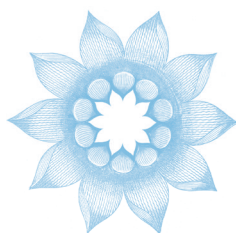
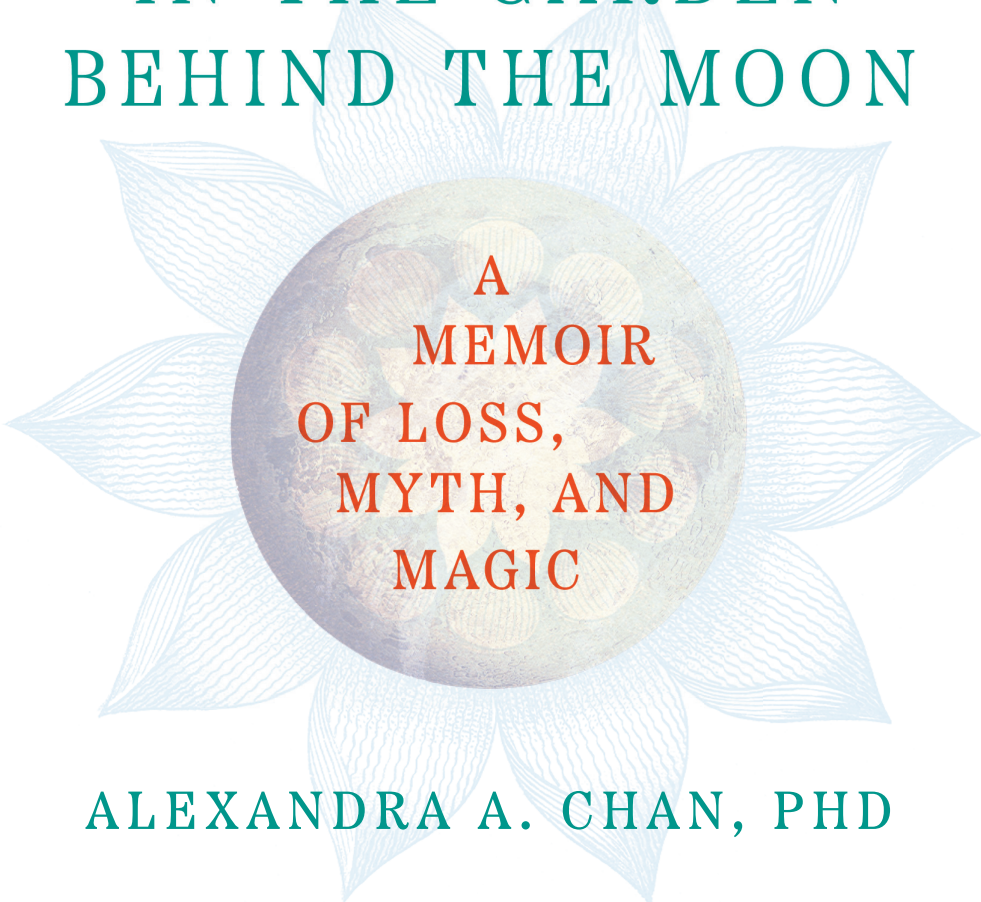


IN THE GARDEN  
BEHIND THE MOON





# IN THE GARDEN BEHIND THE MOON



A  
MEMOIR  
OF LOSS,  
MYTH, AND  
MAGIC

ALEXANDRA A. CHAN, PHD

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"What's madness but nobility of soul/ At odds with circumstance?" from *Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* reprinted by the permission of Faber and Faber Ltd as the publisher.

Excerpt from "Sometimes a Wild God" on page 364 used by permission of Tom Hirons.



*To the ancestors—  
our own, and the ones we hope to become.*





The Carp Leaps  
Through the  
Dragon's Gate.  
*The characters in  
the painting have  
the same meaning  
as the title.*



## ABOUT THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

We are a storytelling animal, for better or for worse, and the most important story we will ever tell is the story of our own lives. Are we telling the “right” story? Are we telling it well? That’s important because it is the best storytellers among us who have the future in our hands. A good story isn’t just entertainment. It has the power to heal us in the present and prepare a better future for all. It can awaken us to the truth of who we really are, what we want, what we came here to do—things we have perhaps spent a lifetime not permitting ourselves to know. It involves learning from the ancestors, yes, but also becoming better ancestors ourselves in the process.

This book follows the arc of the Chinese zodiac from Year of the Ram (2015) to Year of the Tiger (2022). For those not familiar, Chinese astrology is an ancient classification system composed of the twelve animals (Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Ram, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, and Pig) and five elements (metal, water, wood, fire, earth). Each animal has its own characteristics, and depending on the year, each element has its own features and associations with each animal (e.g., the Wood Ram or the Water Tiger). Thus the zodiac cycle is actually sixty years and not the twelve we often think of.

Each section of this book represents not only a year in my journey, but new developments in spiritual growth and understanding. The stories I tell in each explore different facets of that animal year’s gifts and challenges. Come with me on a journey of ever-increasing enchantment. Enjoy discovering the magic of the ancients’ wisdom and

knowledge as you watch each year unfold, often as foretold. Take heart as you discover that there are no “unprecedented” times. The labyrinth of earthly life is known, for people and creatures of all times and places have walked it before you.

The Ouroboros, pictured on the dedication page, is an ancient emblem found in numerous cultures, depicting a snake, or sometimes a dragon, eating its own tail. The earliest depiction of the Ouroboros in China appears on pottery from the Neolithic Yang Shao culture, which flourished in the Yellow River basin from five thousand to three thousand years ago. It symbolizes wholeness, completion, and the eternal, cyclical renewal of life, death, and rebirth. It is this book in a single image.

## A NOTE ON NAMES AND PRONUNCIATIONS

T'ai Peng, my grandfather, the Great Phoenix: dah BUNG

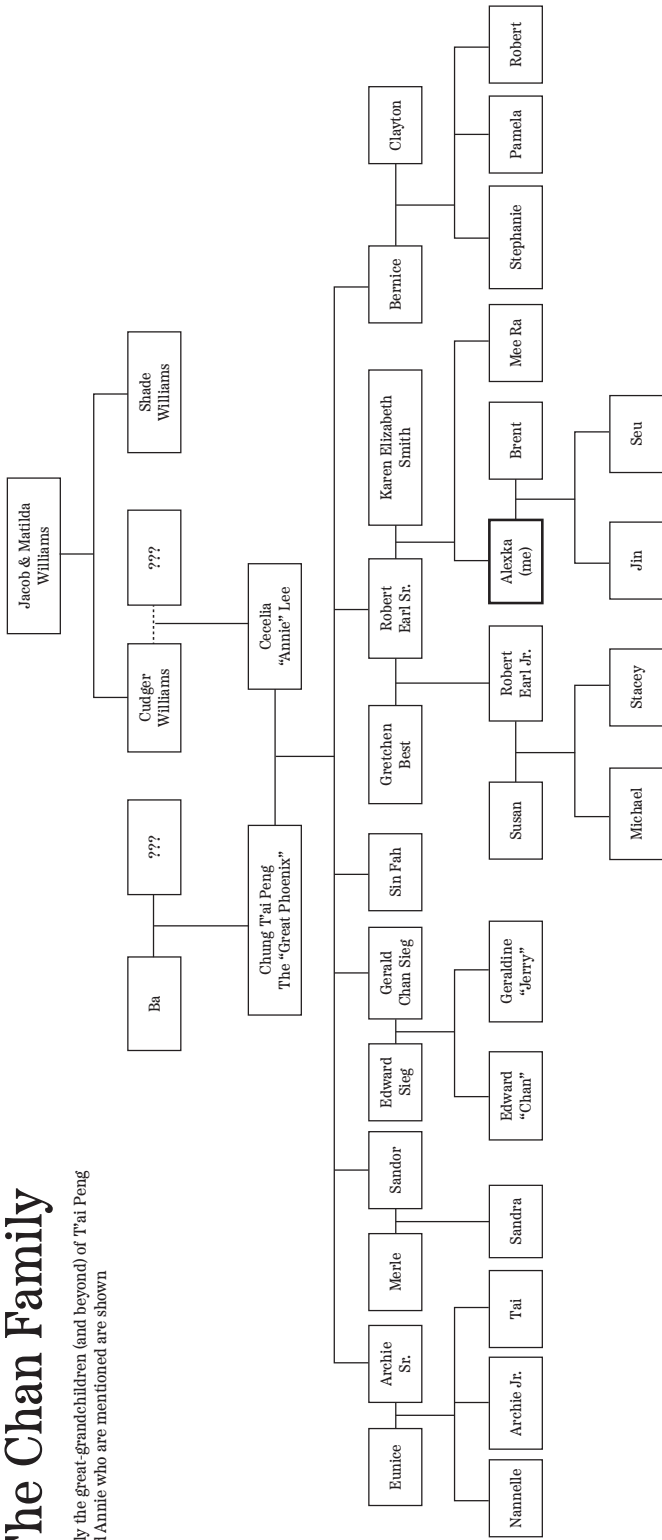
Alexka, a diminutive for Alexandra: a-LESH-ka

Seu, my younger son: SEH-oo

Throughout this book, names shown with an asterisk are unknown and/or have been fictionalized.

# The Chan Family

Only the great-grandchildren (and beyond) of T'ai Peng and Annie who are mentioned are shown







*T'ai Peng, young revolutionary with  
Western hair, ca. 1889*



*T'ai Peng, laundryman, 1930s*



## PROLOGUE

1889

## GUANGDONG PROVINCE, CHINA

### THE GREAT PHOENIX

Grandpa Chan was eighteen years old in 1889, the year he escaped beheading and flew off across the horizon, stepping into the mantle of his own name, T'ai Peng, the Great Phoenix.

It is said of the mythical T'ai Peng that its back covers thousands of *li* (which measures about a third of a mile) and its wings are like clouds that hang from the sky. When it flaps its wings, the air thunders and the waters churn for three thousand *li* in all directions. The T'ai Peng starts its life, however, as a giant Kun fish in the North Sea, where it circles through the black waters, unknowing, unseeing, and restless. In time, it is written, the Kun fish sheds the dark, cold ocean of its youth, metamorphosing into the mighty T'ai Peng. As it rises from the deep, it grows wings and beats them ninety thousand *li* into the sky, where it enters a state of complete transformation and heads on its destined journey to the Celestial Pond.

What were my great-grandparents thinking, in a country village outside the capital city of Guangzhou, naming their youngest son and last-born child after the most powerful character in Chinese mythology? It was as if they knew he was never theirs to keep, and blessed him

with a powerful spell of protection, spoken daily for eighteen years. “T’ai Peng,” Great Phoenix. Each time their child’s name crossed their lips, it summoned the otherworldly power and extraordinary destiny of the magical beast. Attached to each utterance of his name was a silent addendum: *You are enormous of spirit and powerful beyond measure. You will journey ten thousand li beyond the realm of what is recognizable. You will embrace transformation and soar to meet your destiny.*

And, too, *You cannot stay.*

As a boy, T’ai Peng received a classical education and was intent on going to university to become a Confucian bureaucrat and work in the imperial civil service, which was what all the best and brightest young men of his generation aspired to. The year of his exile, he had won a poetry competition in the capital, taking the prize not only for subject matter but also for the elegance of his brushwork. Recalling the moment decades later for his six American children, he described how, with notice in hand, he had been carried, swaying and triumphant, on the villagers’ shoulders to see his father.

He stumbled to the ground and grinned at his friends, then straightened and composed his face to approach his father, who was schoolmaster for all the surrounding villages. Thus it was as the schoolmaster that his father took the notice and scanned it, gave a terse nod of approval, and handed it back. Only T’ai Peng, who stood close, could see the glint in his eye that bespoke a father’s pride. It was one of the last times T’ai Peng would see his father, so his children heard the tale often. And so, eventually, did I.

T’ai Peng’s academic work was in world studies at the university at Guangzhou, where he began to conceive of many modern ideas—from technology to day-to-day practices and observances to governance—that he wanted to see brought home to China, a backward and exploited country whose people suffered at the hands of the Empress Dowager Cixi and the Manchus. Within months of his arrival in the capital, he had taken up with a group of similarly minded young intellectuals in the Revolutionary Party. They held secret midnight meetings in the back room of an herb shop, fantasized about a free and modern China, and plotted the overthrow of Empress Cixi and the Manchu government.

In early 1889, the plot was discovered. T'ai Peng, born in the Year of the Horse, might almost have expected it. Soothsayers and old women gathered at the village well had reminded him that General Fu Youde—one of sixty heavenly generals, or Tai Sui, of Chinese mythology—had it out for the Horse. The happiness, health, and good fortune of all mortals were the Tai Sui's alone to rule for the year. It was bound to be an unlucky one for the Horse.

The young revolutionaries had time for one last meeting to alert their members that the empress had dispatched soldiers to destroy their plans and that the soldiers were now moving through the city with orders to round up and execute those named in the conspiracy. They should all assume their names were on that list. The group leader's final instructions were "Go now. And try to stay alive. China needs you."

As T'ai Peng fled the herb shop, he heard the quick-trot tread of soldiers' boots two streets over. His eyes strained in the dark, unable to see an escape route. But as the drumbeat of doom moved ever closer, the clouds suddenly parted and the moonlight illuminated a garden wall belonging to the neighboring monastery. In a flash, T'ai Peng was up and over it, crouching beneath large bushes at its base. The clouds then slid back over the moon and plunged the streets into darkness. From where he hid, T'ai Peng heard one of his comrades being dragged into the street, his wild screams cut short by the crisp, wet smack of sword cutting flesh and cracking bone and the sickening thud of something hitting the ground. An image came to T'ai Peng, unbidden, of his older brother chopping melons in the courtyard for a feast, smiling broadly, sleeves of his best shirt rolled to the elbows, cleaver in hand. *Chunk*. Juice spurted and glinted through the sunshine. T'ai Peng's small niece and nephew toddled after the geese. Home. He had to get there.

"Bag the head," said the captain. "Leave the body for the people to see."

A monk from the monastery discovered T'ai Peng in the bushes and gave him cover for the night, disclosing that he, too, belonged to the revolution. The monk arranged for food, clothing, money, and secret passage on a ship departing for America the following morning. He also promised to get word to T'ai Peng's parents. Home? No, he could never go home, the monk told the frightened young man.



Soldiers would be sweeping towns and villages throughout the province, looking for the conspirators. He must leave.

"Maybe you'll come back one day," he said to the boy, in reassurance. "And then you must come pay me a visit and tell me about the world."

And so T'ai Peng set out from the monastery and met a sampan driver on the banks of the Pearl River in the dark before morning. In silence, the sampan slipped toward the ship, where T'ai Peng climbed a rope ladder to its decks and stowed himself away, sleepless, terrified, and heavy with sorrow. The ship had been underway for less than a day when it mysteriously came to a halt. An imperial ship was checking departing vessels for stowaways and had sent a small band of sailors over to search the decks and cabins.

They found T'ai Peng and took him into custody, forcing him onto a dinghy with two of the sailors, who started rowing him back to the mainland to his execution. T'ai Peng, gripped by terror, thought of his mother and father, his sisters who doted on him, the terrible grief they would experience at news of his demise, and his terror settled into despair.

But unbeknownst to him, circling far below, the giant Kun fish had heard the call. The great beast began to rumble in the deep. Glimpsing for the first time another world above, it began its journey upward, flexing its powerful body side to side, churning the waters in all directions. Bursting through the surface of the sea in total metamorphosis, the T'ai Peng began to rise to the firmament. The clouds grew thick, the sky grew dark, and the air became dense with pressure. A peal of thunder rumbled across the sky as the great beast beat its wings, their awful power whipping up mighty winds and turning choppy waters into raging seas. Gigantic waves tossed the dinghy from peak to trough, throwing the three men about like rag dolls. The T'ai Peng ruffled its feathers, shedding the ocean waters of its youth as torrential rain. Futile attempts to row the little boat soon gave way to frantic bailing of the water that threatened to swamp it with every swell. The T'ai Peng beat its wings harder and the rain fell in sheets.

For many hours and all through the night, the men fought heroically to stay afloat. And when the great T'ai Peng eventually set off for the Celestial Pond and the storm passed, young T'ai Peng and the



two sailors found they had drifted irrevocably off course and could no longer see land. The water was dead calm, and a blazing midday sun shone punishingly upon the scene below. The men were exhausted and weakened by their ordeal. Worse, the dinghy had not been equipped with provisions, as it had been meant to be only a couple of hours' row back to shore. Soon all three men lay inert and at odd angles on the bottom of the boat, using their shirts to protect themselves from the glare of the sun. They drifted for days. Their lips turned white and cracked. And as they continued to weaken, T'ai Peng took sips of seawater under cover of night, remembering from his school days that salt caused water retention. Enough to slow his dehydration? His own initiation had begun, and as he watched his captors grow ever weaker, he continued to sip and spit seawater at night. The wheels of destiny ground into motion.

On the third morning, young T'ai Peng struggled to his feet, wobbling the boat violently. He froze, afraid to rouse his captors, but incapacitated as they were, they barely seemed to notice. He carefully bent down, never taking his eyes from their faces, and wrapped his long fingers around the shaft of one of the oars at his feet. *The T'ai Peng must meet its destiny.* He raised the oar high into the air, like the Kun fish breaching the surface of the sea, and brought it crashing down onto the heads of his captors. Once, twice, three times. He dropped the oar, breathless in his weakened state, gagged, and let out a single, strangled sob. The dinghy rocked back to equilibrium while blood trickled and pooled in the boat's bottom. T'ai Peng wiped his mouth and brow and felt a blank calm overtake him. He rolled the two bodies overboard, checked the position of the sun, and began to row in the direction he thought land to be.

Of course the Great Phoenix found land; how could it be otherwise? He sheltered again with the monks until he had physically recovered from his ordeal. And then he caught another ship to America, this time without incident. When he set foot on the shore of San Francisco Bay, the first thing he did was grab the hated queue over his shoulder, a symbol of the tyranny that had robbed him of his family and his future (*one hairstyle to rule them all*) and cut the hair off at the nape of his neck. He threw the braid in a nearby dustbin and touched the brush of new growth above his forehead, for he had not shaved his head in

forty-five days. *The T'ai Peng travels ten thousand li beyond the realm of what is recognizable. It embraces transformation and soars to meet its destiny.*

In time, he found his way across the country to an old student of his father's, Li Chin, who owned a laundry on Broughton Street in the port city of Savannah, Georgia. Chung T'ai Peng (who would live and die in the United States as Robert Chan) would eventually take over the Willie Chin & Co. Laundry, and there he lived out his days starching collars, raising children, writing poetry, and dreaming of China and a better world.

Years later, my aunt G.G. captured her father's longing in a poem.

#### LAUNDRYMAN

If I could hear once more  
The call of dark winged birds across the fields  
Of rice and slim young bamboo,

If I could see once more  
A crane with yellow legs so straight  
Among cool water grasses,

If I could touch again  
Her hands whose fingers in their sleeve of scarlet  
Are softly curled and gentle,

My soul would be content,  
O gods,  
To iron away eternity.

—Gerald Chan Sieg, *The Far Journey*