

Chapter One

Hangzhou, China | December 1949

My name was Tao Wen Shun, before I changed it. Events that started at home pursued me across the oceans. This is my story.



Since it was the season for unexpected weather changes, I buttoned my coat and turned up my collar against the pre-dawn chill. I bent into the wind as I walked along Zhijiang Road headed for Hangzhou's port to retrieve an especially important package for my grandfather, YeYe. He needed the materials to finish making one of his famous musical instruments. It was an honor to help him.

The sounds on the streets swirled around me. Farmers pushing their carts loaded with fruits, vegetables and grains to sell at the market, and vendors calling to each other as they set up their stalls and readied themselves for the day.

When I finally approached the harbor, the fog was so thick that I could barely make out the smokestacks of the ocean-going ships that crowded against each other in the busy port. The sun was beginning to turn the sky from charcoal to a pale grey as grizzled porters pulled cargo along gangways that creaked and moaned from the weight. I approached an old crewman working the freight area and waved my receipt so he'd know I was there to pick up a package.

“Come back later,” he yelled before disappearing behind a stack of large crates.

With nothing to do but wait, I watched the ships coming in and out of port and recalled when YeYe carried me on his shoulders. Even now, the monotonous rise and fall of the ships in the harbor, the porters scurrying like ants on a hill, up and down the gangplanks at the sides of the ships, the sounds of the screeching hawsers, and the low mournful wail of the foghorn mesmerized me.

I felt the dampness from the sea mist as I paced the dirty docks. Mechanical cranes groaned and banged containers on the docks for men to load and unload. As the fog lifted, I could see dozens of sampans floating in the waterways hawking fresh fish. The air smelled foul from steam and soot that belched out of the smokestacks and yellow bilge being pumped into the bay.

It was midday by the time the passengers disembarked from the freighter, and the cargo was unloaded by weary-looking dockhands. The old crewman avoided me all morning. When he finally approached, I noticed deep neck wrinkles and blotches on his face. He adjusted his sagging trousers and asked, “What you want, boy?” His breath smelled like garlic as he reached out with scarred hands and arms and took my receipt. He rubbed his neck and winced as he walked away. I sat on a crate until he returned and shoved a box at me, then extended his hand with an open palm. YeYe didn’t give me money to tip him, and besides, he ignored me for hours. The man narrowed his eyes, shook his head, grunted, and walked away.

I inspected the Indonesian shipping ticket and customs declaration, which was stamped by Chinese authorities. I ran

my hand along the rough edges of the wooden box and noticed the nails that secured it had been pried open and refastened. I reached into my back pocket, pulled out my pocketknife, and pried the top panel to inspect the contents. Inside and intact were several python skins that YeYe would use to craft a two-stringed bowed fiddle, known as an erhu in China and in the Western world as a Chinese violin. I resealed the box as best I could and anxiously walked through the port toward home.

The air was redolent with the smell of dumplings and meats from vendors cooking over open fires. The smell made my stomach growl and reminded me that I had not eaten. The vendors looked past me and must have known that I didn't have money to spend. Beyond these merchants were dark-skinned rickshaw pullers, clad in loose clothing and sandals, waiting for customers. Near them were three women with heavy makeup wearing tight-fitting long silk floral gowns, and smoking thin cigarettes in shiny holders. One whistled at me, another extended a bunch of purple asters toward me, and the third asked, "Is that box a gift for me?" YeYe warned me to stay away from these ladies, so I looked the other way as one of them said, "Look at the little man's face turn red!"

As I walked past dock laborers overburdened with heavy loads, lugging crates, trunks, and overstuffed suitcases up steep gangways, I was relieved to leave the harbor area and thankful that I didn't have to work on a ship or the docks.

Retracing my route home, I heard short high-pitched bursts of sound like someone took a hammer and hit it hard against a thick piece of metal. Pop. Pop. Pop. I thought it might be fireworks. The noise came from Shangcheng, a district near the docks which was home for the military and where political prisoners were incarcerated. My stomach muscles tightened

when I saw the road I took from home was barricaded by military police. I flattened myself against a wall and watched the chaos in the streets. There were competing yells and jeers, but for who and for what? Chills went up my back as I saw the commotion moving toward me. I needed to find an alternate route.

The quickest route home would take me across the river and near the prison. As I turned the corner, soldiers armed with machine guns, clad in green uniforms with pants tucked into high socks below the knee, blocked all street traffic while police patrolled both sides of the road. Sweat chilled my body, and I used both arms to clutch the box to my chest. Men and women dressed in white were in the middle of the street, hailing Mao as a hero as they hoisted poles with his pictures framed in red. Crowds were elbow to elbow, and there was a sense of parade and violence at the same time.

The crowds pulled me along as I maneuvered through the streets. Realizing it was a mistake to come this way, I leaned against a building to consider whether to take a different route, but any other street would take me much further away. I had no alternative but to cautiously proceed. When I turn up Shixin Middle Road, there were still throngs of people, and I heard screams and sirens wailing as men and women ran past me with terrified expressions on their faces. I hurried down several blocks and took a side street eager to get away from the crowds. As I approached the Xinxin Hotel, I saw it was decorated with red banners hung from columns. Soldiers, many of whom looked no older than me, carried rifles and wore bandoliers. They were stationed at the entrance and on the second-floor terrace of the hotel.

Drawing closer, I noticed a stiff-looking guard with his eyes on my box. My heart raced, and my face felt hot. I didn't want to be stopped and asked to open the box to explain its contents or be questioned about its purpose. Without warning, an elderly woman tripped into me, spilling her sack of vegetables. I dropped the box of snakeskins and scrambled to pick it up as I said to her, "Let me help you."

"No," she said with terror in her voice, then hurried away, which added to my nervousness.

As I collected myself, I took a furtive glance at the soldier. His attention was elsewhere on the crowd, so I rushed past the Hotel and down several blocks. Startled by a loud crash and shouts of panic, I clutched the box and wanted to be invisible. I was hiding behind a screen of rickshaws when I saw soldiers smash the storefront window of Mother's favorite bookstore. Broken glass littered the street. They threw books into a pile on the road and soaked them with fuel. When the soldiers ignited the books, sparks flew up into the sky. I recognized old Mr. Yang, who was screaming to save his books as he struggled against two officers who cursed him and called him a western traitor. They made him kneel on the glass shards and held his head up by the hair to force him to watch his books burn. There was heat on my back as I ran away from the blaze.

People scurried down the streets and stayed in the building shadows. Like me, they wanted to avoid confrontation.

I raced home and ran to the back of our house. My clothes were saturated with sweat as I flung open the door to YeYe's workshop, slammed it shut, and leaned against it, panting and dropping the box.

YeYe dropped his tools on the workbench and moved toward me. He wrapped his arms around me and held me close while he asked, "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

I took a deep breath and said, "There was chaos downtown. I took the road in front of the Xinxin Hotel. The military took over the Hotel, and police blocked the main street during a demonstration for Mao. There were posters of Chiang Kai-shek with skulls at his feet and red streaks painted across his face, and people paraded with posters of Mao. I scurried through the crowds and felt chilled and sweated at the same time. I ran most of the way home."

"Why did you take the road in front of the Xinxin?"

"Because of the blockades. I saw a group of soldiers break the window of Yang's bookstore and throw his books into a fire on the street. Yang was screaming as soldiers restrained him and forced him to his knees on broken glass."

YeYe stared off into the distance for a moment. "Heinrich Heine wrote, 'When they burn books, in the end, they burn people.'"

"Burning people," I repeated.

He whispered, "You're safe at home now, but I shouldn't have sent you alone to get the package." When he held me, all the stress drained from my body. YeYe was more than my grandfather; we shared a sixth sense.

"We're facing difficult times with Mao displacing Chiang Kai-shek. It's the start of major changes. No one knows what the future holds. As you saw today, it's becoming volatile in the city. The army and police are searching for anyone associated with Chiang Kai-shek. This is probably my last shipment of skins from abroad. Besides, the cost of skins and shipping has skyrocketed because our money is practically worthless."

I picked up the box, walked across the shavings on the floor, put it on his workbench, and said, "I guess these python skins arrived just in time for you to finish the Magistrate's erhu."

He nodded and said, "Sit down and rest. I'll make us tea." He put the cast-iron kettle on to heat, then walked to his workbench, lifted the rosewood erhu he was working on, and said, "Do you think the Magistrate will like this fiddle?" Only YeYe would dare call one of his erhus a fiddle. The two-stringed instrument was unique to China, and his work was in demand from all parts of the country.

"He'll cherish it!"

To his customers, he was Tao, and I wanted to be just like him. He was head of our family and possessed a kind intimacy that drew people to him.

"What you saw today was people losing their peace. Always remember that we add a few paint strokes to our life's work each day. The work we undertake and the relationships we build are expressions of our character."

The workshop was made of old stone, bricks, and wood. The ceiling was open to the rafters, and the floor was compacted dirt and sawdust. Wooden racks held all the materials necessary to make erhus and xiaos (Chinese flutes). Two workbenches were in the middle of the shop with large wooden bins between them, which held raw wood and scraps. We wore leather aprons, and my job was to sand and refine surfaces before applying stain and varnish. It was usually just the two of us in the workshop. Mother painted designs on the body of the instruments before the varnish was applied, and my sister, Lijuan, was learning how to paint the designs by practicing on paper. The sweet, fruity smell of rosewood filled the room, and sunlight caught particles of dust that hung in the

air. The atmosphere seemed magical to me. I was privileged to be apprenticed by YeYe. At home, I felt sheltered from the outside world.

He made Longjing tea, crushing the dried leaves between his long, strong fingers as he dropped the leaves into a strainer, then poured hot water over them, which released a mildly sweet aroma, with a hint of chestnut. We regularly walked the hillsides together in search of wood and tea leaves. He was too old to scale the steep slopes and often said, “You are my arms and legs.”

He brought me steaming hot tea in my favorite purple clay cup. As I sipped the tea, my mind whirled and I said, “I can’t forget the look on Mr. Yang’s face or the smell of the burning books. I don’t want to tell Mother about Yang’s bookstore because I know it will upset her.”

YeYe placed his hand on my shoulder and said, “Let’s keep this to ourselves for now and focus on our work.”

He hunched over the workbench as his calloused and rough hands glided over the wood with ease. He caught me watching him, then winked and smiled, “While you were gone, I inspected the blackwood erhu you have been working on. You are becoming a fine craftsman. You’ve learned well and put your heart into your work.” His encouragement always made me feel good.

YeYe’s distinctive leathery scent came from the apron he wore in the shop, and the smell triggered a sense of calm and peace in me. He stood and put his hands on my shoulders. I stopped working and turned to face him. He looked me in the eye and said, “Wen Shun, I’m proud of you. You are growing up to be a fine young man of good character. But never forget,

many would be startled if, when they looked in the mirror, it revealed their character.”

Character was important to him, but when I looked in the mirror, all I saw was a boy. I was tall for fourteen, but he was a full head taller, and I realized how small I was compared to him when he reached around my thin body and drew me into his embrace.

“My son, by now you know that our deepest motivations and values define what we do and how we do it.”

“I know, and ‘Our character is visible in all we do.’”

He laughed as he picked up two pieces of wood, then tapping each on the workbench, he said, “Can you hear the difference between this one and this one?”

“The second piece seems to be richer sounding.”

“For those who want to make a living making or playing musical instruments, this difference is significant. Testing wood for sound is important because it reveals its soul. I’m passionate about selecting the right piece of wood for an instrument. Our village is the holy city of erhus. To craft instruments or study music in Hangzhou is a gift.” I was privileged to work alongside YeYe., I pictured my life crafting instruments beside him and playing the erhu and xiao.

“Let’s set this erhu aside for the time being. Bring me your wood carving knife, I received an order for a xiao, and I want to show you how to carve the bamboo.”

I opened a mahogany chest in my room and marveled at the knife YeYe’s father had given to him, which he presented to me on my 10th birthday. He said his father’s passion was to carve wood, like his father before him.

When I returned to the workshop with the knife, YeYe was working on a piece of bamboo and said, “I like this purple

bamboo better for making xiaos because it has a brighter and sharper tone even though the wood itself is more prone to cracking than bitter bamboo.” When I handed him the knife, he motioned for me to sit next to him.

“Hold the knife like this. I’ll guide your movements and show you how to carve it.” We worked quietly, and I tried to copy him.

When Mother got home, she came into the workshop, bowed, and hugged YeYe. Her large, brown eyes were expressive, and she wore her black hair long and straight. It stood out against her smooth, light skin. Mother followed in YeYe’s scholarly footsteps by graduating from Hangzhou University and teaching science. Girls weren’t expected to attend university, but she secretly tutored girls in our home and took pride in how many of her students were accepted into Hangzhou University.

YeYe’s eyes twinkled when she kissed him on both cheeks. Then she came to me, bowed, hugged, and kissed me twice. She called the kisses European style.

“How was your day?” she asked.

YeYe gave me a look to remind me to keep what I had seen to myself. I showed her the xiao we were working on. She smiled and said, “You’re just like your YeYe. Since you took your first steps, you have mimicked whatever you saw him do, and you followed him everywhere. Do you remember? I called you *his reflection*.”

I grinned, cherishing her comment, and said, “I still do.”

“I need to prepare the evening meal. Please clean up and wash for dinner.”

We each picked up our work areas. YeYe washed his hands and face first, I followed.

As we entered the house, Lijuan was working on a school project, and her papers were scattered on the floor. When she saw me, she jumped up, squeezed my arm, and excitedly said, “Wen Shun, I was with Cousin Liu Yang today, and her friend, Lil, read my fortune! Lil used *I Ching* just as her mother taught her. Cousin said it’s been used by emperors for over a thousand years. Lil told me she read the *Book of Changes*.”

I doubted she read the *Book of Changes*, and I hoped to avoid the conversation, but I saw the excitement on my sister’s face. She was a dreamer and liked to imagine what her future would be like. I only knew that I wanted to study science and make musical instruments with YeYe. I decided to remain silent, but that did not stop my sister.

“Lil asked me what questions I had, then used six divination coins, five the same and one different. She tossed them on a table and explained the meaning of each one, to make either yin or yang more or less likely to move. The first interpretation meant I would lead a fascinating life.” She smiled at me, and I frowned.

Lijuan’s cheeks turned pink like a rose petal as she grinned and continued, “The second showed, I have vitality like the spring and would meet many men.”

“The last coin indicated that I would live in different places. I asked Lil if I would have children, so she tossed them again and said I would, but it would be difficult.”

“How much did you pay for the fortunes?”

Lijuan puckered her face at me.

“Did she charge for your extra question?”

She stuck out her tongue and glared.

“I don’t believe in fortune-telling, and neither should you.”

“I asked if Lil would toss the coins for you? She asked me to tell her about you, so I told her how you love science, like Mother and YeYe, and would probably follow them and teach. Not me, I’d rather be a fortune teller because everybody needs a fortune teller to tell you the truth. Then she tossed coins for you.”

“I don’t want anyone telling me about my future,” I snapped.

My sister ignored me. “Lil looked at the first coin, shook her head, then said it meant you’d go on a journey you didn’t want to take.” Lijuan looked at me. When I gave no response, she continued, “The second coin indicated you’d live an adventurous life. The last coin foretold unusual life experiences.”

“Enough! No more talk, such foolishness is okay for you, but I don’t want to hear it.” I started to say she wasted her money, but seeing her still excited, I restrained myself. I didn’t want to dampen her spirit. I just wanted the conversation to end.

I was relieved when the front door opened, and Father walked in. He was tall and muscular, with an oval face and black eyes. He combed his hair away from his face, unlike mine which was parted down the middle. Lijuan bolted toward him, and they bowed and hugged. He acknowledged me with a nod. I bowed. Lijuan called him Baba, but I called him Father. Even though I was the son and the oldest, he favored her with gifts and attention. That was okay with me. I was closer to Mother and YeYe.

“Time for dinner,” Mother called. I was glad the conversation with Lijuan was over. I headed to the table and sat in my usual spot between Lijuan and YeYe.

Mother greeted Father with a bow of honor. He bowed in return and said, "We need to talk."

Mother replied, "Dinner is ready, can it wait?" I saw a puzzled expression on her face. They stepped away and spoke in whispers at the far end of the room.

Lijuan looked at me and angled her head toward our parents. When I looked at YeYe, I saw a hint of worry was on his face. Father lit a cigarette and vigorously worked it in his fingers as he spoke to Mother. He never smoked in the house.

When Mother noticed us watching, she broke away and began serving dinner. Father sat down next to Lijuan. I was startled by a bang on the table by Father's fist. Then he banged his fist again, even louder. We all looked at him. Mother spun around with a glass water pitcher in her hands.

Father turned to YeYe and spoke loudly, "At a meeting this morning, my supervisor announced, 'Mao declared the new Republic of China has started.' I couldn't contain myself. I blurted out that Mao caused a famine killing most of my family. All Mao says in response to the millions who have died is, 'They can fertilize the ground!'"

Glass shattered. Lijuan gasped, YeYe stood, I turned and saw that Mother had dropped the pitcher NaiNai had given her as a wedding gift. She swallowed hard and, with trembling hands, reached to grasp the edge of the table. She gave Father an exasperated look. Her body was shaking. "You didn't tell me that! I warned you not to speak publicly against Mao, certainly not in front of your supervisor."

Mother never raised her voice. It made me uneasy, especially after seeing the soldiers burning Yang's books in front of his store and YeYe saying our lives would change.

Was burning people next?

Was there merit to what the fortune-teller told Lijuan?
Shattered glass can't be put back together.

Father's face darkened, and his voice rose, "Mao's policies killed my family. I couldn't tolerate it anymore when he said, 'The families of the dead should plant crops on top of their graves.'"

Mother's face turned red, her cheeks puffed out, her eyes narrowed, and she held her breath before she snapped, "Tai, come with me. Now!"

She turned to me, "Wen Shun, clean up the broken glass and be careful not to cut yourself. Lijuan, mop up the water." Then she looked at YeYe and shook her head. Leaving the dining area, they walked out of the house to the far end of the garden.

Stunned, I watched their animated conversation through the window as I swept the floor.

When they returned, Father looked down and said, "I'll stand trial regarding my comments about Mao."

YeYe exclaimed, "Tai! We will be under Mao's authoritarian regime. You made a dreadful mistake that will identify our family as objectors. What about the children's future?"

A knot was in my throat. What did YeYe mean? How was this a threat to Lijuan and me?

Mother said to YeYe, "Many of my students have left over the past year. One of my former professors, who is now at Shanghai University, sent me a letter warning that Hangzhou would no longer be stable because civil war will rip China apart."

That explained the disappearance of some friends from school. Maybe their families moved to get away from war.

Mother continued, “Cousin Liu Yang told me a few weeks ago she awoke to screams in the night. Soldiers had forcibly entered her neighbor’s house, the father was dragged out of his home and beaten in the street. He was openly opposed to Mao. The next day the house was looted, and the family was taken away.

“Liu Yang was scared, so she arranged to send her son to Canada through a foreign immigration program. She found an agent who located a Chinese Canadian family to sponsor him, pay travel expenses to Vancouver, and provide for his education.”

What were they talking about?

YeYe said gravely, “But what can we afford to do for our children?”

“We need to talk to Liu Yang’s agent now,” Father said. As he turned toward me, his face paled, and his voice trailed off, “Wen Shun, we must try to get you out of the country.”

My mind started spinning. I tried to collect my thoughts and could only mutter, “Out of Hangzhou?”

He said nothing.

Then a wave of nausea hit me, and my legs felt rubbery. “What’re you talking about?” I waited for his reply. His silence annoyed me.

I looked at YeYe, then back at Father, and he turned away from me. “No! You said out of China!”

I stared in disbelief and tried to process what I heard.

My voice turned hoarse. “This is my home. I don’t want to leave.” My breath left me.

“What about me? I don’t want to be separated from Wen Shun and don’t want to go away either,” Lijuan whimpered.

Mother whispered to her, "Liu Yang said they only take boys, but we'll try to send you with Wen Shun." Mother's hands were trembling, and tears welled in her eyes.

Then Father took Lijuan in his arms and squeezed her tightly. But I was the one he intended to send away. My insides churned. Father displayed affection to Mother and Lijuan but was stern with me. At home, his presence hung over me like a persistent fog. He scrutinized me with rigid exactness to call out any mistake. I hated how he disapproved of me, his eyes always watching me for errors. If he gave me any attention, it was criticism, and whatever I did was never good enough. Now he was talking about sending me away.

I searched Mother and YeYe's faces looking for either of them to come to my defense. I felt unsettled. I never disobeyed Father, but now I stood to face him and said, "I've always been respectful and devoted to you. You are the one who spoke out against Mao. Why do I have to go?"

"It wasn't my intent..."

"Could you apologize to your supervisor, tell him you misunderstood his comments?"

He answered in a voice barely above a whisper, "Never." Then he looked at me and shouted, "Never!"

"If I leave, who'll help YeYe?" I felt the tremble in my voice.

YeYe came forward to face me. He gently clutched my upper arms, and his eyes were piercing. "There's no future for any of us in Mao's China. If you don't leave now, you may not have another opportunity. You must go."

"YeYe, I don't want to go. I don't care about my future if I have to live in another country. I want to stay with..."

YeYe put his finger to my lips and said, "Quiet now. My father worked deep in the mines in northern China. When

I was old enough, I wanted to work alongside him, but he told me I must leave to attend school, or I'd never escape the mines. Against my wishes, he sent me to live with his sister in Hangzhou. I did well and wouldn't have discovered my love for academics, or taught science, or crafted musical instruments if I remained in the mines."

"I didn't know." His disclosures surprised me.

"I'm telling you to do what my father told me. None of our lives will remain the same now that Mao is taking over the country. My heart is heavy, like yours, but your future is important, and missing this opportunity would be a mistake. You must go while you can. You witnessed the brutality of the soldiers in the streets today. It's only going to get worse."

Dizziness swept over me, and sweat beaded on my face. This was unfair. Conceivably this was an opportunity for Father to act on hidden desires. I always honored my parents and grandparents, but I couldn't handle the abruptness and severity of wanting me to leave not just Hangzhou but also China. It was too much. It was hard for me to breathe; my heart and head pounded.

"I don't fear Mao," I said defiantly to Father. "I did nothing wrong. You should go!"

Father's face filled with blood, and he looked as if he was going to explode. His eyes became glazed as he exclaimed, "Ungrateful boy! Do you realize Mao will force you to join the communist party and the army?"

I felt sick and stood paralyzed. Father took an aggressive step toward me because I'd crossed a line. I managed to step back, my stomach tightened, and I trembled inside, afraid of what was to come.

"Tai!" YeYe shouted in an authoritative voice.

Mother stepped between us, grabbed his arm, then pulled him toward her.

Father looked down, and his shoulders dropped. My energy drained. I was hollow inside.

Looking at me with her soft brown eyes, Mother said, "Trust me. We are family and have a bond. You will go first, then we will follow."

"Do I have a choice?"

There was no reply.

"If it's dangerous here, why can't we all go together?"

I looked at each of them, but there was no response.

"When will you join me?"

"That isn't possible to answer right now," Father said in a low voice.

I didn't think he wanted to follow, so I looked at Mother, then YeYe, and said, "Do you want me to leave?"

They shook their heads.

"I'd rather be together in bondage than free in another country."

Mother was always composed, but now was openly crying as she hugged me. I looked at Father, and he turned away.

"Why can't I go to Hong Kong or Taiwan?"

"We have no family there or money to send you," Father replied.

"When do I have to go?" I asked Mother.

"We'll know after meeting cousin Liu Yang's agent. First, he must accept you, then papers need to be filled out, and transportation arranged." She paused. "Enough! Lijuan, help me serve the food," she said in a manner to end all further talk on the subject.

My stomach cramped, the vision of my future was shattered. There was dead silence, and no one looked at anyone else. Lijuan choked back tears, and I could see that she was scared, but so was I. That night, I struggled to sleep and couldn't stop thinking about the day's events.