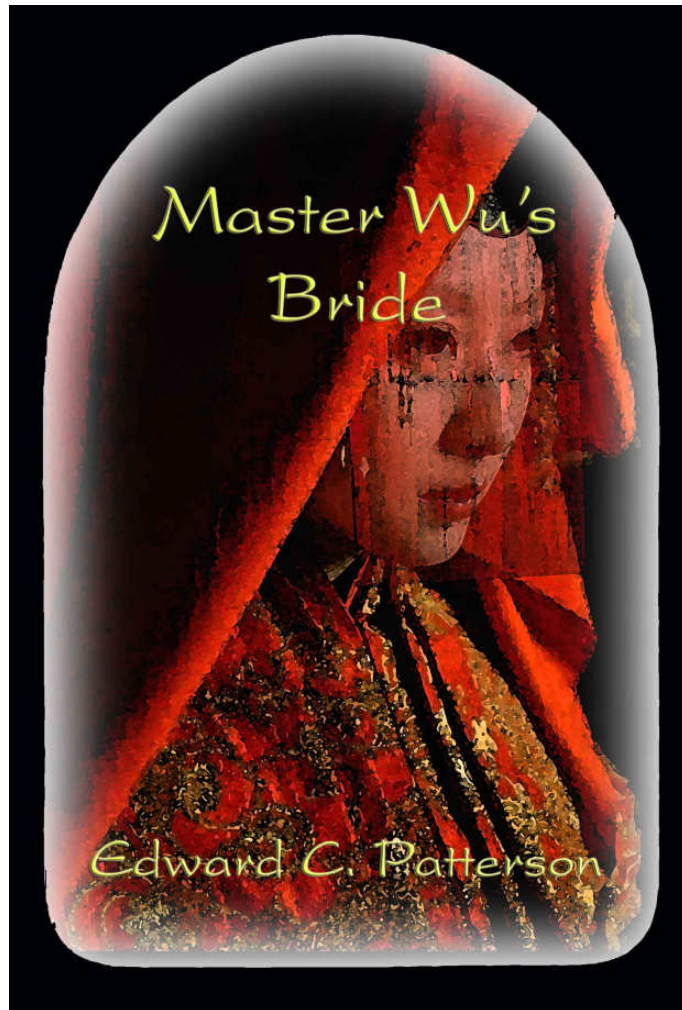




Sample Chapter

Master Wu's Bride

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Chapter One *A Dash in Time*

1

"It is time, mistress," the gruff servant said. "The porters are approaching and you have not even made an effort."

Chi Lin sat beside the courtyard pool, her aging eyes closed, fearing what she might see in the waters if she could stretch so far as to peek. The air was filled with jasmine, the aroma reminding her of the best days, if she could count them. She had sniffed both wonderful scents and more horrid within these walls. The house had been home and prison, but she did not care to distinguish one from the other today.

"Mistress," the gruff servant said again. "Let me prepare you for her coming."

Chi Lin opened her eyes. The sight of her handmaiden, a woman nearly as old as herself, did not favor her today. Still, she knew she had to prepare. It was a duty and a privilege. But she preferred to sit by the pool catching the scant breeze pressing a promise across her canyoned cheeks. She stirred, but stopped short of standing. She reached into the pool, brushing the surface. Her hand jostled a lotus blooming above a swollen *koi*, her fingers trying to recall another pool, a dream of days past. She dared to take a peek, her rugged reflection rippled, hinting at younger days and a better complexion, despite the layers that painted her now. She shivered, but in that recall she eased to dreams of long ago, separating her from dark days — days of toil and fearful nights; and yet it was in this place, not far from the lotus pool that her hardships had blossomed. Now her fingers broke the surface sending ripples to the *koi* and sweet tidings to the lotus.

"The duck pond," she murmured.

"Again the pond," Mi Tso-tze said. "No time for it, mistress. No time."

Chi Lin shook her head. She closed her eyes again, recalling another reflection beside another pool — her father's duck pond, no *koi* nor flowers, but the tingle of minnows and an old catfish lurking on the bottom. There she would come and watch the moon's reflection as it set, and then waited for the sun's face to shine again. Then it was not a vigil, but a dash in time, between her studies and her chores, when she fretted on the departure from her father's house and her golden fate in a rich neighbor's estate — the House of Wu.

"Do not sleep, mistress," Mi Tso-tze nagged. "The priest will scowl."

"Let him scowl," Chi Lin muttered. "Let him wait. He has waited before."

"When?"

"Ah, yes. Before you had entered my service."

Chi Lin could hear Mi Tso-tze chuff, but ignored her. She remembered the time beside the duck pond and in the barnyard. She missed her mother, who had taught her to play the lute and to sing ballads to the moon. On the banks of the *Ti-shui*, her mother had sat beside her and her sister Chi Tsai and contradicted the world, telling her daughters tales of women who changed their times. Beyond Chi Lin's father's house the world was stern and regulated. The Ming dynasts poked their fingers in every *mu* of land. Wars ensued, breaking the old order — a barbarian order. Now warlords became ministers and a bandit became the Emperor. The era of Hung Wu had been proclaimed and a new order stalked the land. Chi Lin's father, Chi Ming, was called into service and serve he did — and long. But now the old scholar retired to his books and paintings, teaching his son the character forms. Chi Ming the scholar believed his daughters could master such things as *the Spring and Autumn Annals* and *The Book of Odes*. He encouraged their curiosity, despite the bans. But Chi Ming's only son was cripple-born and could not contribute much to the household. Heaven had cursed the scholar with two daughters, whom Chi Ming prized above all.

"Do not sleep, mistress," the gruff servant said. "It is time. The porters are approaching and you have not even made an effort."

Chi Lin snored.

2

"It is time," her sister called. "The porters are approaching and you have not even made an effort."

Chi Lin sat by the duck pond, her hand sweeping the foam, disturbing the frogs. She kept her eyes shut, her sister's voice yet another distraction from sadness. Chi Lin longed for her mother, who was lost to different waters — *the Yellow Springs*. Mother played her lute and told her tales to the ancestors now. Chi Lin thought her mother could have soothed all concerns on this day. No moonrise or sunset reflections could do it. No other family member could.

Sister Chi Tsai was practical, more intent on housework and tending the cowcubers than musing over frogs and minnows. She had had her chance for family honor, but declined the opportunity. It was never discussed. Brother Chi Sheng was kind, but preoccupied with his studies. When asked, he offered kind words and adages from the Classics. As fond as Chi Lin was of the aphorisms of Masters K'ung and Meng, she was stirred more by the poetry of Su Tung-po and Po Chu-yi. When asked, her father provided guidance but only from precedent. But precedent could not console her now, because, when the sun's arc reached the third watch, Chi Lin would retire to the cottage and don the red dress, because today was her wedding day — an act of duty, with dim prospects. This she knew because her future father-in-law had sent a bouquet of *ma-lan* flowers — a dreadful message for any bride. Today, unlike her sister, Chi Lin would bestow honor on her household.

"It is time," her sister called again. "The porters are approaching and you have not even made an effort."

Chi Lin sighed, her hand still wet.

"I wish to stay here and admire the ducks."

"You know that is impossible."

Her sister was dressed in a drab gray robe tied with a plain green sash. She would not attend the wedding today. No need. Such distractions as sisters were superfluous at such events. Chi Tsai hopped along the stone path until she reached the pond. Although a pretty maiden, she scowled now, shaking her head.

"It is a good match for our family. It brings us needed honor."

"But no more than that," Chi Lin snapped. "It also brings a *ma lan* bouquet."

"It is the way with the world. Mother once told us . . ."

"I know that tale. It chills my heart,"

Her sister relented, hunkering down, her scowl easing into a half-smile.

"In a rich household you will have many pretty things and dainty food. You shall sit by your own pool all day and splash the ducks. Perhaps you will be permitted to read between your duties."

"I am not about such things, Chi Tsai. You enjoy tending to things. I am not accustomed to it. If my life will continue as it is here, why should I not remain here?"

"Because the dowry is paid and Master Wu waits."

Chi Lin scowled now. She knew what waited.

"When the chair comes," Chi Lin replied, "fill it with the dowry, but leave this bride behind."

Chi Tsai stood, shaking her fists.

"You have always been as stubborn as an ox. You must do your duty or no house in the county will favor us again with an offer. You shall wither on the vine. I know this too well."

"We shall wither on the vine, sister."

Chi Lin wept, her hand diving into the pond. She felt the minnows kiss her fingers, perhaps trying to console her.

Chi Tsai turned away. Chi Ming approached.

"What is the delay?" he said, approaching cautiously. "Why is the red dress still on the bamboo pole? Why is the veil bundled in the sack?"

"She is as stubborn as an ox, father," Chi Tsai grumbled.

"Ah, my daughters. Do not quarrel over such things as marriage. It is a day for celebration. I lose a daughter and, Heaven should know, I am joyous in that." He looked to the sky and nodded. "Such riddance is a blessing to any father." He then leered at Chi Tsai. "I shall handle this." He then whispered to Chi Lin. "I too am heartbroken at your departure, but let us not give Heaven an excuse to sweep our good fortune away."

Chi Lin knew that fortune had once graced the House of Chi, but the Emperor was as fickle as he was powerful. He had called all his ministers into the Imperial courtyard one day, accused them of ingratitude and had a thousand heads removed on the spot. On that day, Chi Ming was ill and had made an excuse. On the next day, the Emperor had a change of heart and halted the purge. Still, all those who served, served no longer — no longer enjoying Heaven's behest. So Chi Ming retired to this county town and lived on his neighbor's good will.

"I shall obey, father," Chi Lin said, nodding. "But it is unfair."

"It is a woman's lot," her father said. "How bad could it be in the House of Wu, even when they send the *ma-lan* flowers and deck their walls in snowy silk?"

Chi Lin stood, her sister guiding her. Her brother, Chi Sheng, had hobbled across the threshold on his crutch. He rarely emerged from the house, but he was anxious. He would not be going to the wedding either, cousin Chi Fa being sent in his place. His crippled leg prevented his journey and it would be improper for him to be carried in a chair — a blow to his sister's honor.

"They will be here soon," he called. "We should not delay."

Chi Sheng had commanded the house staff to gather the balance of the dowry — a chest of cash, seven goats, three pigs and a fine ox, as well as twelve bolts of finely woven silk. The servants loaded the carts and assembled the livestock. Chi Sheng was efficient, in charge of the household accounts. He assured that the ceremonial incense always burned and the ancestral tablets were properly honored. Now he waved his hand for his sister to hurry. Chi Lin loved her brother, but the circumstance did not capture her sandals with gratitude. Instead, she shuffled to the house setting about her duty with a heavy heart.

3

Beneath the red robe, the bride wore white, a doff to the purple flowers. The silk reminded her of the act's cruelty — the heavy cloth her husband would never see. Quickly Chi Tsai covered the skirts with rich crimson brocade, draped in three layers.

"There, sister," she said. "Only you know that it is there."

"I and *Guan-yin*."

"The goddess knows everything," Chi Tsai said. "You cannot complain to her about such things. She rules your destiny and cannot be bought, no matter how many prayers you make or sticks you burn."

"I do not believe that," Chi Lin said.

"Believe what you will. It does not make it so."

Chi Lin sighed, but received both sisterly chiding and the red blouse as roughly as the rude, white undergarments. She was already hot in this dress and would be hotter still on the road to Yan-

cheng. The salt bogs would fill the air with bitter fragrance to accompany the mosquitoes.

"Must I wear so many layers?"

"Do you wish to void the contract?"

Chi Lin did not, and yet she did. At least, for her part it was void already. But her family depended on this connection. Perhaps her father might find a post in the Ya-men again. It was a daughter's sacrifice, but Chi Lin remembered her mother's words.

"A woman's lot in life is to ease our men folk to positions that will make the ancestors proud and give hope to those who carry the family name."

Suddenly, her brother was on the threshold.

"You are not allowed here," Chi Tsai snapped.

"I do not see why I should not hasten slow women when time is lost on the horizon. The chair has arrived and the drummers too."

Chi Tsai turned on her brother, but did not dare push him. In his unsettled condition, any push might tumble him. Instead, she opened a fan and waved him away.

"He can stay," Chi Lin said. "I will miss him when I am tucked away beneath Master Wu's roof."

"And you will not miss me?" Chi Tsai asked.

"I will. Although I will not miss your rules of order."

"If you have learned nothing else in your *xien* filled life, Chi Lin, you must remember the rules of order. The day tells us where and when we should be, how we should prepare and how we must fulfill."

"No space for idle dreaming?"

"Just so. You have had your days of idle dreaming. Now you must find your way in your husband's household."

For Chi Lin that was like being a flower boat unmoored in a whirlpool. She could not guess the rules of order in such a house — a gentry estate in a busy town. But since she did not die in the night, she guessed *Guan-yin* had decided a daughter must fulfill her role. Fulfill the sacrifice.

The drums beat and a half-dozen *xiao* flutes bleated competing with the goats.

"Let me see," Chi Tsai said, inspecting her sister's face.

The powder had been applied quickly, the eyes given an underscore and the lips a vermilion coat. It would suit. So Chi Tsai hoisted the heavy robe onto her sister's shoulders and tied the sash. The headdress was fitted and the veil prepared.

"Leave it be," Chi Lin said.

"What bride would go out with her face revealed?"

"I would see the sun. I would see our father's face once more."

Chi Tsai hissed, but gave in. She guided Chi Lin over the threshold and through the kitchen. Carefully the bride swept over crockery and dust until she crossed the high threshold barring demons from the inner sanctum. The sun was bright, reflecting her white face like the moon's borrowed light. She squinted. The veil would be a comfort after all. Chi Lin saw her brother inspecting the dowry and paying the musicians. She noticed three bannermen toting red flags to signal the nature of the procession. The animals were restless, except the ox, who winked at her as if he knew nothing more than that he was destined to yet another field or perhaps a roasting pot. The pigs were oblivious. Beside her father stood Cousin Chi Fa, a mature man, who was dressed in his best robes, his sandals tied with yellow ribbons and his hair coiffed in a tight bun, a spatula holding it together. His cap was an old official's bonnet, secondhand, but suitable. Upon seeing Chi Lin, he nodded and pointed to the chair.

The bride's chair was plain and smaller than she expected. Bright red and wrapped in crimson

bunting, it was nothing more than a carry chair lacquered for the occasion. But it would do, she supposed, as long as the porters did not drop her in the road. A makeshift awning covered the vehicle to assure no one saw the bride before the household did. Her father approached.

“Come, come, my daughter. You are as ugly as ever.” He winked, and looked to Heaven. “Was ever a man so cursed? But somehow I will miss you and perhaps I will see you again, if not here for a visit, at the *Yellow Springs* beside your mother’s tablet.”

She gazed into her father’s eyes — eyes dewy. She loved this man, whose kindness and sponsorship gave her the privilege of letters and painting and hours of going beyond what her sister called *the rules of order*. He had forgiven her lapses in mending and cooking and feeding the chickens. Perhaps her brother’s ailment had allowed her a special place. But that place now evaporated like the water in the salt marshes that hugged Ting-hu Prefecture’s monopoly. She saw those salt marshes in her father’s eyes. She bowed.

“Now, now, daughter,” her father said. “You will be a mistress in a great house. No need to bow to me. True, I am your father. True, you owe me much. But you have paid me well with smiles and giggles and hugs.”

He turned away and disappeared over the high threshold.

“No time for sentiment,” Chi Tsai snapped.

She had not noticed her sister’s presence. She thought Chi Tsai had drifted off to feed the pigs. But Chi Lin realized she would also miss the nattering of this constant in her life. Suddenly, the world was red, the sun dimmed by the heavy brocaded veil. She could not see to get to the chair, but a hand touched hers.

“Thank you, brother,” she said.

“It is me,” came a voice. “Chi Fa. I hope the feast will not be curtailed because of your *ma-lan* bouquet. In times like these, they withhold the full feast and make do with cold gruel and scallions.”

“If it does not suit, cousin,” Chi Lin replied. “I am sure you can return here and kill a pig.”

“Yes,” Chi Fa laughed. “Yes, that would do. Not that I think the Wu family would cause an insult to the Chi or risk endangering the contract. The dowry is handsome. But you never know with the press of taxes and the squeeze of the magistrate. There are always concessions. Always concessions.”

Chi Lin took Chi Fa’s hand and trusted that he could deliver her safely into the chair. His words lay heavy on her heart, as heavy as the *ma-lan* bouquet, which she had thrown in the wood pile behind the mulberry shack. Still, there were always concessions and when her foot engaged the marriage chair, Chi Lin was making hers.

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Author Edward C. Patterson has been writing novels, short fiction, poetry and drama his entire life, always seeking the emotional core of any story he tells. He has currently 30 published books. He is known for spinning magical and fantasy yarns grounded in history and favors epic tales revealed in books series. His flagship works are The Jade Owl Legacy Series, The Southern Swallow Series, The Farn Trilogy and the Nick Firestone Mysteries.

In many of Patterson's novels, he combines an imaginative touch with his life long devotion to China and its history, having earned an MA in Chinese History from Brooklyn College with further postgraduate work at Columbia University. This background is the cornerstone for The Jade Owl Legacy, The Southern Swallow Series and Master Wu's Bride, works drawing on Sung and Ming Dynasty History and Culture. History has played a major part in the coming of age tale Little Vin at Dreamland.

Patterson's military experience is reflected in such works as Surviving an American Gulag, The Road to Grafenwoehr and Pacific Crimson - Forget Me Not. His gay life-way and work in diversity is reflected in his novellas No Irish Need Apply, Cutting the Cheese, Bobby's Trace and Mother Asphodel; and in larger works - Turning Idolater and Look Away Silence.

A native of Brooklyn, NY, Patterson has spent over five decades as a soldier in the corporate world gaining insight into the human condition. He won the Year 2000 New Jersey Minority Achiever Award for his work in corporate diversity and is a proud U S Army Veteran of the Vietnam Era. Blending world travel experiences with a passion for story telling, Patterson's adventures continue as he works to permeate his reader's souls from an indelible wellspring.

His novel No Irish Need Apply was named Book of the Month for June 2009 by Booz Allen Hamilton's Diversity Reading Organization. His Novel The Jade Owl was a finalist for The 2009 Rainbow Awards.

Edward C. Patterson is the proud founder of Operation eBook Drop which, in its heyday, distributed over a million eBooks to deployed Armed Forces members from over 2,000 independent authors. He has guest blogged extensively and has appeared on the Bobby Ozuna - Soul of Humanity Show. He is also proud of his Cherokee heritage, knows seven languages (including Cherokee) and is a contributing member of the ACLU.

“The little voice from between the lines can become a lion's roar, one listener at a time.”

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