

# The Lost Daughter of Happiness

Geling Yan

Translated by Cathy Silber

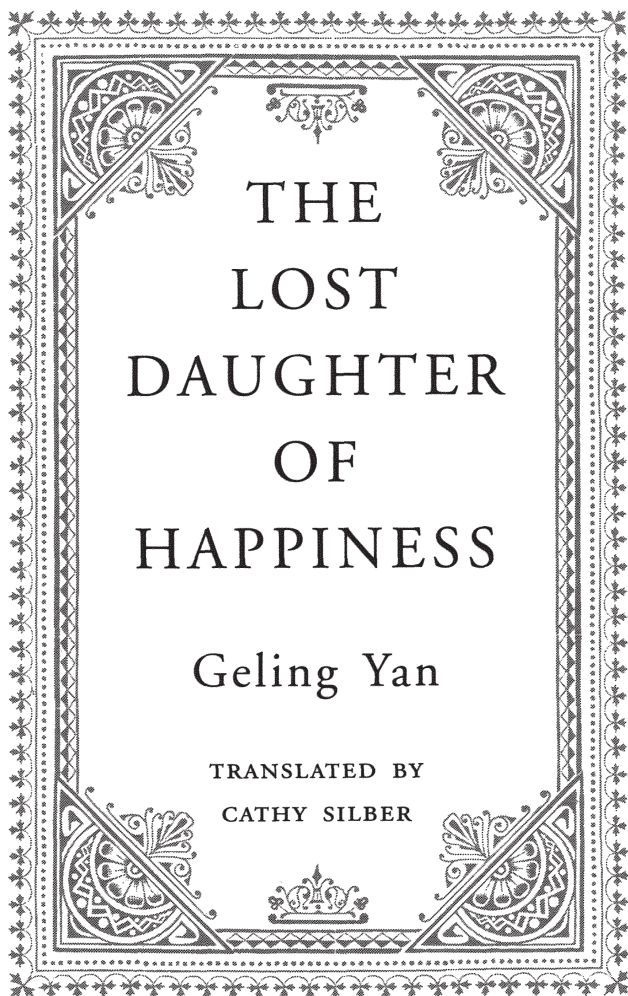
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You're nothing like the other girls on auction. First of all, you lived past twenty. This is a miracle. I looked through all one hundred and sixty of those books and you were the only one to live so long. The other girls in your line of work started losing their hair at eighteen, their teeth at nineteen, and by twenty, with their vacant eyes and decrepit faces, they were as good as dead, silent as dust.

But you're *nothing* like them.

Don't be so eager to show off your feet. I know they're less than four inches long: two mummified magnolia buds. I'll let you show them later. After all, you're not like that woman who lived at 129 Clay Street from 1890 to 1940 and made her living putting her four-inch golden lotuses on display. Several thousand tourists a day would shuffle reverently past her door, looking at the way her dead toes had been broken clean under and now curled into the soles of her feet. Most of them came from the more genteel East Coast, though some even came from the other side of the Atlantic, just to pay homage to a vestige of antiquity on a real live body. In the deformity and decay of those feet, they could read the *Orient*.

I know who you were: a twenty-year-old prostitute, one of a succession of three thousand prostitutes from China. When you stepped upon these golden shores, you were a fully grown woman. You had no skills, no seductive charms, not a trace of lust in your eyes. People could sense your distinctive simplicity the moment they met

you. In an instant, you could make any man feel as if it were his wedding night.

So you were a born prostitute, a good-as-new bride.

On a summer day in the late 1860s, there's a rather large girl standing in a barred window on a narrow lane in San Francisco's Chinatown, and that's you.

You have a strange name: Fusang. You're not from the Canton delta, so your price is 30 percent higher than those girls with names like Pearl, Silky, or Snapper, who had a hard time proving themselves unsullied by foreign sailors on shore.

Now look at me, a writer here in the late twentieth century. You want to know whether the same thing brought me to Gold Mountain. I've never known what made me take that stride across the Pacific. We've all got ready answers—that we came for freedom, knowledge, wealth—but really we have no idea what we're after.

Some call us fifth-wave Chinese immigrants.

You're wondering why I singled you out. You don't know that foreign historians wrote about you in these one hundred and sixty histories of the Chinese in San Francisco that no one else has bothered to read. These writers are totally serious when they say things like: "When the famous, or perhaps we should say infamous, Chinese prostitute Fusang appeared in all her finery, gentlemen were so stirred they could not help but doff their hats to her." And: "The consensus on this Chinese prostitute, considered such an anomaly, confirmed that she was

essentially the same as her Western counterparts and showed no anatomical abnormalities.”

You know I too am auctioning you.

You turn around again, and now I see the huge bun at the back of your head, with a hairpin of white jade and a garland of pink silk flowers starting behind your left ear and looped down around half the bun. Several years from now, the depths of this bun will hide a brass button belonging to Chris, that white boy.

The first time he saw you, when he first thought of buying your services, he was only twelve.

Let’s take a look at you from the very beginning. Very good: The hazy distance between us has thinned and all of a sudden you’re right here.

Your fourteen-year-old colleagues instructed you to “market” yourself: If you don’t get work, Fusang, you won’t get supper and you’ll be whipped naked. Your juniors in the field considered you worthless—you didn’t know how to sell yourself; you didn’t know how to make eyes at the men outside the window.

The histories describe this marketing in detail: “Chinese prostitutes employed their own unique ways of attracting customers: ‘Nice Chinese girl, hey mister, come on in and see, your daddy he just go out! . . .’ ‘Two bittee lookee, fol bittee feelee, six bittee doee! . . .’ ‘Chinese girly, fresh off boat, good girly, only thirty cent! . . .’ Every now and then, moved by such explicit language and cheap prices, someone would

turn back, pause, and pick out one of those children, one much like the next.”

You didn't hawk yourself. Whenever a man looked at you, you smiled at him, hesitantly at first, and then so wholeheartedly you made him feel you were wild about him and perfectly content with your life.

It was probably your smile that made these men realize you were no ordinary goods. Someone slows before your window. Bigger and taller than most, you rise from the creaky bamboo bed. The slight delay in your movements makes you seem almost dignified.

People could forget for a moment that you were a caged prostitute for sale.

This is what you were like when you first arrived in San Francisco. I certainly won't let people confuse you with any of the other three thousand whores from China.

EVENING FOG CAME ASHORE from the sea, dampening the dirt on the streets, growing heavier, settling. The dust that caught in Fusang's throat was no longer coming in the window.

A bit cold, a bit tired, a bit hungry, she was watching the buggy lanterns jouncing along.

Next door was fourteen-year-old Doughface, whose voice by now was as hoarse as the sound of ripping cloth. Three little white devils walked by, no more than eleven or twelve. Hearing Doughface call out, they pressed their

dirty fingers to their throats to mimic her voice, the sound of their laughter like paper rattling in the wind.

Doughface tried again, Hurry up, come on in, your daddy he just go out!

The little white devils tore open their shirts like brutes, exposing their funny-looking navels. They begged her to unbutton her blouse.

She dickered over the price while fanning her collar open and shut. Her breasts looked like two swollen mosquito bites. She wasn't terribly pretty to begin with and the pockmarks on her face were as deep as raindrops in sand.

Her bamboo bed started singing, creaking out a rhythm. She would eat tonight.

Fusang left the window. The room was so small that with only four steps she had reached the curtain on the other side, where several flies hung, too cold to move. The flowers embroidered on the curtain had not yet faded. She lifted the curtain, with its filth and red flowers and green leaves and flies, stepped inside, raised and secured her skirt, and lowered herself over the copper chamber pot.

The water in the wash basin beside the chamber pot was still clean—no customers. All the prostitutes here told Fusang, You've got to wash yourself as soon as the john leaves, or else you'll stink to high heaven.

On a little bamboo stand were soap, face powder, and rouge. Fusang rubbed a little rouge on her lips. She liked the fruit-sweet taste.



Amah, the madam, pushed open the door and entered, calling to Fusang in a voice as burnt as dregs of cooking fat. Amah Mei carried around a big brass kettle all day, pouring fresh water into the wash basins in every room.

Fusang got up from the chamber pot, a little sorry to leave the circle of warmth she'd made while sitting there.

Amah, parting the curtain with her backside, poured some water into the basin and said, Still no customers? I keep forking out for your rice and salt fish, and what do I get in return? She raised her eyebrows and sighed with a smile at Fusang. What's the matter? You got a lump of gold in your mouth? Afraid it'll fall out if you talk?

Fusang smiled back and said nothing.

At midnight, take off your clothes and wait in my room. The boss wants to give you a good beating. You hear me?

Fusang said she heard.

Don't forget to fasten your hair up tight, Amah continued. Don't let him pull your hair. Once he pulls a girl's hair, he's an addict. He can't stop beating her. He loses track of how much he's beaten her. He'll beat her to death and not even know it.

I won't forget.

Your hair is so thick, Amah said. What a great head of hair—you go through three ounces of my hair oil a day. Hey, what are you crying about?

Nothing, nothing, Fusang said, shaking her head. I'm just hungry.

No you're not. When you're hungry you can't pee and I just heard you take a long one.

Fusang wanted to ask Amah for some better sandalwood incense, but the sound of Doughface seeing off her john distracted her.

Amah said, You've got to do a better job. You're already twenty. Other girls are household names by your age. If you don't get a customer soon, I'm selling you off next month and that's all there is to it.

WHIPPED, AND THEN SALVED, Fusang walked slowly down the dark hall toward the faint yellow light. When she reached the third door, she relaxed a bit. Her lash wounds were starting to cool off. She entered the dining room, which contained a big table with sixteen chairs. The table had been cleared, though here and there a fish bone or scrap of vegetable stuck to its surface. A boiled fleshy fish head, big as a piglet's, lay in an earthenware pot. Deep red blood still clung to its lips.

Fusang wondered if Amah had been serious when she'd said she'd sell her. After all, she was willing to part with such a big fish head for her. Fusang shooed a few cockroaches from beneath the lip of the pot, sat down, took her feet from beneath her skirt, and rested them on the chair across from her.

She broke the fish head open and lifted it piece by piece into her mouth.

Suddenly, Amah shouted from the hall, Fusang, you've got a customer!

She answered her, then pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat from the tip of her nose. She heard Amah shout, Fusang, can't you hear me when I'm calling you? What've you been doing, stuffing food in your ears?

Fusang got up and answered more loudly as she re-adjusted her skirt and walked toward her room.

She was flustered and glad, almost skipping. She'd been waiting for a customer for a whole month and now that he was here, shouldn't she be flustered and glad?

When she reached her room, she jumped back in shock, figuring she must have barged through the wrong door. Four red candles were burning and wisps of top-grade sandalwood incense smoke were circling into a net, weaving into a curtain, the fragrance so heavy she squinted.

Tongues of candle flame shimmered and the golden-red space of the whole room turned unstable. Fusang thought Amah must like her after all, to part with such good candles and incense.

She faced the mirror, her cheeks aflame. She tidied her forelocks with her comb, then flung it down with a clatter, grabbed the flowers and stuck them into her hair. What would her first man be like? She didn't dare turn around. Mangy? Crippled? One-eyed? Harelipped? As she started to smile, the door pushed open with a creak.

Quietly, he stepped in.

Fusang saw him in the mirror. She bit her lip so hard she swallowed some rouge.

He didn't even smile. He just stood there in the doorway, watching her get up from her stool. He stared at her with disbelief.

Fusang quickly sized him up. He wasn't much shorter than she was, the top of his head coming up to her ears, but the contours of his face were still childlike, so he seemed shorter and smaller.

She didn't know that countless times this boy had hidden in the shadows of walls and trees to watch her. She was the strangest thing he'd ever seen. Her every movement made him bite his thumb to the point of pain.

She didn't know that he used a little round mirror to savor every part of her. He had learned as a child to use this mirror to capture any scene in the world as his own, however momentary, private possession.

As far as Fusang was concerned, he was just a boy, another little white devil not much different from Dough-face's johns. Still, she made up her mind to give him good service.

She took off the padded jacket that must have consumed ten catties of silk floss. This was the only such jacket in the whole brothel, given to each girl to wear with her first customer.

Chris, the boy said. My name is Christopher. Call me Chris. He forced his voice to sound rough and low to make himself seem an old hand at this.

Fusang said with a curtsy, My name is Fusang.

He had found out her name a long time ago.

Fusang went on to say, Please have a seat, have some tea, will you be staying the night, sir? She knew a total of twenty words in English.

His eyes wide with wonder, Chris took in the furnishings of the room.

The curling incense smoke made their shabbiness seem appropriate.

She brought over a pot of freshly brewed tea and a plate of roasted watermelon seeds dyed the color of blood. These were the usual refreshments. They rarely served alcohol because it led to violence and the woman was left beaten to a pulp and useless.

The table was covered with a tablecloth. The two bamboo chairs, one on each side, had embroidered cushions on their seats, gray cotton stuffing showing through the worn corners. Across from the table was a bamboo bed, above which hung a pink bed curtain, though the wrinkled parts were no longer pink but stained a yellowish gray by incense smoke. The walls were also painted pink and they too were smoke-stained. Chris could not conceal the curiosity in his eyes—that invasive curiosity of twelve-year-old boys.

Fusang poured the tea. The glugging sound made the boy turn to look at her.

She tilted her head as she poured and her earrings ducked and trembled as if afflicted with a painful itch. As

she turned to smile at him, the tea missed the cup. The silvery smoke made her seem very far away.

Fusang sat down, adjusted her skirt, and propped one tiny pointed red foot on top of the other.

Chris had no trouble keeping his eyes on those feet. All the legends about them were now proven, right before his very eyes. Such deformed yet beautiful things really did exist!

Still in shock, he sat down and lifted his cup. He just kept looking at her.

Twisting open the button loop at her collar, Fusang asked him again if he was staying the night.

He said he wasn't. He was looking at the opening in her worn silk blouse. Such delicate skin. Her hand continued on down, undoing buttons. Suddenly she stopped, seeing him pulling back his tongue, scalded by the tea. She reached over to take the cup and began to blow on the tea.

Chris had never seen such a thing. Her pursed lips and lowered lashes lent her face all the gentleness of a mother. Her translucent silk blouse shimmered with every breath she blew. The candlelight accentuated the shapes and movements of the body underneath. She bent her neck, tilted the cup, and touched her lips briefly to the surface of the tea. And then she wiped her lips with the back of one hand and returned the cup to him with the other. She barely smiled.

He was sure he'd never seen a woman do such things

before. He just stared. He couldn't figure out what made her movements so tempting—such a new and different temptation.

Fusang waited a moment, with a fairly good idea of what he was going through. She crossed the room and trimmed a candle wick that didn't need it. Then, instead of returning to her seat, she walked over and stood before him. Her smile wasn't the sort she'd ordinarily give a twelve-year-old boy. As if a boy his age deserved such a smile, such wholehearted anticipation.

Chris didn't move. She was standing two feet in front of him, making it so easy for him, yet he didn't move. He felt her hand coming toward him and stop on his shoulder. He felt her full round breasts rise in expectation. And he couldn't move.

At this point, Fusang resorted to saying the dirtiest English words she knew. Her lips and tongue struggled with the earnestness of her effort to make each sound. She said these words with complete sincerity.

They lost their meanings instantly. The heart behind the words was so innocent that each syllable became something entirely unfamiliar. The effect was enchanting.

She massaged his earlobes with her fingers, earlobes as tender as tiny buds, so soft her heart trembled.

She really wasn't much taller than he was; she just seemed to be because her body was so developed. When she embraced him, his lips reached her face easily.

Smiling, she pulled away, walked over to the dressing

table, and removed her earrings, bracelets, necklace, and hairpins. To Chris, these trinkets brought to mind all the mysteries of the Orient and the ornate intricacies of antiques. Finally, her black hair fell like water, as black and impenetrable as the sky before time began.

She sat down on the bamboo bed, which creaked with her weight, and smoothed the sheet beside her.

The role of the bed suddenly dawned on Chris. The whole filthy building was filled with the banging and creaking of those beds. He got a good look at Fusang's feet. She had taken off her red shoes and then the semi-sheer pink stockings with two tiny holes in them.

She slowly moved her feet to the edge of the bed.

Chris couldn't believe they were real. He moved closer to them. They seemed to belong to a stage of evolution no one had ever imagined. Unaware of what he was doing, he knelt beside the bed and reached out and touched them. They looked like fishtails—the most sensitive, vulnerable part. How could they be feet? He kept his touch extremely light, afraid they would melt and die.

Fusang had arranged her hair, and was watching him, her whole body ready.

He suddenly smiled. The smile of a boy who thinks he's gotten to the bottom of a big mystery.

Amah yelled from the doorway, Excuse me, sir, are you planning to stay the night?

YOU HAD THOUGHT OF EVERYTHING: mangy, crippled, one-eyed. But you were shocked when you turned to the



creaking door. You never imagined such a little kid. You bit your lip, bit the sharp sweetness of rouge. The twelve-year-old John had come in.

You could tell he'd dressed up; he wore a gold chain on his vest, a handkerchief in his breast pocket, and his straw-colored hair was slicked back with so much oil that it looked like a cap. You saw right through him from the start. Twelve, tops. Even being white couldn't help disguise his age. The curiosity in his pale blue eyes was almost cruel. Such curiosity is only found in boys that age.

It's hard to say what he looked like. All boys have the same vaguely shaped mouth. From suckling at the breast to sucking hard candy, certain instincts remain on the lips. This was the mouth that fed his ravenous curiosity: a mouth in transition, a mouth that devoured so many fairy tales and adventure stories. You were his fairy tale. Your cavelike room was a distant kingdom, and your every movement had magical powers. The *Orient*—the word alone was enough to become the origin of all mysteries, at least as far as this twelve-year-old boy was concerned.

Once you got over your shock, you pretended you couldn't tell how young he was. You wouldn't cut a single corner with him, you decided. You smiled at him as if he were a man every bit your match. You never thought of him as just one of the hundreds of little white devils who came to the Chinatown brothels looking for cheap thrills.

Let me tell you about that: In a single year, over two thousand white boys between the ages of eight and fourteen entertained themselves with Chinese prostitutes. One of my books calls it “a most unusual social phenomenon. . . a contagion running rampant through morality and decency. . . Fifty percent of the boys visited Chinese brothels on a regular basis, and ninety percent used their lunch money or candy allowance. . . .”

I’m looking at you in the candlelight. There’s nothing cheap about you, even though all my sources keep insisting the “cheapness” of Chinese prostitutes is what attracted white boys. Just the way the cheap restaurants, housewares, and produce of Chinatown today attract penniless new immigrants like me, as well as tourists from all over the world.

Now you are walking step by step toward him, this twelve-year-old white devil named Chris. Your steady step makes you seem big and tall, ripe to the bursting point. Ignored so long, your whole body is expectant, like fruit heavy with juice. You are so ready for the hand that picks you, it doesn’t even matter whose hand it is.

Every woman has her moment of greatest beauty, that point of fullest bloom, and this was yours. Chris saw it. The little john swooned.

His desire for thrills disappeared. His enthusiasm to try out a cheap Chinese whore turned to adoration. The adoration boys all over the world feel for ripe beautiful women. That age-old, predictable adoration.

Nothing could make him brave now, not even the inferiority everyone of his race ascribed to everyone of yours, including you personally. He could no longer muster his bravado. He just stared at you with those blue eyes, watching you cracking melon seeds with your teeth, watching you pour tea for him. And when you cooled his tea, breath by breath, he trembled with longing.

You look in his eyes now. Stop pretending you don't see the soul floating to the surface of that blue. This marks the beginning of the destiny between you.

After that first time, when he'd left so abruptly after only barely touching your feet, he kept coming back to see you. To watch you play the flute or embroider shoes, to watch you crack melon seeds with your teeth or eat fish heads. Every now and then he opened his mouth too, to ask you something about China, and you just smiled. Sometimes he pulled out a pretty pebble or a beetle that changed colors and reverently placed it in your palm. Each time he came, he stayed just a short time, never more than ten minutes. But each time he left, he frowned and said, Wait for me. A worried look came over his face, funny and moving at the same time.

As if he had forgotten what had brought him to you in the first place, he kept postponing the day he would have you as a man did a woman. He never ate his favorite Swiss chocolate right away either; he always saved it for later. He saved anything he loved from his desire, until he couldn't save it any longer.