier (earning only the Shengyuan [Xiucai] degree). Freed from the grind of civil examinations, Tan spent the 1880s roaming China, studying everything from Confucian classics and Buddhism to Western science and political theory. These experiences culminated in his seminal work *Renxue* ("Study of Benevolence"), blending traditional and new ideas. In 1898 Tan became one of the "Six Gentlemen" leading the Hundred

Days' Reform in Beijing, pushing for radical changes to government and the exam system. When the reform was suppressed, Tan chose martyrdom—he was executed by beheading at age 33. His tragic end was itself influential: contemporaries saw Tan's fate as proof of the Qing regime's inflexibility, and his sacrifice inspired many to abandon hope in peaceful reform and turn toward revolution. Tan's life shows how eschewing the exam system's confines fueled an original thinker and reformer, whose ultimate failure (and death) galvanized later change.

HUANG ZUNXIAN (1848–1905)—HAN CHINESE FROM GUANGDONG

Huang, a gifted poet, struggled for years to succeed in the exam hierarchy. He failed several times at the exams, finally obtaining the Juren (provincial) degree in 1876 after repeated frustration. Rather than continue to chase the highest degree, he soon leveraged personal connections to enter the foreign service: in 1877 he was appointed a diplomatic secretary in Japan, an eye-opening posting that exposed him to Meiji-era reforms. Huang went on to serve in the Qing diplomatic corps (including travels in the West) and later as a reform-minded official in Hunan. A noted man of letters, he used poetry and prose to advocate social and literary change. Huang's experience with the exam system's limitations shaped his outlook—he became “opposed to the archaism” of traditional literature and argued that poetry should address contemporary realities rather than slavishly imitate the classics. As an official, he supported the 1898 reform movement (until its failure forced his retirement). In sum, Huang's exam setbacks pushed him toward cosmopolitan learning and innovation, which he channeled into influential writings and early modern reforms.

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ZHAO ZHIQIAN (1829–1884)—HAN CHINESE FROM ZHEJIANG

Born to a merchant family, Zhao received a classical education and initially had hopes for an official career. He did pass the provincial exams (becoming a Juren in 1859), but thereafter failed to attain the coveted Jinshi degree despite about a dozen years of trying. During the 1860s, Zhao remained in Beijing attempting the capital exam repeatedly—to no avail—and sustained himself by selling his calligraphy and paintings. In 1872, he was finally granted a minor post as a district magistrate (likely via recommendation rather than exam merit). By then, Zhao had established his reputation as a leading scholar-artist of late Qing: he was renowned as a calligrapher, seal-carver, and painter, admired for his innovative fusion of styles. His lack of official success meant that Zhao's influence came through art and scholarship rather than governance. Tellingly, his works often incorporated classical allusions and moral messages, suggesting that his scholarly ideals found expression outside the exam system. Zhao Zhiqian's career exemplifies how a failed exam candidate could become an eminent cultural figure, proving talent could flourish outside imperial office.

ZHANG BINGLIN (1869–1936)—HAN CHINESE FROM ZHEJIANG

Zhang (also known by the alias Zhang Taiyan) was a brilliant classicist who, despite his erudition, never passed the imperial examinations that would have earned him a government post. Barred from the officialdom route, he instead poured his energies into independent scholarship and radical politics. Zhang re-interpreted Confucian texts not as immutable dogma but as cultural literature open to critique.

An ardent Han nationalist, he despised Manchu rule and believed the exam-obsessed Qing establishment had stifled China's vitality. He became an outspoken intellectual rebel: as a journalist and pamphleteer in the early 1900s, Zhang blamed China's woes on the imperial system. He was jailed in 1903 for anti-Qing writings and later joined Sun Yat-sen's Tongmenghui revolutionary alliance in Japan, emerging as one of its chief theorists. Zhang's failure in the exam system clearly shaped his revolutionary ideology—having been denied a voice within the Qing bureaucracy, he concluded that true national revitalization required overthrowing that entire system. His later prominence as a philosopher of Chinese nationalism and a republican activist can be traced back to the doors that the exam system closed on him.

Each of these figures illustrates how late-Qing exam failure often bred innovation—whether in religious rebellion, military modernization, political reform, or cultural creativity, their dashed hopes in the examination hall became a catalyst for new paths that profoundly impacted Chinese history.

Hu Shiren as a Fictional Echo of These Figures

HU SHIREN IS A WHOLLY fictional character, but his life and choices are deeply informed by the real-world experiences of late Qing intellectuals who were crushed by the imperial system they once hoped to reform. Like Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, and others of the Self-Strengthening and Hundred Days' Reform movements, Hu is depicted as a man caught between idealism and survival—a scholar who once believed in the promise of merit but was ultimately disillusioned by its corruption.

Hu's past is marked by promise and ambition. Once a

candidate for palace service, his talents were recognized by Prince Cheng, a fictional reformist prince modeled loosely on real historical patrons of modernization. Under Prince Cheng's protection, Hu had room to explore progressive ideals. But when the prince died, the backlash was swift. Hu's career was cut short by the new regime's reactionary turn—mirroring the fate of many late Qing scholars dismissed, exiled, or worse after the fall of their patrons.

In choosing to become a lantern maker, Hu trades the scholar's inkstone for craftsmanship—still making things meant to enlighten, but in a more literal, and more hidden, way. This transformation echoes the lives of real figures like Pu Songling, whose frustrations with the examination system led him to turn to fiction and allegory. In Hu's poetic lanterns and coded verses, readers glimpse the same subversive creativity that allowed many sidelined intellectuals to critique the court from the shadows.

Perhaps most poignantly, Hu is not only a reformer but a father. His decision to silence Shen Qiwen and burn down his own workshop reflects the impossible moral calculus so many reformers faced: speak truth and risk your family's ruin—or stay silent and live with the shame of betrayal. His statement, "We lit the way for emperors once," places him in a lineage of scholar-officials who saw themselves as guiding the state through reason. Now, however, Hu sees truth not as liberating, but dangerous—a mark of doom in a decaying dynasty.

In this way, Hu Shiren becomes a fictional echo of countless real-life men and women who sought change at the end of empire, only to be met with silence, surveillance, or fire.

BANNED BOOKS AND WHISPERED TRUTHS: CENSORSHIP IN THE QING

In imperial China, the written word wielded immense power—and under the Qing dynasty, that power was tightly controlled. Censorship was not merely a tool of governance; it was a method of survival for a ruling house that, as Manchu conquerors, often felt the precariousness of their mandate. Books, essays, operas, and even poems could fall under scrutiny. A single miswritten character or double entendre could be interpreted as sedition.

During periods of reform, rebellion, or external pressure—such as the Taiping Rebellion, the Opium Wars, or the Hundred Days' Reform—the imperial court grew increasingly sensitive to dissent. In such times, truth went underground. Writers turned to allegory, symbolism, or anonymous broadsheets. Entire communities developed codes to share ideas too dangerous to say aloud.

This section explores how the Qing dynasty policed the flow of information, the types of material deemed subversive, and how—despite it all—dissent found a way to survive. It also considers the role of scholars, printers, and secret societies in preserving banned texts and transmitting hidden knowledge through poetry, drama, and coded references—just as Hu Shiren does in our story.

The Imperial Censorate: Eyes of the Throne

At the heart of Qing censorship stood the Imperial Censorate (都察院, *Dūcháyuàn*)—a powerful institution tasked with monitoring moral conduct, bureaucratic corruption, and ideological purity across the empire. Originally established during earlier dynasties and fully developed under the Ming, the Censorate retained its sharp teeth under

Qing rule, serving both as a watchdog and as an arm of imperial will.

Censors were elite officials, often promoted from the upper echelons of the examination system. Though technically subordinate to the emperor, they had wide-reaching authority: they could investigate governors, impeach ministers, audit court decisions, and most notably, denounce any writings deemed disrespectful, misleading, or heterodox.

In theory, censors were supposed to defend moral and political rectitude. In practice, they often walked a knife's edge—balancing genuine oversight with the expectations of absolute loyalty to the emperor. A well-written memorial could earn praise and promotion; a poorly judged one could result in exile or execution.

Among their duties, censors reviewed books for publication, especially anything involving history, politics, or Confucian ethics. Printing houses required licenses, and forbidden topics included critiques of the current dynasty, praise of rebels or heterodox thinkers, and even innocent historical comparisons that might reflect poorly on the reigning house.

Worse still, offenses could be retroactive. A poem written decades earlier might suddenly become seditious in a new political climate. Families were punished for their ancestors' words. Printers and publishers could be jailed—or worse—for circulating the wrong volume at the wrong time.

The result was a literary culture of both constraint and cleverness. Writers like Hu Shiren, fictional though he may be, reflect a real world in which every phrase had to be sharpened like a blade—both to cut through illusion, and to survive the censors' scrutiny.

How and Why Books Were Banned

Book banning in the Qing dynasty was not merely a matter of suppressing information—it was a form of political control, cultural engineering, and moral gatekeeping. The Qing emperors, particularly during the early and late periods of the dynasty, used censorship to affirm their legitimacy, suppress dissent, and enforce a Confucian moral order. The process of banning books was methodical, often sweeping, and occasionally devastating.

The Mechanics of Censorship

Books were banned through a variety of official channels. The Imperial Censorate and the Board of Rites often worked in tandem to review newly printed works, especially those related to history, governance, philosophy, or morality. Private printing houses were required to register their publications and submit them for inspection. Texts deemed problematic could be confiscated, destroyed, and—most critically—recorded on official indexes of banned works.

The Qing court maintained a series of proscribed book lists, which were regularly updated. The most infamous of these efforts occurred during the Qianlong Emperor's reign (1735–1796), with the massive literary project known as the Siku Quanshu (四庫全書, “Complete Library of the Four Treasuries”). While publicly presented as a grand preservation of Chinese scholarship, the project doubled as a far-reaching purge. As thousands of books were gathered and reviewed, hundreds were censored or outright destroyed for containing “anti-Manchu sentiment,” “errors in Confucian interpretation,” or “rebellious intent.”

Common Reasons for Banning Books

- **Anti-Manchu Sentiment**—Works that portrayed the Manchus as foreign usurpers or lamented the fall of the Ming dynasty were immediately suspect. Even classical historical works could be banned if they appeared to glorify Han Chinese resistance or criticize non-Han rulers.
- **Praise of Rebels or Subversive Figures**—Any book that depicted past rebels (e.g., the leaders of the Taiping Rebellion or White Lotus uprisings) with sympathy—or even neutral language—could be blacklisted. The line between history and sedition was dangerously thin.
- **Unorthodox Philosophy or Religion**—Texts promoting heterodox schools of thought—especially those outside the Confucian mainstream, like certain Daoist sects, unapproved Buddhist teachings, or folk prophecy—were considered threats to moral and social order.
- **Political Satire or Hidden Critique**—Even allegorical works, poems, or operas could be censored if censors believed they concealed criticism of the emperor, court corruption, or policies. Writers often used metaphor and coded language to express discontent, but the court grew adept at uncovering it.
- **Revisionist History**—Historical texts that contradicted official narratives or emphasized politically sensitive episodes (such as the fall of the Ming or early Qing succession crises) were subject to scrutiny and often suppression.

Consequences

The penalties for possessing, copying, or printing banned

books were severe. Offenders could be sentenced to exile, hard labor, or execution, and in some cases, entire families were implicated. Printers and booksellers were especially vulnerable. This atmosphere of fear pushed many dissenting texts underground, where they were circulated in secret handwritten copies or smuggled in from coastal regions and foreign presses.

Yet even under such threat, people read. They whispered verses, passed scrolls in teahouses, and hid pages inside wall panels and lantern frames—much like Hu Shiren in our story. Censorship did not kill the thirst for knowledge or truth. It merely made it more dangerous—and more precious.

SECRET PUBLICATIONS, HIDDEN PRESSES, AND BOOK SMUGGLERS

Wherever censorship thrives, so too does resistance—quiet, determined, and often disguised in ink. In Qing dynasty China, the imperial court's stringent control over publishing gave rise to an underground network of secret presses, illicit scribes, and brave smugglers who risked their livelihoods—and sometimes their lives—to ensure forbidden ideas continued to circulate.

Hidden Presses and Private Printers

In back rooms behind apothecaries, on the upper floors of teahouses, and even in secluded farmhouses, hidden printing presses operated under cover of darkness. These presses were typically small, mobile, and capable of producing limited runs—often just a few dozen copies—of banned books, essays, or reformist tracts.

Woodblock printing remained the dominant method, as

it allowed artisans to produce pages silently and without the sound of metallic type. To reduce suspicion, texts were sometimes printed with altered titles or blank title pages, making it harder for censors to immediately identify a work.

In larger cities like Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Guangzhou, sympathetic literati and merchants funded such operations. Some presses were attached to private academies or literary salons—places where Confucian classics were taught by day and radical reinterpretations were whispered by night.

Smuggling and Distribution Networks

Once printed, the books had to travel. Couriers concealed them inside boxes of incense or under false bottoms in carts of rice. Buddhist and Daoist monasteries sometimes offered safe passage, disguising the books as religious texts or stashing them among scrolls of sutras.

Book smugglers moved along familiar trade routes, often accompanied by legitimate goods to mask their contraband. From port cities, banned works could be smuggled in or out via merchants, missionaries, and even foreign diplomats—especially in the late Qing, when Western-run presses began translating and publishing Chinese-language texts that had been censored at home.

A well-known trick was to bind dangerous material inside innocuous volumes. One might find a revolutionary essay hidden between chapters of a Confucian treatise or pasted into the flyleaf of a Tang poetry anthology.

The Role of Scholars and Students

Scholars themselves became part of the distribution network. A single manuscript of a banned essay might be copied by hand a dozen times over, passed from student to

student under the guise of literary critique. In elite academies, promising candidates sometimes composed new essays in the margins of old texts—never daring to speak their convictions aloud, but letting the ink speak in whispers.

Students preparing for the civil service exams were both victims and vectors of forbidden knowledge. While they memorized official doctrine by day, some read seditious commentaries by night. They debated justice, empire, and identity behind closed doors, sharpening minds that would never be permitted to rule.

Risks and Consequences

To be caught with a banned book could mean loss of livelihood, exile, or execution. Entire printshops were burned; their operators imprisoned or executed as “traitors.” The Qing state's paranoia deepened in the wake of uprisings like the Taiping Rebellion, which had its own radical religious tracts and subversive literature. Even works considered harmless decades earlier were reclassified as dangerous, and purges swept through public libraries and personal collections alike.

Yet the presses did not stop. The hunger for truth, beauty, and justice—however hidden—remained stronger than fear. From the ashes of burned scrolls, new ones were inked. From banned names, legends grew.

In this atmosphere, characters like Hu Shiren come to life—not just as dissidents, but as guardians of endangered truths. Each lantern he crafted carried more than light; it carried memory, resistance, and the quiet defiance of those who chose to speak, even when they could not be heard.

A LANTERN-MAKER'S CODED REBELLION

Hu Shiren's role as a lantern-maker and former examination candidate is a microcosm of late Qing intellectual dissent. A failed scholar-turned-artisan, he carves poetry into lanterns—a humble craft imbued with subversive purpose. By inscribing veiled critiques onto objects of light, Hu defies the conformity expected of imperial exam graduates. His bitter line, *"The light reveals what the court hides,"* exemplifies how he uses art to illuminate truths that the Qing court sought to obscure. In this way, Hu Shiren's fictional rebellion through aesthetics mirrors the real-life stratagems of Qing dynasty literati who hid bold ideas in poetry, drama, and art to evade censure. Under a regime notorious for persecuting "seditious" writings, even a single provocative phrase could endanger a writer and his family. Thus, like many frustrated scholars of his era, Hu turns to coded creativity—employing metaphor and medium to voice discontent without inviting immediate persecution.

Parallels with Dissident Scholars and Artists

Hu Shiren's rejection of conformity and subtle protest echoes the lives of numerous late Qing poets, artists, and dissidents who suffered for veiled critique. Scholars such as Gong Zizhen (1792–1841), a reform-minded poet-official, became famous for boldly criticizing Qing conservatism and urging change through literature. Gong Zizhen exemplified the constrained genius of the era: he experimented with unorthodox literary styles and emotional frankness in his verse—an "anti-orthodox" stance that challenged stale Confucian conventions. Though he served as an official, Gong's poetic laments about a decaying empire and calls to "revitalize" the nation were thinly veiled critiques of the

status quo. His willingness to break ritual norms and inject urgent reformist messages into art foreshadows Hu Shiren's own path of *creative* defiance.

Another real-life echo is Yu Youren (1879–1964), a scholar who, like Hu Shiren, grew disillusioned with the imperial pathway. Yu passed the civil service exam in 1903—near the Qing dynasty's end—yet his earlier writings condemning Qing misrule had branded him a political radical. Barred from office as a “revolutionary,” Yu turned to other means: he became an educator, an influential calligrapher, and later a leader in the anti-Qing Tongmenghui movement. His trajectory shows the fate of brilliant exam-tutored minds who refused to conform: rather than serve a court they despised, they used their pens and brushes to undermine it. Hu Shiren's bitterness over his examination failure and subsequent life as a marginalized artisan resonate with Yu Youren's story—both men spurned a corrupt system and repurposed their talents for dissent.

Even artists and writers outside the official exams share Hu's spirit. Early Qing playwright Kong Shangren's famous drama *The Peach Blossom Fan* (1699) allegorized the fall of the Ming dynasty in a way that subtly commented on Qing rule. By portraying the tragedy of a prior regime, Kong Shangren—much like Hu Shiren with his lantern poems—leveraged art as indirect political critique. Late Qing novelists and pamphleteers followed similar paths. Some, like Zou Rong (1885–1905), openly attacked the Qing in print (Zou's incendiary pamphlet *The Revolutionary Army* led to his imprisonment and death). Others chose a coded approach: for instance, reformist scholars Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao wrote about historical or philosophical themes that concealed urgent calls for modernization. Hu Shiren can thus be seen as a composite of these dissident literati and

creatives—a fictional embodiment of their frustrations and furtive rebellions against a “dying dynasty.”

Disillusionment with the Examination System

At the heart of Hu Shiren’s narrative is a deep disillusionment with the imperial examination system, a sentiment widely shared by late Qing intellectuals. By the 19th century, the once-vaunted exams had become, in the eyes of many, a stifling relic—rewarding rote conformity over true talent. Brilliant thinkers often chafed under the strictures of the eight-legged essay and the requirement to parrot orthodox ideology. Those who could not or would not mold themselves to these confines frequently failed to advance, as happened to Hu Shiren in the story. The result was a generation of highly educated but embittered men, their genius constrained by an antiquated system. Many became “fallen” scholars without official posts, harboring resentment toward the establishment that rejected them.

Historical records show that countless literati in the late Qing chose to abandon the official path altogether, seeking purpose elsewhere. In cultural centers like Jiangsu and Zhejiang, “a large group of lower-class literati were disillusioned by the requisite imperial examinations,” turning instead to lives of letters and art. Unable to win recognition through civil service, they made livings by writing, printing, engraving, and selling their works, and by organizing literary societies and cultural events. Hubs of intellectual activity formed where novelists and poets gathered to share ideas, freed from the exam halls’ constraints. This phenomenon gave rise to a vibrant literary underground late in the Qing era. Hu Shiren’s choice of artisan life—crafting lanterns adorned with poetry—fits squarely within this trend. Like many real scholars who failed to secure government

appointment, he channels his education and frustration into creative pursuits, finding spiritual satisfaction in art after the collapse of his official ambitions. His very occupation as a lantern-maker symbolizes how enlightened knowledge moved outside palace walls into the marketplaces and workshops, where new kinds of influence could be crafted in ink, wood, and light.

Coded Critiques and Hidden Resistance

Hu Shiren's poetic lantern inscriptions are part of a broader culture of hidden resistance among the late Qing intelligentsia. Under heavy censorship and the threat of literary inquisition (文字獄), direct criticism of the throne was perilous—the Qing authorities were infamous for construing even innocuous phrases as treasonous. Intellectuals learned to couch their criticisms in layers of classical allusion, symbolism, and wordplay. Poetry, opera, calligraphy, and crafts became the *safe* outlets for dangerous ideas. A clever verse might lament the falling petals of a flower as an allegory for a nation in decline, or a painting of bright autumn moonlight might imply the revealing of hidden truths. In Hu Shiren's case, the medium is literal light: his lanterns illuminate streets during festivals, just as his verses aim to illuminate corruption in the shadows of the court. The phrase "The light reveals what the court hides" captures this elegantly. By embedding such a message in an artwork meant to bring light, Hu participates in a longstanding tradition of subtle protest—shedding light on imperial hypocrisy while maintaining plausible deniability as a mere craftsman's decoration.

Historically, late Qing reformers and dissidents often spoke in riddles and metaphors to escape prosecution. A slight change of wording could transform sedition into a

seemingly innocent aphorism. For example, official playwrights set their critiques in the safely distant past; scholars writing commentary would use heavy irony or ghostly parables to voice dissent. These veiled expressions formed a language of resistance understood by like-minded readers. The Qing regime's paranoia was well earned: as one scholar noted, rulers "deliberately extracted words or phrases from an author's writings to fabricate charges." Thus, the oppressed literati *had* to hide the dagger of critique within a flower of art. In Hu Shiren's fictional world, every lantern he paints with poetic script is such a flower—its glow attracting common folk with beauty while its words convey rebellion to those able to perceive it. His work illustrates the subversive power of aesthetics: a beautiful object that, upon closer reading, can undermine an empire's grand façade.

Disillusionment, Constrained Genius, and the Power of Aesthetics

Hu Shiren emerges as a conduit for the era's themes of disillusionment and constrained genius. Like many real late-Qing intellectuals, he embodies the tragedy of potential stifled by an ossified system. We sense his brilliance in the elegance of his verse and the craftsmanship of his lanterns—yet that genius finds no official outlet, having been barred from serving the state. This was a common fate. Some of Qing China's most brilliant minds languished in obscurity or met violent ends because their loyalty to truth outweighed their loyalty to empire. Their frustration often turned inward as corrosive bitterness, or outward into creative revolution. Hu's own bitterness over his failure radiates through his biting inscriptions. Yet crucially, he does not remain silent or defeated. In him, we see how constrained genius can be redirected rather than extinguished. Denied a

voice in the Examination Hall or the bureaucrat's desk, Hu Shiren finds a voice through poetry and craft. He proves that scholarship need not serve the court to have meaning—it can serve the people's enlightenment instead.

In this light, Hu Shiren stands as a fictional composite of late Qing dissident-scholars. He reflects Tan Sitong's resolute idealism (Tan famously declared he would "die for change" before his 1898 execution), Kang Youwei's reformist zeal to remake ossified institutions, and even Hong Xiuquan's drastic rejection of Qing authority (Hong, a failed exam candidate, launched the Taiping Rebellion). But Hu's weapons are not swords or formal petitions—they are ink, paper, wood, and flame. This emphasis on art underscores the unique power of aesthetics in times of repression. A poem or painting can slip through the censors' nets where a pamphlet might be confiscated. A beautifully crafted lantern inscribed with delicate calligraphy can hang in a public square, its message hiding in plain sight. Such art invites interpretation and discussion, stirring awakening in subtle ways. Late Qing history provides many instances of art-as-resistance: from politically charged opera performances to satirical novels sold on street corners. Hu Shiren's story channels that reality. His character illustrates how beauty and creativity became acts of rebellion when direct action was curtailed.

A Fictional Voice for a Dying Dynasty's Critics

By weaving together strands from real lives, Hu Shiren's tale gains a profound resonance with Qing dynasty cultural critique. In the twilight of Qing rule, a chorus of disillusioned voices—scholars, poets, playwrights, artisans—lamented the dynasty's decay and sought to inspire renewal or revolt. Hu is a single voice in that chorus, but through him

we hear echoes of all the others. His rejection of imperial conformity aligns him with those unsung exam failures who chose integrity over advancement. His coded lantern-poems place him among the ranks of courageous writers who risked speech crimes for the sake of truth. And his artistry, born of personal bitterness, ultimately transcends it—becoming a beacon for the broader frustrations of his age.

In sum, Hu Shiren's fictional journey as a lantern-maker with a secret pen captures the essence of a historical reality. He symbolizes the countless late Qing literati whose intellect was too large for the cage of tradition, and whose hearts burned with a light that could not be dimmed by imperial edict. Through subversive art and veiled verse, they—and Hu—kept that light alive. In a dying dynasty desperate to quell dissent, it was precisely these constrained geniuses and their aesthetic rebellions that presaged the dawn of a new era. Hu Shiren stands as an homage to them, illuminating through fiction the enduring truth that art and intellect, though suppressed, can still shine defiantly in the darkness.

Hu's Risks, the Secret Press, and the Cost of Truth

Within the fictional world of *The Lantern Maker's Secret*, Hu Shiren represents the countless real-life intellectuals who navigated the razor's edge between silence and dissent. His clandestine decision to preserve and share Shen Qiwen's final essay—a powerful critique of Qing corruption and the examination system—is a dangerous act of resistance, not just against individuals, but against the very mechanisms of imperial control.

In the Qing Dynasty, such a choice could mean death. Hu knew the risks: secret presses were raided, underground printers imprisoned or executed, and anyone found distributing banned material could be sentenced harshly—espe-

cially if their lineage lacked noble protection. The fact that Hu had a son studying for the very exams he was quietly condemning added a deeply personal layer of stakes. To speak the truth might doom not only himself but the next generation of his family.

Yet Hu's decision to entrust the article to Inspector Gong—who then places it in the hands of a hidden press—shows a glimmer of belief that truth can outlast suppression. His act echoes those of many historical figures who risked everything to write, print, and pass forbidden words hand to hand, behind screens and shop walls, at great personal cost.

In the end, Hu's lanterns are never lit, but the truth they carry still reaches the eyes of the next wave of scholars. That moment—when knowledge passes from one trembling hand to another—reflects the quiet revolution of the printed word in Qing China. It is a reminder that censorship, no matter how powerful, cannot wholly extinguish the human drive to understand, remember, and resist.

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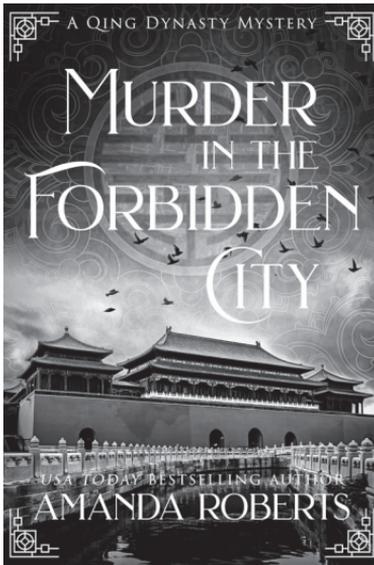
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MURDER IN THE FORBIDDEN CITY



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**Behind the vermillion walls of the Forbidden City,
murder knows no boundaries.**

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—yet somehow he must solve a murder he cannot
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has been murdered while serving the Empress. Determined
to find justice, she makes a dangerous decision: she'll go
undercover in the Forbidden City and work with the
insufferable Inspector Gong, even if his arrogance makes her
want to throttle him herself.

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will the rigid traditions that divide them prove more deadly
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