

A FLASH of WATER

The year is 1883. China is teetering on the verge of bankruptcy. In the countryside, antagonism against foreigners and missionaries is growing and the warlords are at large.

Li Ling, a young peasant girl in China, flees to Malaya to escape being made a concubine to a warlord only to find herself tricked into becoming a second wife to a rich man with sadistic tendencies. Her life becomes intertwined with that of her rescuer, Shao Peng, in a Malaya that is rapidly transforming under British rule.

A Flash of Water follows *New Beginnings* and together with *Sweet Offerings* and *Bitter-Sweet Harvest* forms a quadrilogy, which traces the lives of one family against the turbulent political, economic and social changes in China and Malaya. The books are complete in themselves.

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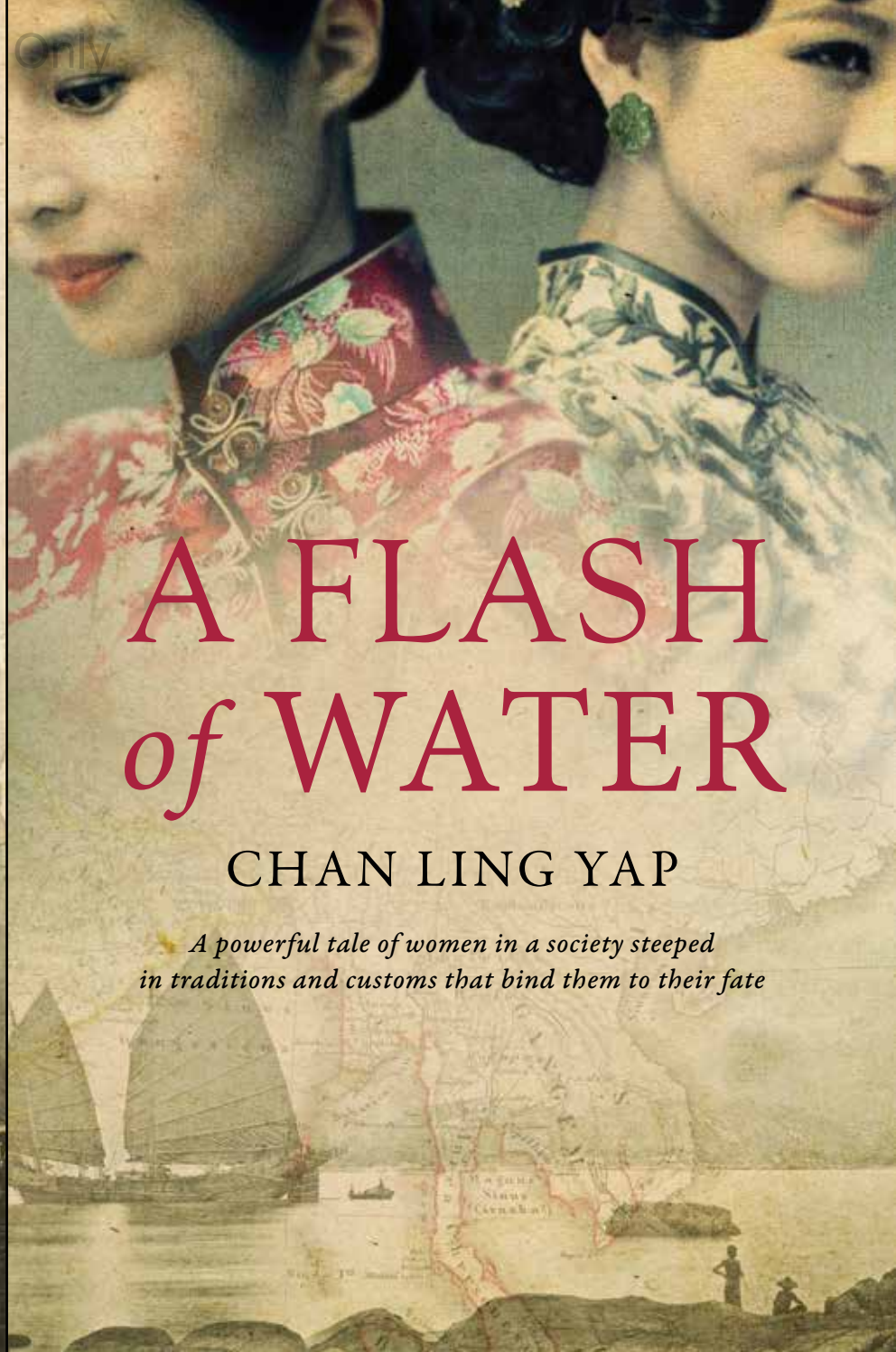
CHAN LING YAP

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*A powerful tale of women in a society steeped
in traditions and customs that bind them to their fate*



For Review Only

Praise for *Sweet Offerings*, *Bitter-Sweet Harvest* and
New Beginnings

Chan Ling Yap's third novel *New Beginnings* has all the assurance of her first two successes – and more. A strong story line, deftly rendered in brief and readable instalments, takes us from the turbulence of a China unmercifully exploited with opium by the western powers in Victorian times, to the race and clan rivalries of an emerging Singapore and Malaya. The beautiful and tragic figure of Hua might serve as a metaphor for the suffering sub-continent; and that of her husband Ngao for the resilience of the Chinese themselves.

The refinement and the thuggery of China alike, the bustle of Singapore and the tropical potential of Malaya in those days are all made to feel familiar rather than foreign, the high emotions to be shared rather than differentiate us. The characters are entirely believable, the degree of background 'colour' is perfectly judged, and the pace seductive: don't be surprised if you find you read this book at a sitting.

—Bill Jackson,

Editor of *The Corporal and the Celestial*

Bitter-Sweet Harvest is one of “4 Books you Won't Want to Put Down”. A controversial page-turner ... heart breaking and thought provoking.

—Review from *Cosmopolitan* (Singapore, January 2012)

For Review Only

Bitter-Sweet Harvest is a love story beautifully and engagingly told. It reflects the complex ethnic, religious and social tensions of Malaysia and beyond—all made vivid through the experience of characters, movingly depicted, and the exciting action, which carries the reader briskly from page to page.

—Dato' (Dr) Erik Jensen,
Author of *Where Hornbills Fly*

Tautly written, Chan Ling Yap's second novel is a powerful story of the problems of intercultural marriage that can arise from family interference. With a superbly woven plot, *Bitter-Sweet Harvest* leads the reader through a minefield of cultural, ethnic and religious conflicts. Compelling and gripping, I found I could not put down this tragic saga of missed opportunities for the lovers. A poignant love story that is highly recommended!

—Professor Bill Edeson,
Professorial Fellow, University of Wollongong

Sweet Offerings is a great read with real emotion and such detail as one can almost smell the atmosphere coming from the pages. Also I cannot recall ever reading a book where the very last word carried so much meaning for the future.

—Chris Allen

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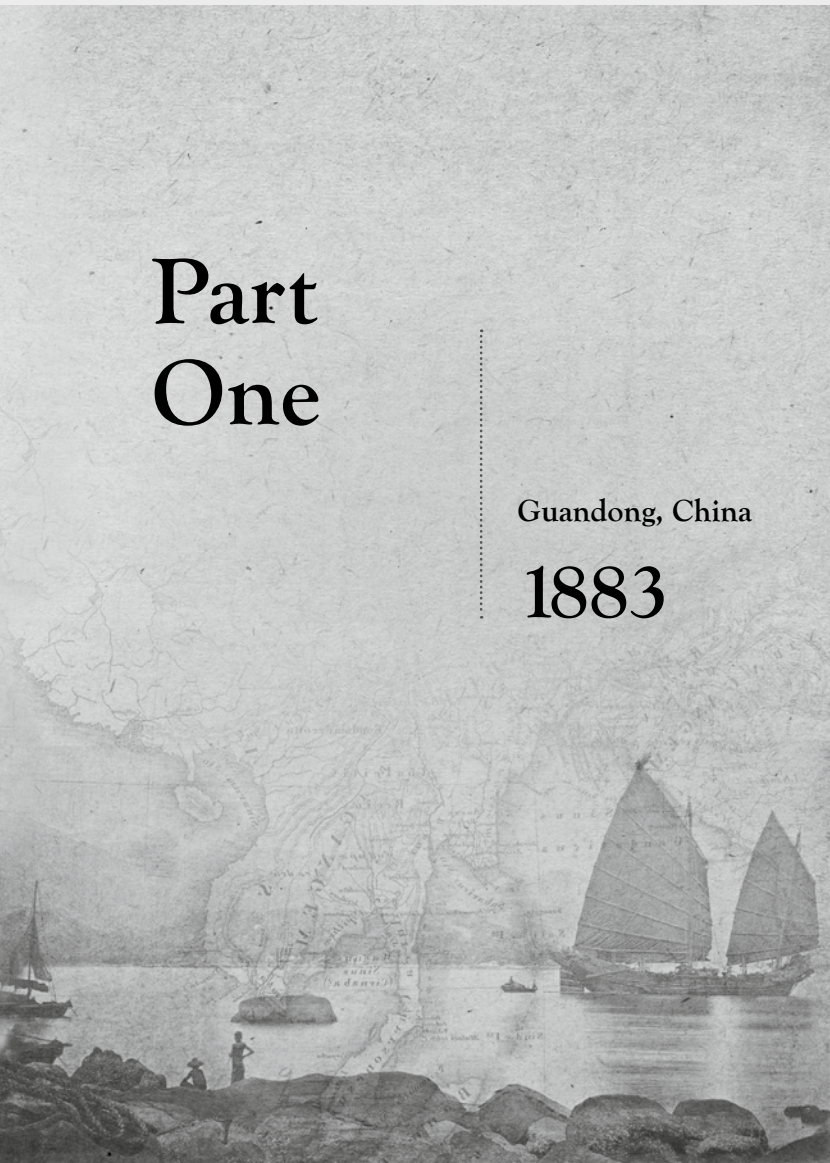
Author's Note

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Part One

Guandong, China

1883



Chapter 1

THE PEDALS WERE rough under her bare feet. Li Ling could feel the uneven texture of the wood grate into her soles. She pushed hard shifting her weight from side to side. The wheel groaned. Water gushed through, rippling down the narrow channels into the land all round her.

Li Ling looked up with a triumphant smile on her face. Her cheeks were flushed from the effort of working the water wheel. She could see her mother standing in the glistening paddy field with her cotton trousers rolled up high on her calves. She raised a hand to wave at the diminutive figure but her mother was too busy to notice. Over and over again, Ah Lan retrieved green shoots from the basket she carried on one hip and pushed them into the wet soil. Under the sweltering midday sun, the flooded ground glimmered black, like a still pond.

On the other side of the field, beyond the raised bund that separated it from another plot, her father was pulling a wooden plough, his back bent under its weight. Ribbons of turned-up soil followed him as he trundled forward in the soft mud. His feet sank deep with each step, the strain on his shoulders seen in the tendons bunched tight on his neck. It would take the whole day to plough that part of the field; and then it too would have to be flooded.

Li Ling grinned at her little brother pedalling beside her. Although he was still small for the work, his weight provided a useful balance. Once the momentum of the pedals was set, she could manage. Moreover she could hardly leave him alone at home for she could not look after him there and work the waterwheel at the same time.

“Shall we sing a song?” she asked.

“*Bu yao!* No! I don’t want to. I am tired. You sing.” Bao stuck out his lower lip in petulant rebellion. Suddenly his eyes brightened with excitement. “Look!” He pointed to a group of men coming towards them. There were five of them. They walked with an exaggerated swagger; their unbuttoned tunics flapped open with the breeze to reveal smooth muscular torsos. Their shaven foreheads glinted with the sun’s glaring heat. With a quick practised flick of their heads, they swung back their long queues, thick braids of black hair like oiled ropes, and yelled. Their voices resonated across the field.

“*Hush!*” Li Ling said to her brother. “Don’t attract their attention.”

She saw the men heading towards her father. He must have seen their approach. He had already dropped the yoke and was hastening towards them. Even from where she was, she could sense the fear in her father’s movements.

Ah Lan ran towards her children gesturing all the while towards the north. She flung both her arms out. "Go! Go!" she mouthed. In her haste she dropped her basket of seedlings. She stumbled; her feet sank deep into the soft mud; she picked herself up and lurched once more towards the children. She stumbled again, and as her knees connected with the earth, her hands made wide sweeping movements. "Move! Run!" the flailing arms seemed to say.

Li Ling jumped, dragging her brother along with her. They ran towards the dry bunds. From there they could move fast to the hedge and beyond. There was a little cave hidden behind the grove of trees. There they would wait for their mother. They had practised this drill before. Her parents had drummed into her over and over again that in times of emergency, she should run into the caves and wait till someone came to fetch her. She turned to look over her shoulder. Taken by surprise, the five men too were running, branching out to encircle the scattering figures when suddenly they seemed to change their minds. From the corner of her eye, she could see them regrouping and striding towards their father.

"Don't look back!" her mother shouted. She had seen her daughter hesitate.

Reluctantly, Li Ling continued. She pulled her brother along, her feet pummelling the dry path that verged round the wet fields until she reached grassland. She could feel her brother Bao lagging. She dropped to her knees and motioned him to climb on her back, "Hang on tight," she said. She hitched him up on her back. Her mother's words came to her. "Always take care of your brother; he is called Bao, precious, because he is our only son and you have to take care of him always. He comes first before all things. Remember! Bao carries our family name."

“And me?” Li Ling had asked.

“Ah my little daughter,” said Ah Lan, brushing a strand of hair away from Li Ling’s face. “You are a girl. When you marry you become part of another household. I love you dearly. However, as my own mother reminds me, we women are *fang jian shui*, just a flash of water to our own family. Once we marry, we disappear into the earth, soaked up with little signs of our earlier existence. When we are born, we have to obey our father; when we marry, we obey our husband, and when we are widowed, we obey our sons.”

Ah Kang had seen the men coming. He recognised them, at least the two that stood with their feet planted wide and their arms akimbo. They were from their landlord, a warlord who owned all the fields in this valley. He had never spoken to his landlord before. He had only seen him on his horse with his retinue of men when they rode round the countryside. The two that were now glaring at him were his frequent companions. Ah Kang slowed his pace to buy time and to gather his thoughts. He glanced quickly in the direction of the big water wheel. It had ground to a stop. His wife and children could no longer be seen. He felt a quick rush of relief and quickened his footsteps once more to meet the men.

“So!” shouted one of the two men. “You have sent your family scattering. Are you scared of us? Do you have something to hide?”

Ah Kang bowed, his head and back bent so low that he was almost prostrating himself before them. “No! Please forgive my hasty actions. I shoed them away. I didn’t wish you to look at their ugly faces. My wife is in the period of the moon that brings

bad luck to all. I do not wish to offend you with bad fortune.” He bowed humbly once more, his eyes averted to the ground.

Ah Gan the leader turned to the others and sneered. “This one has the mouth of a well-oiled pot.”

“We come,” he said glaring at Ah Kang, “to collect the rent due to our master. He is raising an army to defend our village from the foreign devils that have invaded our land. I am here to give you notice that we will be collecting our dues in two weeks.”

“But ... but we have already paid for this year,” spluttered Kang.

“Who is talking about this year? We are collecting the next year’s rent now. Otherwise, forget about planting the crop. Since it will be harvested only after the spring festival, you will not be entitled to it.”

“But ... but,” stammered Kang.

“Forget the buts! *Fan su tow!*” said Gan gesturing and pointing a finger to his head to indicate that Kang had the brains of a potato. “Just think yourself lucky that we have bothered to give you notice. Unless of course, you have something else to offer.” He threw a meaningful glance over Kang’s shoulder. “My master is always happy to have a beautiful addition to his household.” With that, Gan, with both hands on his hips, lifted one foot and kicked Kang, sending him sprawling on the ground.

“We will find them wherever they are. They cannot hide from us. Choose! The rent or the women! Don’t worry!” His cackling laughter echoed across the fields. “We are not going to take your old woman. Who wants a used up bag like her? It is the girl we are looking for. I hear she is quite a beauty.” He shook with laughter again. “You can spare her can’t you? A mere girl! *Seet boom for!* A commodity that yields no profit. Hand her to us! You could then, at least, make some money. Think about it.”

Kang scrambled to his knee. He prostrated himself before

them, his eyes fixed to the ground. How could he tell his wife? He kept silent maintaining his bow until the men's footsteps receded. Then he squatted down on his haunches and buried his head in his hands. He stayed still until his legs felt numb. Then he got up quickly and hurried towards the cave.

Ah Lan struck a match and held it against the wick. Immediately a flame spluttered to life in the oil lamp and light fell on the scattering of odd bowls and spoons on the table. The night air was heavy with the smell of the farmyard. It blew in through the opened door, which had been left slightly ajar. The stench infused every corner of the confined space. Outside in the fenced pen, chickens and ducks were settling in for the night. The family had just completed their evening meal. Ah Lan placed a protective hand on Li Ling's head. "Go to bed. Your father and I need to talk." Impulsively, she kissed her daughter's forehead, startling her by the intimacy.

Li Ling saw the distress in her mother's eyes and nodded. She slid down from the stool and made her way to the far corner of the room where a makeshift wooden bed stood. She climbed up the bed, taking care not to disturb her brother, and pulled the thin sheet over herself. She drew her knees to her chest and curled into a tight ball on her side. The wood planks grated hard against her hip. Holding her breath, she settled down quietly to listen. She knew she could hear her parents if she kept absolutely still. There was little privacy in the one room hut.

Ah Lan sat down on the stool and pushed the empty bowls to one side. "Did he specifically mean Li Ling?" she asked lowering her voice to a whisper.

At the other end of the room, Li Ling strained to hear. She clutched the thin sheets even more tightly and raised her head slightly.

“Who else could he mean? It was either you or her. He specifically said it was not you.” He stared at Ah Lan’s face, noting the furrowed forehead and the fine lines radiating from her eyes. Years of squinting against the bright sunshine had transformed the face to one that bore little resemblance to the girl he had married. He had not noticed until the man’s rude comments.

“She is only thirteen. We have been very careful not to take her out beyond our patch of land. Few people have seen her. She has not even been to the market. Only the other day, she begged to accompany me to the village. I was on my way to deliver vegetables to the street vendor. I was tempted to take her with me. My shoulders were sore from carrying the pole with the heavy baskets hanging from each end of it. Even then, I resisted. I have never allowed her to wander out on her own. So how do they know if she is pretty or not?”

Ah Kang shrugged his shoulders. “Our neighbours?” he suggested.

Ah Lan fell silent. It could be, she thought. They might be directing the warlord’s men to us to protect their own family. Would she not have done the same herself?

After a while, she let out a long sigh. While she had repeatedly told Li Ling that a woman should always conform and obey, inwardly she was praying that her daughter could be spared from such a life. She did not wish Li Ling to have a life of drudgery. Yet she did not wish her daughter to be taken as a concubine to a warlord. That too was not a life she wished for her. Her mind raced. She remembered a conversation she had overheard in the market place.

“There is a woman,” she said, her words tripping out of her mouth in fits and starts. “She is a nun, not a temple nun. She is a nun from the foreign she-devil convent. She is a Chinese lady, may God forgive her soul for praying to a foreign god. Nevertheless I hear people say she is a good woman. She is helping women join their husbands and families in a place of opportunity in Southeast Asia. They call it Malaya. They say that women are now allowed to leave China and she is helping to arrange their travel.”

“*Low pob*, old woman,” he repeated emphasising the word old. “How could a woman do all this? Are you sure she is not a man disguised as a woman to lure young females into a life of corruption and decadence, to be sold to whoever can pay the price?”

“Quite the contrary, she is doing this to prevent women from falling into such a trap. She is here to visit her ailing aunt. See for yourself. Go to the market.”

“Then what?” he asked. “What is the point of seeing this nun? Haven’t we enough on our hands?”

“To see if she could help us of course,” Ah Lan retorted, exasperated by her husband’s slowness. She bowed her head to stop herself from flashing her steely eyes at Ah Kang. “Perhaps, we could all leave for Malaya,” she muttered softly. “At the very least she might be able to help Li Ling.”

“What about the crop? We are already late in our planting.”

“I will stay back to finish off. Li Ling will help me.”

“Don’t place your hopes on foreign nuns. Remember it is the foreign devils that have made our lives miserable. If they had not built their monasteries and convents and taken land from the warlords, there would not be this incessant fighting and the warlords might not have to raise our tithe. They extract from our masters, our masters passed the burden to us.”

“Try for me, for Li Ling at least,” Ah Lan begged.

In the bed at the far side of the room, Li Ling held her breath.

“All right, all right,” she heard her father say with gritted teeth. “In any case, it might not be a bad idea. I could see if we could borrow some money from your brother. He might know of this nun; I’ll ask him.”

wondered at all the fuss. She recalled her own childhood and the thin thatched walls with gaping holes that separated her from her mother's room. Her mother had been very generous with her favours. The uncles that came every day and night were generous in return, sometimes pressing a coin into Aishah's palm or tousling her hair to demonstrate that they extended their affection even to her. Sometimes they sat her on their knees and petted and touched her until her mother pushed her away.

When her mother died, she was bereft. Alone in the hut, some of the uncles came and comforted her and loved her like they did her mother. She did not find it strange. It was no stranger than seeing her mother with these men. That was until Mahmud came along and took over her care. He said he was her uncle. The headman in the village was glad to give her into Mahmud's care. She hated her guardian Mahmud. He wanted her only for himself and he was cruel. She had prayed and hoped that one day she would find a man who would love her like her mother was loved by all those uncles. She thought that she found him in Master Webster. The only obstacle was his wife, Shao Peng.

She went to the window and leaned out to look into the garden below. She wondered if Suet Ping would report what happened to Mistress Rohani. She shrugged her shoulders. After all, she did only what she had been told, which was to explain to Suet Ping about love and how to attract the young master. If Suet Ping couldn't understand what she was saying, it was only logical that she should demonstrate. She reached up and touched her own lips, trailing her fingers down to her breasts. She chuckled. "Such fuss over nothing," she mused.