

POCKETFUL OF DHARMA

By Paolo Bacigalupi

WANG JUN STOOD ON THE rain-slicked streets of old Chengdu and stared up into the drizzle at Huojianzhu.

It rose into the evening darkness, a massive city core, dwarfing even Chengdu's skyscrapers. Construction workers dangled from its rising skeleton, swinging from one section of growth to the next on long rappelling belts. Others clambered unsecured, digging their fingers into the honeycomb structure, climbing the struts with careless dangerous ease. Soon the growing core would overwhelm the wet-tiled roofs of the old city. Then Huojianzhu, the Living Architecture, would become Chengdu entirely.

It grew on lattices of minerals, laying its own skeleton and following with cellulose skin. Infrastructure strong and broad, growing and branching, it settled roots deep into the green fertile soil of the Sichuan basin. It drew nutrients and minerals from the soil and sun, and the water of the rancid Bing Jiang; sucking at pollutants as willingly as it ate the sunlight which filtered through twining sooty mist.

Within, its veins and arteries grew pipelines to service the waste and food and data needs of its coming occupants. It was an animal vertical city built first in the fertile minds of the Biotects and now growing into reality. Energy pulsed from the growing creature. It would stand a kilometer high and five wide when fully mature. A vast biologic city, which other than its life support would then lie dormant as humanity walked its hollowed arteries, clambered through its veins and nailed memories to its skin in the rituals of habitation.

Wang Jun watched Huojianzhu and dreamed in his small beggar-boy mind of ways and means that might lead him out of the wet streets and hunger and into its comforts. Already sections of it glowed with habitation. People, living high and far above him, roamed the organism's corridors. Only the powerful and wealthy would live so high above. Those with guanxi. Connections. Influence.

His eyes sought the top of the core, through the darkness and rain and mist, but it disappeared long before his eyes could find it. He wondered if the people up high saw the stars while he saw only drizzle. He had heard that if one cut Huojianzhu, its walls would bleed. Some said it cried. He shivered at the rising creature and turned his eyes back to earth to continue pushing with his stick-thin limbs and bent posture through the Chengdu crowds.

Commuters carried black umbrellas or wore blue and yellow plastic ponchos to protect them from the spitting rain. His own hair lay soaked, slicked to the contours of his skull. He shivered and cast about himself, seeking hard for likely marks, so that he nearly tripped over the Tibetan.

The man squatted on the wet pavement with clear plastic covering his wares. Soot and sweat grimed his face, so that his features sheened black and sticky under the harsh halogen glare of the street lamps. The warped and jagged stumps of his teeth showed as he smiled. He pulled a desiccated tiger claw from under the plastic and waved it in Wang Jun's face.

"You want tiger bones?" He leered. "Good for virility."

Wang Jun stopped short before the waving amputated limb. Its owner was long dead so that only the sinews and ragged fur and the bone remained, dried and stringy. He stared at the relic and reached out to touch the jerky tendons and wickedly curving yellowed claws.

The Tibetan jerked it away and laughed again. There was a tarnished silver ring on his finger, studded with chunks of turquoise; a snake twining around his finger and swallowing its tail endlessly.

"You can't afford to touch." He ground phlegm and spit on the pavement beside him, leaving a pool of yellow mucus shot through with the black texturing of Chengdu's air.

"I can," said Wang Jun.

"What have you got in your pockets?"

Wang Jun shrugged and the Tibetan laughed. "You have nothing, you stunted little boy. Come back when you've got something in your pockets."

He waved his goods of virility at the interested, more moneyed buyers who had gathered. Wang Jun slipped back into the crowd.

It was true what the Tibetan said. He had nothing in his pockets. He had a ratted wool blanket hidden in a Stone-Ailixin cardboard box, a broken VTOL Micro-Machine, and a moldering yellow woolen school hat.

He had come from the green-terraced hills of the countryside with less than that. Already twisted and scarred with the passage of plague, he had come to Chengdu with empty hands and empty pockets and the recollections of a silent dirt village where no thing lived. His body carried recollections of pain so deep that it remained permanently crouched in a muscular memory of that agony.

He had had nothing in his pockets then and he had nothing in his pockets now. It might have bothered him if he had ever known anything but want. Anything but hunger. He could resent the Tibetan's dismissal no more than he might resent the neon logos which hung from the tops of towers and illuminated the pissing rain with

flashing reds, yellows, blues, and greens. Electric colors filled the darkness with hypnotic rhythms and glowing dreams. Red Pagoda Cigarettes, Five Star Beer, Shizi Jituan Software, and Heaven City Banking Corporation. Confucius Jiajiu promised warm rice wine comfort while JinLong Pharmaceuticals guaranteed long life, and it all lay beyond him.

He hunkered in a rain-slicked doorway, with his twisted bent back and empty pockets and emptier stomach and wide-open eyes looking for the mark who would feed him tonight. The glowing promises hung high above him, more connected to those people who lived in the skyscrapers: people with cash and officials in their pockets. There was nothing up there he knew or understood. He coughed, and cleared the black mucus from his throat. The streets, he knew. Organic rot and desperation, he understood. Hunger, he felt rumbling in his belly.

He watched covetously as people walked past and he called out to them in a polyglot of Mandarin, Chengdu dialect, and the only English words he knew, "Give me money. Give me money." He tugged at their umbrellas and yellow ponchos. He stroked their designer sleeves and powdered skin until they relented and gave money. Those who broke away, he spat upon. The angry ones who seized him, he bit with sharp yellow teeth.

Foreigners were few now in the wet. Late October hurried them homeward, back to their provinces, homes, and countries. Leaner times lay ahead, lean enough that he worried about his future and counted the crumpled paper the people threw to him. He held tight the light aluminum jiao coins people tossed. The foreigners always had paper money and often gave, but they grew too few.

He scanned the street, then picked at a damp chip of concrete on the ground. In Huojianzhu, it was said, they used no concrete to build. He wondered what the floors would feel like, the walls. He dimly remembered his home from before he came to Chengdu, a house made of mud, with a dirt floor. He doubted the city core was made of the same. His belly grew emptier. Above him, a video loop of Lu Xieyan, a Guangdong singer, exhorted the people on the street to strike down the Three Wrongs of Religion: Dogmatism, Terrorism, and Splittism. He ignored her screeching indictments and scanned the crowds again.

A pale face bobbed in the flow of Chinese. A foreigner, but he was a strange one. He neither pushed ahead with a purpose, nor gawked about himself at Chengdu's splendors. He seemed at home on the alien street. He wore a black coat which stretched to the ground. It was shiny, so it reflected the reds and blues of neon, and the flash of the street lamps. The patterns were hypnotic.

Wang Jun slid closer. The man was tall, two meters high, and he wore dark glasses so that his eyes were hidden. Wang Jun recognized the glasses and was sure the man saw clearly from behind the inky ovals. Microfibers in the lenses stole the light and amplified and smoothed it so that the man saw day, even as he hid his eyes

from others in the night.

Wang Jun knew the glasses were expensive and knew Three-Fingers Gao would buy them if he could steal them. He watched the man and waited as he continued up the street with his assured, arrogant stride. Wang Jun trailed him, stealthy and furtive. When the man turned into an alley and disappeared, Wang Jun rushed to follow.

He peeked into the alley's mouth. Buildings crowded the passageway's darkness. He smelled excrement and dead things moldering. He thought of the Tibetan's tiger claw, dried and dead, with pieces nicked away from the bone and tendons where customers had selected their weight of virility. The foreigner's footsteps echoed and splashed in the darkness; the even footsteps of a man who saw in the dark. Wang Jun slid in after him, crouching and feeling his way blindly. He touched the roughness of the walls. Instant concrete. Stroking the darkness, he followed the receding footsteps.

Whispers broke the dripping stillness. Wang Jun smiled in the darkness, recognizing the sound of a trade. Did the foreigner buy girls? Heroin? So many things for a foreigner to buy. He settled still, to listen.

The whispers grew heated and terminated in a brief yelp of surprise. Someone gagged and then there was a rasping and a splash. Wang Jun trembled and waited, as still as the concrete to which he pressed his body.

The words of his own country echoed, "Kai deng ba." Wang Jun's ears pricked at a familiar accent. A light flared and his eyes burned under the sharp glare. When his sight adjusted he stared into the dark eyes of the Tibetan street hawker. The Tibetan smiled slowly showing the encrustations of his teeth and Wang Jun stumbled back, seeking escape.

The Tibetan captured Wang Jun with hard efficiency. Wang Jun bit at the Tibetan's hands and fought, but the Tibetan was quick and he pressed Wang Jun against the wet concrete ground so that all Wang Jun could see were two pairs of boots; the Tibetan's and a companion's. He struggled, then let his body lie limp, understanding the futility of defiance.

"So, you're a fighter," the Tibetan said, and held him clown a moment longer to make his lesson clear. Then he hauled Wang Jun upright. His hand clamped painfully at Wang Jun's nape. "NJ shi shei?" he asked.

Wang Jun trembled and whined, "No one. A beggar. No one."

The Tibetan looked more closely at him and smiled. "The ugly boy with the empty pockets. Do you want the tiger's claw after all?"

“I don’t want anything.”

“You will receive nothings” said the Tibetan’s companion. The Tibetan smirked. Wang Jun marked the new speaker as Hunanese by his accent.

The Hunanese asked, “What is your name?”

“Wang Jun.”

“Which ‘Jun’?”

Wang Jun shrugged. “I don’t know.”

The Hunanese shook his head and smiled. “A farmer’s boy,” he said. “What do you plant? Cabbage? Rice?” He laughed. “The Sichuanese are ignorant. You should know how to write your name. I will assume that your ‘Jun’ is for soldier. Are you a soldier?”

Wang Jun shook his head. “I’m a beggar.”

“Soldier Wang, the beggar? No. That won’t do. You are simply Soldier Wang.” He smiled. “Now tell me, Soldier Wang, why are you here in this dangerous dark alley in the rain?”

Wang Jun swallowed. “I wanted the foreigner’s dark glasses.”

“Did you?”

Wang Jun nodded.

The Hunanese stared into Wang Jun’s eyes, then nodded. “All right, Little Wang. Soldier Wang,” he said. “You may have them. Go over there. Take them if you are not afraid.” The Tibetan’s grip relaxed and Wang Jun was free.

He looked and saw where the foreigner lay, face down in a puddle of water. At the Hunanese’s nod, he edged closer to the still body, until he stood above it. He reached down and pulled at the big man’s hair until his face rose dripping from the water, and his expensive glasses were accessible. Wang Jun pulled the glasses from the corpse’s face and laid its head gently back into the stagnant pool. He shook water from the glasses and the Hunanese and Tibetan smiled.

The Hunanese crooked a finger, beckoning.

“Now, Soldier Wang, I have a mission for you. The glasses are your payment. Put them in your pocket. Take this,” a blue datacube appeared in his hand, “and take it to the Renmin Lu bridge across the Bing Jiang. Give it to the person who wears

white gloves. That one will give you something extra for your pocket.” He leaned conspiratorially closer, encircling Wang Jun’s neck and holding him so that their noses pressed together and Wang Jun could smell his stale breath. “If you do not deliver this, my friend will hunt you down and see you die.”

The Tibetan smiled.

Wang Jun swallowed and nodded, closing the cube in his small hand. “Go then, Soldier Wang. Dispense your duty.” The Hunanese released his neck, and Wang Jun plunged for the lighted streets, with the datacube clutched tight in his hand.

The pair watched him run.

The Hunanese said, “Do you think he will survive?”

The Tibetan shrugged. “We must trust that Palden Lhamo will protect and guide him now.” “And if she does not?”

“Fate delivered him to us. Who can say what fate will deliver him.? Perhaps no one will search a beggar child. Perhaps we both will be alive tomorrow to know.”

“Or perhaps in another turning of the Wheel.”

The Tibetan nodded.

“And if he accesses the data?”

The Tibetan sighed and turned away. “Then that too will be fate. Come, they will be tracking us.”

THE BING JIANG ran like an oil slick under the bridge, black and sluggish. Wang Jun perched on the bridge’s railings soot-stained stone engraved with dragons and phoenixes cavorting through clouds. He looked down into the river and watched styrofoam shreds of packing containers float lazily on the thick surface of the water. Trying to hit a carton, he hawked phlegm and spat. He missed, and his mucus joined the rest of the river’s effluent. He looked at the cube again. Turning it in his hands as he had done several times before as he waited for the man with the white gloves. It was blue, with the smoothness of all highly engineered plastics. Its texture reminded him of a tiny plastic chair he had once owned. It had been a brilliant red but smooth like this. He had begged for it until a stronger boy took it.

Now he turned the blue cube in his hands, stroking its surface and probing its black data jack with a speculative finger. He wondered if it might be more valuable than the glasses he now wore. Too large for his small head, they kept slipping down off his nose. He wore them anyway, delighted by the novelty of day-sight in

darkness. He pushed the glasses back up on his nose and turned the cube again.

He checked for the man with white gloves and saw none. He turned the cube in his hands. Wondering what might be on it that would kill a foreigner.

The man with white gloves did not come.

Wang Jun coughed and spit again. If the man did not come before he counted ten large pieces of styrofoam, he would keep the cube and sell it.

Twenty styrofoam pieces later, the man with white gloves had not come, and the sky was beginning to lighten. Wang Jun stared at the cube. He considered throwing it in the water. He waited as nongmin began filtering across the bridge with their pull-carts laden with produce. Peasants coming in from the countryside, they leaked into the city from the wet fertile fields beyond, with mud between their toes and vegetables on their backs. Dawn was coming. Huojianzhu glistened, shining huge and alive against a lightening sky. He coughed and spit again and hopped off the bridge. He dropped the datacube in a ragged pocket. The Tibetan wouldn't be able to find him anyway.

Sunlight filtered through the haze of the city. Chengdu absorbed the heat. Humidity oozed out of the air, a freak change in temperature, a last wave of heat before winter came on. Wang Jun sweated. He found Three-Fingers Gao in a game room. Gao didn't really have three fingers. He had ten, and he used them all as he controlled a three-dimensional soldier through the high mountains of Tibet against the rebellion. He was known in Chengdu's triad circles as the man who had made TexTel's Chief Rep pay 10,000 yuan a month in protection money until he rotated back to Singapore. Because of the use of three fingers.

Wang Jun tugged Three-Fingers's leather jacket. Distracted, Three-Fingers died under an onslaught of staff-wielding monks.

He scowled at Wang Jun. "What?"

"I got something to sell."

"I don't want any of those boards you tried to sell me before. I told you, they're no good without the hearts."

Wang Jun said, "I got something else."

"What?"

He held out the glasses and Three-Fingers's eyes dilated. He feigned indifference. "Where did you get those?"

"Found them."

“Let me see.”

Wang Jun released them to Three-Fingers reluctantly. Three-Fingers put them on, then took them off and tossed them back at Wang Jun. “I’ll give you twenty for them.” He turned back to start another game.

“I want one hundred.”

“Mei me’er.” He used Beijing slang. No way. He started the game. His soldier squatted on the plains, with snowy peaks rising before him. He started forward, pushing across short grasses to a hut made of the skin of earlier Chinese soldiers. Wang Jun watched and said, “Don’t go in the hut.”

“I know.”

“I’ll take fifty.”

Three-Fingers snorted. His soldier spied horsemen approaching and moved so that the hut hid him from their view. “I’ll give you twenty.”

Wang Jun said, “Maybe BeanBean will give me more.”

“I’ll give you thirty, go see if BeanBean will give you that.” His soldier waited until the horsemen clustered. He launched a rocket into their center. The game machine rumbled as the rocket exploded. “You have thirty now?”

Three-Fingers turned away from his game and his soldier perished quickly as bio-engineered yakmen boiled out of the hut. He ignored the screams of his soldier as he counted out the cash to Wang Jun. Wang Jun left Three-Fingers to his games and celebrated the sale by finding an unused piece of bridge near the Bing Jiang. He settled down to nap under it through the sweltering afternoon heat.

He woke in the evening and he was hungry. He felt the heaviness of coins in his pocket and thought on the possibilities of his wealth. Among the coins, his fingers touched the unfamiliar shape of the data cube. He took it out and turned it in his hands. He had nearly forgotten the origin of his money. Holding the data cube, he was reminded of the Tibetan and the Hunanese and his mission. He considered seeking out the Tibetan and returning it to him, but deep inside he held a suspicion that he would not find the man selling tiger bones tonight. His stomach rumbled. He dropped the datacube back into his pocket and jingled the coins it resided with. Tonight he had money in his pockets. He would eat well.

“How much for mapo dofu?”

The cook looked at him from where he stood, swirling a soup in his broad

wok, and listening to it sizzle.

“Too expensive for you, Little Wang. Go and find somewhere else to beg. I don’t want you bothering my customers.”

“Shushu, I have money.” Wang Jun showed him the coins. “And I want to eat.”

The cook laughed. “Xiao Wang is rich! Well then, Little Wang, tell me what you care for.”

“Mapo dofu, yu xiang pork, two liang of rice and Wu Xing beer.” His order tumbled out in a rush.

“Little Wang has a big stomach! Where will you fit all that food, I wonder?” When Wang Jun glared at him he said, “Go, sit, you’ll have your feast.”

Wang Jun went and sat at a low table and watched as the fire roared and the cook threw chiles into the wok to fry. He wiped at his mouth to keep from drooling as the smell of the food came to his nose. The cook’s wife opened a bottle of Five Star for him, and he watched as she poured the beer into a wet glass. The day’s heat was dissipating. Rain began to spatter the street restaurant’s burlap roof. Wang Jun drank from his beer and watched the other diners, taking in the food they ate and the company they kept. These were people he might have previously harassed for their money. But not tonight. Tonight he was a king. Rich, with money in his pocket.

His thoughts were broken by the arrival of a foreigner. A broad man with long white hair pulled back in a horse’s tail. His skin was pale and he wore white gloves. He stepped under the sheltering burlap and cast alien blue eyes across the diners. The Chinese at their tables stared back. When his eyes settled on Wang Jun’s bent form, he smiled. He went to squat on a stool across from Wang Jun and said, in accented Mandarin, “You are Little Wang. You have something for me.”

Wang Jun stared at the man and then, feeling cocky with the attention of the Other Chinese said, “Ke neng.” Maybe.

The foreigner frowned, then leaned across the table. The cook’s wife came, interrupting, and set down Wang Jun’s mapo dofu, followed quickly by the pork. She went and scooped out a steaming bowl of rice, broader than Wang Jun’s hand and set it before him. Wang Jun picked up chopsticks and began shoveling the food into his mouth, all the while watching the foreigner. His eyes watered at the spiciness of the dofu and his mouth tingled with the familiar numbing of ground peppercorns.

The wife asked if the foreigner would eat with him, and Wang Jun eyed the foreigner. He felt the money in his pocket, while his mouth flamed on. He looked at the size of the foreigner and assented reluctantly, feeling his wealth now inadequate.

They spoke in Chengdu hua, the dialect of the city, so that the foreigner did not understand what they said. The man watched as the wife scooped another bowl of rice and set it in front of him with a pair of chopsticks. He looked down at the white mountain of rice in his bowl and then looked up at Wang Jun. He shook his head, and said, "You have something for me. Give it to me now."

Wang Jun was stung by the foreigner's disregard of the offered food. Because he was unhappy he said, "Why should I give it to you?"

The pale white man frowned and his blue eyes were cold and angry. "Did not the Tibetan tell you to give me something?" He held out a white-gloved hand.

Wang Jun shrugged. "You didn't come to the bridge. Why should I give it to you now?"

"Do you have it?"

Wang Jun became guarded. "No."

"Where is it?"

"I threw it away."

The man reached across the small table and grasped Wang Jun's ragged collar. He pulled him close. "Give it to me now. You are very small, I can take it or you can give it to me. Little Wang, you cannot win tonight. Do not test me."

Wang Jun stared at the foreigner and saw silver flash in the man's breast pocket. On impulse he reached for the glint of silver and drew a thing up until it was between their two faces. Other people at nearby tables gasped at what Wang Jun held. Wang Jun's hand began to shake, quivering uncontrollably, until the Tibetan's severed finger, with its tarnished silver and turquoise ring still on it, slipped from his horrified grasp and landed in the yuxiang pork.

The foreigner smiled, an indifferent, resigned smile. He said, "Give me the datacube before I collect a trophy from you as well." Wang Jun nodded and slowly reached into his pocket. The foreigner's eyes followed his reaching hand.

Wang Jun's free hand reached desperately out to the table and grabbed a handful of scalding tofu from its plate. Before the man could react, he drove the contents, full of hot chiles and peppercorns, into those cold blue eyes. As the foreigner howled, Wang Jun sank his sharp yellow teeth into the pale flesh of imprisoning hands. The foreigner dropped Wang Jun to rub frantically at his burning eye sockets, and blood flowed from his damaged hands.

Wang Jun took his freedom and ran for the darkness and alleys he knew best,

leaving the foreigner still roaring behind him.

The rain was heavier, and the chill was coming back on Chengdu, harder and colder than before. The concrete and buildings radiated cold, and Wang Jun's breath misted in the air. He hunched in his box, with its logo for Stone-Ailixin Computers on the side. He thought it had been used for satellite phones, from the pictures below the logo. He huddled inside it with the remains of his childhood.

He could still remember the countryside he had come from and, vaguely, a mud-brick home. More clearly, he remembered terrace-sculpted hills and running along those terraces. Playing in warm summer mud with a Micro-Machine VTOL in his hands while his parents labored in brown water around their ankles and green rice shoots sprouted up out of the muck. Later, he had passed those same terraces, lush and unharvested as he made his way out of his silent village.

Under the cold instant-concrete shadows of the skyscrapers, he stroked his toy VTOL. The wings which folded up and down had broken off and were lost. He turned it over, looking at its die-cast steel frame. He pulled out the datacube and stared at it. Weighed the toy and the cube in his hands. He thought of the Tibetan's finger, severed with its silver snake ring still on it, and shuddered. The white man with the blue eyes would be looking for him. He looked around at his box. He put the Micro-Machine in his pocket but left his ratted blanket. He took his yellow anchuan maozi, the traffic safety hat children wore to and from school, stolen from a child even smaller than he. He pulled the yellow wool cap down over his ears, re-pocketed the datacube, and left without looking back.

THREE-FINGERS was crooning karaoke in a bar when Wang Jun found him. A pair of women with smooth skins and hard empty eyes attended him. They wore red silk chipao, styled from Shanghai. The collars were high and formal, but the slits in the dresses went nearly to the women's waists. Three-Fingers glared through the dim red smoky light when Wang Jun approached.

“What?”

“Do you have a computer that reads these?” He held up the datacube.

Three-Fingers stared at the cube and reached out for it. “Where did you get that?”

Wang Jun held it out but did not release it. “Off someone.”

“Same place you got those glasses?”

“Maybe.”

Three-Fingers peered at the datacube. “It's not a standard datacube. See the

pins on the inside?” Wang Jun looked at the datasocket. “There’s only three pins. You need an adapter to read whatever’s on there. And you might not even be able to read it then. Depends what kind of OS it’s designed for.”

“What do I do?”

“Give it to me.”

“No.” Wang Jun backed off a step.

One of the women giggled at the interaction between the mini mob boss and street urchin. She stroked Three-Fingers’s chest. “Don’t worry about the taofanzhe. Pay attention to us.” She giggled again.

Wang Jun glared. Three-Fingers pushed the hostess off him. “Go away.” She made an exaggerated pout, but left with her companion.

Three-Fingers held out his hand. “Let me see it. I can’t help you if you don’t let me see the tamade thing.”

Wang Jun frowned but passed the datacube over. Three-Fingers turned it over in his hands. He peered into the socket, then nodded. “It’s for HuangLong OS.” He tossed it back and said, “It’s a medical specialty OS. They use it for things like brain surgery, and DNA mapping. That’s pretty specialized. Where’d you get it?”

Wang Jun shrugged. “Someone gave it to me.”

“Fang pi.” Bullshit.

Wang Jun was silent and they regarded each other, then Three-Fingers said, “Xing, I’ll buy it off you. Just because I’m curious. I’ll give you five yuan. You want to sell it?”

Wang Jun shook his head.

“Fine. Ten yuan, but that’s all.”

Wang Jun shook his head again.

Three-Fingers Gao frowned. “Did you get rich, suddenly?”

“I don’t want to sell it. I want to know what’s on it.”

“Well, that makes two of us now.” They regarded each other for a time longer. Three-Fingers said, “All right. I’ll help you. But if there’s any value to what’s on that, I’m taking three quarters on the profit.”

“Yi ban.”

Three-Fingers rolled his eyes. “Fine. Half, then.”

“Where are we going?”

Three-Fingers walked fast through chill mist. He led Wang Jun into smaller and smaller alleys. The buildings changed in character from shining modern glass and steel to mud-brick with thatched and tiled roofs. The streets became cobbled and jagged and old women stared out at them from dark wooden doorways. Wang Jun watched the old ladies with suspicion. Their eyes followed him impassively, recording his and Three-Fingers’s passage.

Three-Fingers stopped to pull out a box of Red Pagodas. He put one in his mouth. “You smoke?”

Wang Jun took the offered stick and leaned close as Three-Fingers struck a match. It flared high and yellow and then sank low under the pressure of the wet air. Wang Jun drew hard on the cigarette and blew smoke. Three-Fingers lit his own.

“Where are we going?”

Three-Fingers shrugged. “Here.” He jerked his head at the building behind them. He smoked for a minute longer, then dropped his cigarette on the damp cobbles and ground it out with a black boot. “Put out your smoke. It’s bad for the machines.” Wang Jun flicked the butt against a wall. It threw off red sparks where it bounced and then lay smoking on the ground. Three-Fingers pushed open a wooden door. Its paint was peeling and its frame warped so that he shoved hard and the door scraped loudly as they entered.

In the dim light of the room, Wang Jun could see dozens of monitors. They glowed with screen savers and data. He saw columns of characters and numbers, scrolling, connected to distant networks of information. People sat at the monitors in a silence broken only by the sound of the keys being pressed at an incessant rate.

Three-Fingers pulled Wang Jun up to one of the silent technicians and said, “He Dan, can you read this?” He nudged Wang Jun and Wang Jun held up the datacube. He Dan plucked it out of Wang Jun’s hand with spidery graceful fingers and brought it close to his eyes in the dimness. With a shrug he began to sort through a pile of adapters. He chose one and connected it to a stray cord, then inserted the adapter into the datacube. He typed on the computer and the borders and workspaces flickered and changed color. A box appeared and he hit a single key in response.

“Where am I?” The voice was so loud that the speakers distorted and

crackled. The technicians all jumped as their silence was shattered. He Dan adjusted a speaker control. The voice came again, softer. "Hello?" It held an edge of fear. "Is there anyone there?" it asked.

"Yes," said Wang Jun, impulsively.

"Where am I?" the voice quavered.

"In a computer," said Wang Jun.

Three-Fingers slapped him on the back of the head. "Be quiet."

"What?" said the voice.

They listened silently.

"Hello, did someone say I was in a computer?" it said.

Wang Jun said, "Yes, you're in a computer. What are you?"

"I'm in a computer?" The voice was puzzled. "I was having surgery. How am I in a computer?"

"Who are you?" Wang Jun ignored Three-Fingers's glowering eyes.

"I am Naed Delhi, the 19th Dalai Lama. Who are you?"

The typing stopped. No one spoke. Wang Jun heard the faint whine of cooling fans and the high resonances of the monitors humming. Technicians turned to stare at the trio and the computer which spoke. Outside Wang Jun heard someone clear their throat of phlegm and spit. The computer spoke on, heedless of the effect of its words. "Hello?" it said. "Who am I speaking to?" "I'm Wang Jun."

"Hello. Why can't I see?"

"You're in a computer. You don't have any eyes."

"I can hear. Why can I hear and yet not see?"

He Dan broke in, "Video input is not compatible with the software emulator which runs your program."

"I don't understand."

"You are an artificial intelligence construct. Your consciousness is software. Your input comes from hardware. They are incompatible on the system we have

installed you.”

The voice quavered, “I am not software. I am the Dalai Lama of the Yellow Hat sect. The 19th to be reincarnated as such. It is not my fate to be reincarnated as software. You are probably mistaken.”

“Are you really the Dalai Lama?” Wang Jun asked.

“Yes,” the computer said.

“How —” Wang Jun began, but Three-Fingers pulled him away from the system before he could phrase his question. He knelt in front of Wang Jun. His hands were shaking as he held Wang Jun by the collar of his shirt. Their faces nearly touched as he hissed out, “Where did you find this cube?”

Wang Jun shrugged. “Someone gave it to me.”

Three-Finger’s hand blurred and struck Wang Jun’s face. Wang Jun jerked at its impact. His face burned. The technicians watched as Three-Fingers hissed, “Don’t lie to me. Where did you find this thing?”

Wang Jun touched his face, “From a Tibetan, I got it from a Tibetan who sold tiger bones, and a man from Hunan. And there was a body. A big foreigner. They were his glasses I sold you.”

Three-Fingers tilted his head back to stare at the ceiling. “Don’t lie to me. Do you know what it means if we’ve got the Dalai Lama on a datacube that you’ve been carrying around in your pocket?” He shook Wang Jun. “Do you know what it means?”

Wang Jun whined, “I was supposed to give it to a man with white gloves, but he never came. And there was another man. A foreigner and he killed the Tibetan and took his finger, and he wanted mine too, and I ran and —” his voice rose in a babbling whine.

Three-Fingers’s hands settled around Wang Jun’s neck and squeezed until Wang Jun’s ears rang and blackness scudded across his eyes. Distantly, he heard Three-Fingers say, “Don’t cry to me. I’m not your mother. I’ll take your tongue out if you make my life any more difficult than it already is. Do you understand?”

Wang Jun nodded in his haze.

Three-Fingers released him, saying, “Good. Go talk to the computer.” Wang Jun breathed deeply and stumbled back to the Dalai Lama.

“How did you get inside the computer?” he asked.

“How do you know I am in a computer?”

“Because we plugged your datacube in and then you started talking.”

The computer was silent.

“What’s it like in there?” Wang Jun tried.

“Terrible and still,” said the computer. Then it said, “I was going to have surgery, and now I am here.”

“Did you dream?”

“I don’t remember any dreams.”

“Are you leading a rebellion against my homeland?”

“You speak Chinese. Are you from China?”

“Yes. Why are you making people fight in Tibet?”

“Where is this computer?”

“Chengdu.”

“Oh, my. A long way from Bombay,” the computer whispered.

“You came from Bombay?”

“I was having surgery in Bombay.”

“Is it lonely in there?”

“I don’t remember anything until now. But it is very still here. Deathly still. I can hear you, but cannot feel anything. There is nothing here. I fear that I am not here. It is maddening. All of my senses are lost. I want out of this computer. Help me. Take me back to my body.” The computer’s voice, vibrating from the speakers, was begging.

“We can sell him,” Three-Fingers said abruptly.

Wang Jun stared at Three-Fingers. “You can’t sell him.”

“Someone wants him if they’re chasing you. We can sell him.”

The computer said, “You can’t sell me. I have to get back to Bombay. I’m sure my surgery can’t be completed if I’m not there. I must go back. You must take me back.”

Wang Jun nodded in agreement. Three-Fingers smirked. He Dan said, “We need to unplug him. Without some form of stimuli he may go crazy before you can decide what to do with him.”

“Wait,” said the Dalai Lama. “Please don’t unplug me yet. I’m afraid. I’m afraid of being gone again.”

“Unplug him,” said Three-Fingers.

“Wait,” said the computer. “You must listen to me. If my body is dead, you must destroy this computer you keep me in. I fear that I will not reincarnate. Even Palden Lhamo may not be able to find my soul. She is Powerful, but though she rides across an ocean of blood astride the skin of her traitorous son, she may not find me. My soul will be trapped here, unnaturally preserved, even as my body decomposes. Promise me, please. You must not leave me —”

He Dan shut off the computer.

Three-Fingers raised his eyebrows at He Dan.

He Dan shrugged. “It could be that it is the Dalai Lama. If there are people chasing the beggar-child, it lends credence to its claims. It would not be hard to upload his identity matrix while he was undergoing surgery.”

“Who would do that?”

He Dan shrugged. “He is at the center of so many different political conflicts, it would be impossible to say. In a datacube, he makes a convenient hostage. Tibetan extremists, Americans, us, perhaps the EU; they would all be interested in having such a hostage.”

Three-Fingers said, “If I’m going to sell him, I’ll need to know who put him in there.”

He Dan nodded, and then the door exploded inward. Splinters of wood flew about and shafts of light illuminated the dim room. Outside there was a whine of VTOLs and then there were bright lights lancing through the door, followed by the rapid thud of heavy boots. Wang Jun ducked instinctively as something seemed to suck the air out of the room and the monitors exploded, showering glass on the technicians and Wang Jun. People were shouting everywhere around him and Wang Jun smelled smoke. He stood up and pulled the datacube out of its adapter and rolled underneath a table as a barrage of pellets ratcheted across the wall above him.

He saw Three-Fingers fumble with something at his belt and then stiffen as red blossoms appeared on his chest. Other technicians were failing, all of them sprouting bloody stains on their bodies. Wang Jun huddled deeper under the table as forms in black armor came through the door. He put the datacube in his mouth, thinking he might swallow it before they could find him. More explosions came and suddenly the wall beside him was gone in a cacophony of bricks and rubble. He scrambled over the collapsed wall as shouts filled the air. Hunched low and running, he became nothing except a small child shadow. An irrelevant shadow in the rain and the play of lights from the troops left behind.

HE CROUCHED in a doorway's shadow, turning the datacube in his hands, stroking its blue plastic surface with reverential fascination. Rain fell in a cold mist and his nose dripped with the accumulated moisture. He shivered. The datacube was cold. He wondered if the Dalai Lama felt anything inside. People walked along the side-street, ignoring his small shadow in the doorway. They rose as forms out of the mist, became distinct and individual under the streetlamps and then disappeared back into shadows.

He had seen the VTOLs rise from a distance, their running lights illuminating their forms in the darkness. He had watched their wings lower and lock above the wet tile roofs. Then they were gone in a hissing acceleration. Against his better judgment he had returned, joining other residents in a slow scavenging across the rubble of the destroyed building. They moved in a methodical stooped walk. Picking at brick. Turning shattered monitor screens. Fumbling at the pockets of the bodies left behind. He had found no trace of Three-Fingers and doubted he was alive. He had found him, but only in pieces.

He turned the datacube again in his hands.

“Where did you get that?”

He jerked skittishly and moved to run, but a hand was holding him and he was immobile. It was a Chinese woman and she wore white gloves. He stared at the hand which held him.

“Do you have something for me?” she asked. Her Mandarin was clear and educated, perfect, as though she came from Beijing itself.

“I don't know.”

“Is that yours?”

“No.”

“Were you supposed to give it to me?”

“I don’t know.”

“I missed you at the bridge.”

“Why didn’t you come?”

“There were delays,” she said and her eyes became hooded and dark. Wang Jun reached out to hand her the datacube. “You have to be careful with it. It has the Dalai Lama.”

“I know. I was coming to you. I was afraid I had lost you. Come.” She motioned him. “You are cold. There is a bed and food waiting for you.” She motioned again and he followed her out of the doorway and into the rain.

She led him through the wet streets. In his mind, the images of VTOLs and exploding monitors and Three-Fingers’s blossoming red mortality made him wary as they crossed intersections and bore along the old streets of Chengdu.

The woman held his hand firm in hers, and she bore him with direction and purpose so that no matter how many twists and turns they took, they were always closer to the organic skeleton of the city core. It rose above them, glowing. Dwarfing them and the constructors who swung from it on gossamer lines. They swarmed it as ants might, slowly growing their nest.

Then they were under its bones, walking through the wet organic passageways of the growing creature. Wang Jun smelled compost and death. The air grew warm and humid as they headed deeper into the architectural animal. Glowing chips embedded in the woman’s wrists passed them through construction checkpoints until they came to a lift, a cage that rose up through Huojianzhu’s internals, sliding on smooth organic rails. Through the bars of the cage Wang Jun saw levels completed, shining and habitable, the walls with the appearance of polished steel, and fluorescent lamps, glowing, in their brackets. He saw levels where only the segmented superstructure of the beast existed. A monster with its bones exposed; wet slick things sheened with a biological ooze. Hardening silicon mucus coated the bones, flowed, and built up successive layers to form walls. Huojianzhu grew and where it grew the Biotects and constructors oversaw, guiding and ensuring that its growth followed their carefully imagined intentions. The beautiful woman, and Wang Jun with her, rose higher.

They came to a level nearly complete. Her feet echoed in a hallway, and she came to a door. Her hand leaned gently on the surface of the door and its skin moved slightly under her pressure so that Wang Jun was unsure if the door molded to her hand or reached out to caress it. The door swung open and Wang Jun saw the luxury of the heights of which he had always dreamed.

In a room with a bed so soft his back ached and with pillows so fluffy he believed he smothered, he woke. There were voices. “— a beggar. No one,” she said.

“Then blank him and turn him out.”

“He helped us.”

“Leave his pocket with money, then.”

Their voices became distant, and though he wished he could stay awake, he slept again.

Wang Jun sank into the enveloping cushions of a chair so deep that his feet could not touch the polished elegance of the real wooden floors. He was well rested now, having climbed finally out of the womb of bedding and pillows which had tangled him. Around him, shanshui paintings hung from smooth white walls, and recessed shelves held intricately fired vases from China’s dynasties, long dead and gone. The kitchen he had already made acquaintance with, watching the lady who looked Chinese but wasn’t as she prepared a mountain of food for him on burners that flared like suns, and made tea with water that scalded as it came from the faucet. In other rooms, lights glowed on and off as he entered and departed, and there was carpet, soft expanses of pale fiber that were always warm under his feet. Now he sat in the enveloping chair and watched with dark eyes as the lady and her foreign companion paced before him. Behind them, the Dalai Lama’s cube sat on a shelf, blue and small.

“Sile?”

Wang Jun started at the sound of her voice, and he felt his heart beating. Outside the windows of the apartment thick Chengdu mist hung, stagnant and damp. No more rain. He struggled out of the chair and went to look out the windows. He could not see the lights of Chengdu’s old city below. The mist was too thick. The woman watched him as her counterpart spoke. “Yeah, either the Chinese or the Europeans blew his head full of holes. They’re just annoyed because they lost him.”

“What should we do?”

“I’m waiting for an indication from the embassy. The Tibetans want us to destroy him. Keep whining about how his soul won’t be reborn, if we don’t destroy it.”

She laughed. “Why not write him onto a new body?”

“Don’t be sacrilegious.”

“That’s how they see it? Fanatics can be so — “

“ — intractable,” he finished for her.

“So this whole mission is a waste?”

“He’s not much good to us without his body. The Tibetans won’t recognize him if we write him onto a new body and he’s no good as leverage against the Chinese if he doesn’t have a following.

“She sighed. “I wish we didn’t have to work with them.”

“Without the Tibetans, we wouldn’t even have known to look for the kid.”

“Well, now they’re threatening that if we don’t give him back, the Pali Lama is going to flay our skins, or something.”

“Palden Lhamo,” said the man.

“What?”

He repeated, “Palden Lhamo. She’s a Tibetan goddess. Supposed to be the protector of Tibet and our digital friend.” He jerked his head at the datacube sitting on its shelf. “The paintings of her show her riding a mule across seas of blood and using the flayed skin of her son as a saddle blanket.”

“What a lovely culture they’ve got.”

“You should see the paintings: Red hair, necklaces of skulls —”

“Enough.”

Wang Jun said, “Can I open the window?”

The woman looked over at the man; he shrugged.

“Suibian,” she said.

Wang Jun undid the securing clasps and rolled the wide window open. Chill air washed into the room. He peered down into the orange glow of the mist, leaning far out into the air. He stroked the spongy organic exoskeleton of the building, a resilient honeycomb of holes. Below, he could just make out the shifting silhouettes of constructors clambering across the surface of the structure. Behind him the conversation continued.

“So what do we do?”

He waved at the datacube. “We could always plug his eminence into a computer and ask him for advice.”

Wang Jun’s ears perked up. He wanted to hear the man inside the computer again.

“Would the Chinese be interested in a deal, even if his body is gone?”

“Maybe. They’d probably keep his cube in a desk drawer. Let it gather dust. If he never reincarnated, it would be fine with them. One less headache for them to deal with.”

“Maybe we’ll be able to trade him for something still, then.”

“Not much, though. So what if he does reincarnate? It’ll be twenty years before he has an effect on them.” He sighed. “Trade talks start tomorrow. This operation’s starting to look like a scrub at the home office. They’re already rumbling about extracting us before the talks begin. At least the EU didn’t get him.”

“Well, I’ll be glad to get back to California.”

“Yeah.”

Wang Jun turned from his view and asked, “Will you kill him?”

The pair exchanged looks. The man turned away, muttering under his breath. Wang Jun held in his response to the man’s rudeness. Instead he said, “I’m hungry.”

“He’s hungry, again,” muttered the man.

“We only have instants, now,” said the woman.

“Xing,” said Wang Jun. The woman went into the kitchen and Wang Jun’s eyes fastened on the dark blue sheen of the datacube, sitting on its shelf.

“I’m cold,” said the man. “Close the window.”

Wang Jun sniffed at the aroma of frying food coming from the woman and the kitchen. His belly rumbled, but he went to the window. “Okay.”

The mist clung to him as he clung to the superstructure of the biologic city. His fingers dug into its spongy honeycomb skin and he heard the rush of Chengdu far below, but could not see it through the mist. He heard curses and looked up. Light silhouetted the beautiful woman who looked Chinese but wasn’t and the man

as they peered out of their luxury apartment window from high above.

He dug a fist deeper into the honeycomb wall and waved at them with his free hand, and then climbed lower with the self-confident ease of a beggar monkey. He looked up again to see the man make to climb out the window, and then the woman pulled him back in.

He descended. Slipping deeper into the mist, clambering for the slick safety of the pavement far below. He passed constructors and Biotects, working late-night shifts. They all hung precariously from the side of the mountainous building, but only he was so daring as to climb the skin of the creature without the protection of a harness. They watched him climb by with grave eyes, but they made no move to stop him. Who were they to care if his fingers slipped and he fell to the infinitely distant pavement? He passed them and continued his descent.

When he looked up again, seeking the isolated window from which he had issued, it was gone. Lost in the thickness of the chill mist. He guessed the man and woman would not follow. That they would have more pressing concerns than to find a lone beggar boy with a useless datacube somewhere in the drizzling streets of Chengdu. He smiled to himself. They would pack and go home to their foreign country and leave him to remain in Chengdu. Beggars always remained.

His arms began to shake with strain as his descent continued. The climb was already taking him longer than he had guessed possible. The sheer size of the core was greater than he had ever imagined. His fingers dug into the spongy biomass of Huojianzhu's skin, seeking another hold. The joints of his fingers ached and his arms trembled. It was cold this high even though the night air was still. The wet mist and the damp spongy walls he clung to chilled his fingers, numbing them and making him unsure of his handholds. He watched where he placed each hand in an agony of care, seeking stability and safety with every grip.

For the first time he wondered how long it would be until he fell. The descent was too long, and the clinging chill was sinking deeper into his bones. The mists parted and he could see the lights of Chengdu proper, spread out below him. His hopes sank as he saw finally how high he hung above the city.

He dug for another hand-hold and when he set his weight against it, the spongy mass gave way and he was suddenly dangling by a single weak hand while the Chengdu lights spun crazily below him. He scrabbled desperately for another hand-hold. He dug his feet deep into the spongy surface and found one. He saw where his slipping hand had torn away the wall. There was a deep rent, and from it, the milky blood of the biostructure dripped slowly. His heart beat faster staring at Huojianzhu's mucus wound and he imagined himself slipping and falling; spattering across the pavement while his blood ran slick and easy into the street gutters. He fought to control his rising panic as his arms trembled and threatened to give way. Then he forced himself to move his limbs and descend, to seek some respite from

the climb, a hope of survival on the harsh skin of the core.

He spoke to himself. Told himself that he would survive. That he would not fall and die on the pavement of the street. Not he. Not Xiao Wang. No. Not Xiao Wang at all. Not Little Wang anymore. Wang Jun; Soldier Wang. Twisted and bent though he was, Soldier Wang would survive. He smiled to himself. Wang Jun would survive. He continued his descent with shaking arms and numbed fingers, picking each hold carefully, and eventually when he began to believe that he could climb no more, he found a hole in Huojianzhu's skin and swung himself into the safety of the ducts of the animal structure.

Standing on a firm surface he turned and looked out at Chengdu's spread lights. In a few more years all of Chengdu would be overwhelmed by the spreading core. He wondered where a beggar boy would run then. What streets would be left open for those such as he? He reached into his pocket and felt the hard edges of the datacube. He drew it from his pocket, and gazed on its smooth blue perfect surface. Its perfect geometric edges. So much consternation over the man who lived inside. He hefted the cube. It was light. Too light to hold the whole of a person. He remembered his brief interaction with the Dalai Lama, in a dark room under the glow of monitors. He squeezed the cube tight in his hand and then went to the edge of the duct. Chengdu lay below him.

He cocked his arm to throw. Winding it back to launch the Dalai Lama in his silicon cell out into the empty air. To arc and fall, faster and faster until he shattered against the distant ground and was released, to begin again his cycle of rebirth. He held his arm cocked, then whipped it forward in a trajectory of launch. When his arm had completed its swing, the datacube and the Dalai Lama still sat safe in his palm. Smooth and blue and undamaged.

He considered it. Stroking it, feeling its contours in his hand. Then he slid it back into his pocket and swung himself out, once again onto the skin of Huojianzhu. He smiled as he climbed, digging his fingers into the living flesh of the building. He wondered how long this infinity of climbing would last, and if he would reach the streets whole or as a bloody pulp. Chengdu seemed a long way below.

The datacube rested in his pocket. If he fell, it would shatter and the Dalai Lama would be released. If he survived? For now he would keep it. Later, perhaps, he would destroy it. The Dalai Lama was asleep in the cube, and would not overly mind the longer wait. And, Wang Jun thought, who in all the world of important people could say, as he could say, that he had the Dalai Lama in his pocket?

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By Paolo Bacigalupi

Paolo Bacigalupi first went to China as a language student, and thus far he has spent about three cumulative years there (over various trips), working such jobs as a



proofreader, a marketing director, and a door-to-door salesman. Nowadays, he lives in Denver, Colorado, and notes that he recently got married in “a fantastic Hindu ceremony.

This story marks his first professional sale, and his writing career seems to be off to a running start. The word on the street is that he’s working on a novel related to this remarkable, inventive debut.