



PHOENIXA: THE NEST
A Mystical Quest for The Cheng Legacy

Gold Winner of the 2026 Nautilus Book Award
Gold Winner of the 2026 Literary Titan Award
Semi-Finalist of the 2025 Somerset Book Award

FREE SAMPLE CHAPTER

From *PHOENIXA: THE NEST* by J.J. Cheng

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Synopsis

Rising from the ashes of her ancestors, Phoenixa, the six-and-a-half-year-old kite-flying, Phoenix-riding, Chinese girl embarks on a mystical journey into China's tumultuous past, searching for her Renaissance Grandpa who read to her *Shan Hai Jing, The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, seeking cures for human greed. From the interior of a quiet traditional Beijing courtyard to the soaring heights of a giant Wu Tong Tree, Phoenixa finds her home being dislocated from safety to peril. A relentless Red force looms, ready to strip her home bare. Fortunately, the enduring incandescent Feng Huang, the Phoenix, has kept her amused and protected as a secret guardian, at least for now.

Written in the genre-defining style now called "Mystical Realism", Cheng has tapped into the subconscious and beyond in search of human goodness. Cheng's debut novel is stunningly visual, fantastical, dreamlike yet achingly real, demystifying China, as it offers a luminous insider's view on why— and how — the Dragon roared.

This is a story of metamorphosis and freedom, of madness and redemption, of humanity standing at the edge of self-destruction, and the fierce, tender hope of rebirth.

PHOENIXA

THE NEST

A Mystical Quest for the Cheng Legacy



A Novel

By

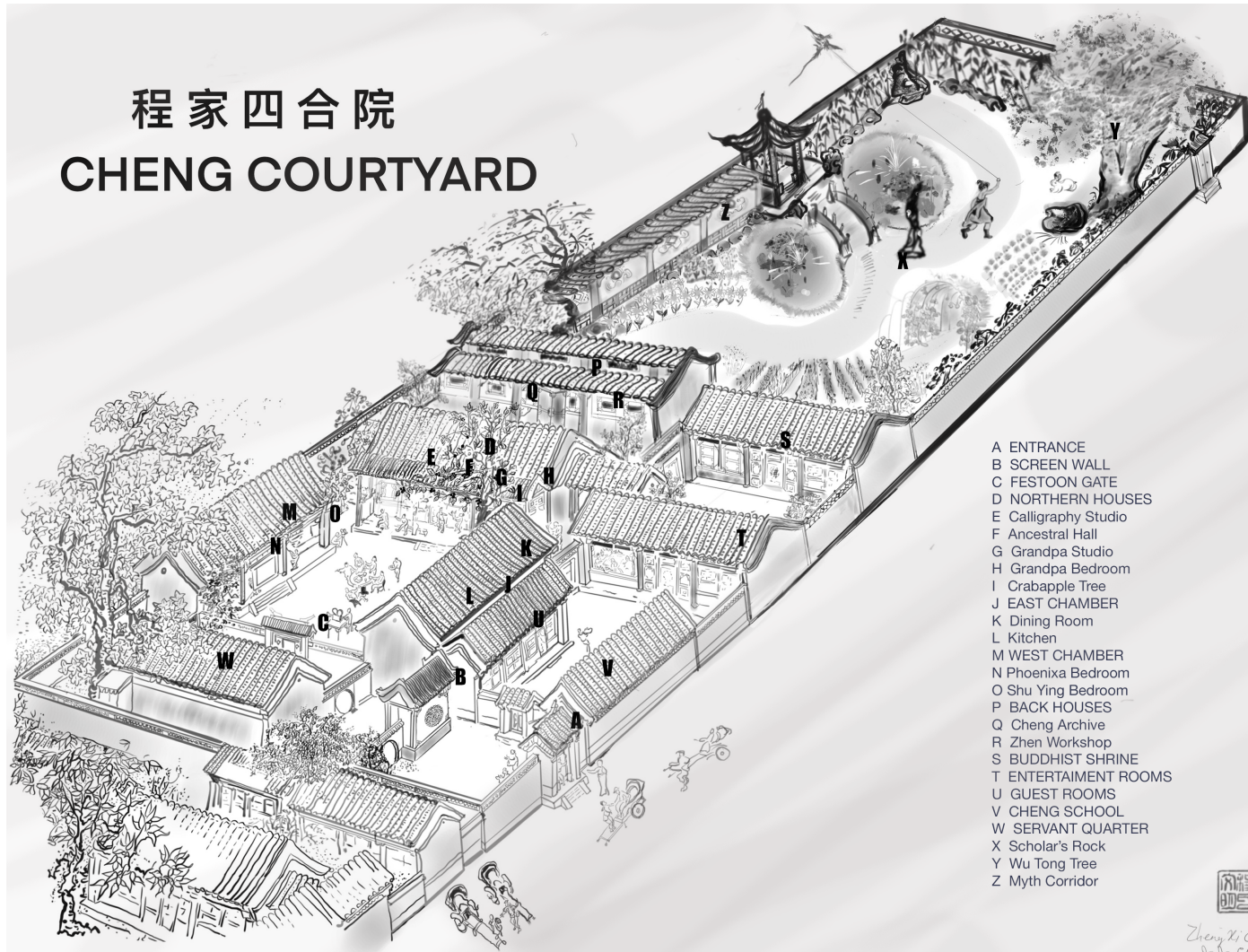
J. J. CHENG

Illustrated by the Author



EAST-WEST CORRIDOR PRESS

程家四合院 CHENG COURTYARD



- A ENTRANCE
- B SCREEN WALL
- C FESTOON GATE
- D NORTHERN HOUSES
- E Calligraphy Studio
- F Ancestral Hall
- G Grandpa Studio
- H Grandpa Bedroom
- I Crabapple Tree
- J EAST CHAMBER
- K Dining Room
- L Kitchen
- M WEST CHAMBER
- N Phoenixa Bedroom
- O Shu Ying Bedroom
- P BACK HOUSES
- Q Cheng Archive
- R Zhen Workshop
- S BUDDHIST SHRINE
- T ENTERTAINMENT ROOMS
- U GUEST ROOMS
- V CHENG SCHOOL
- W SERVANT QUARTER
- X Scholar's Rock
- Y Wu Tong Tree
- Z Myth Corridor



Zheng Xi Cheng
J. J. Cheng



1

FENG HUANG

鳳凰

FENG HUANG, A MESSENGER OF PEACE!

Grandpa

Thunder grumbled and roared, announcing its verdict to the world. A prophecy was at hand on the affairs between heaven and man.

Phoenixa, a pig-tailed Chinese girl, looked up, catching a cluster of dancing snakes flickering in the purple clouds above the roof of her ancestral home, a traditional Chinese courtyard. Her eyes fixed, wonder filled them, her body tingled with delight.

Lightning cracked again. Another blast filled her ears. As if born with an antenna for the cosmos, the girl listened curiously to the loud message from the above. She heard something. Something grand, on the sinister side.

At the moment, Phoenixa was sitting on her grandfather's knees, holding a heavy, century-old Chinese mythology book *Shan Hai Jing* 《山海经》 or *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*. Her puffy little fingers turned the soft and fragile pages. Her nose dipped into it, as if to inhale the scent of the ink, an aged woody smell possessed only by the much-prized antique volumes. The Chinese characters densely populated the pages, forming a forest of secrets and divine forces.

A bird with long, feathery fancy tails emerged on the next page. The girl's eyes became wildly lit, exclaiming in her musical voice.

"There it is! Grandpa."

"One second, my Little One," a deep resonating voice sounded.

"You are getting heavier day by day."

Phoenixa stood up, seeing Grandpa shaking his numbing left leg. The girl waited and sat back on Grandpa again when the storytelling began.

"Five hundred miles to the East, there is a mountain called the Red Cave, rich in gold and jade. A red river flows to the south into the Ocean Bo. There lives a bird in the shape of a pheasant with five-colored markings. It's called Feng Huang 鳳凰. The marking on its head spells Morality 德; on its wings, Righteousness 義; on its back, Propriety 禮; on its chest, Benevolence 仁; and on its abdomen, Faith 信. Feng Huang eats and drinks from nature, elegant in singing and dancing at will. It's an omen of peace if it's seen."

Phoenixa inched closer to Grandpa's chest, sensing the vibration of his richly deep voice.

Affectionately, the girl became more engrossed, seeing a mythical creature standing up on the page. She eyed its body, inch by inch, from its head to its tail. She fancied the vigor of the wings rested under the rather dull-looking plumage.

"What would it be like when it flies?" Phoenixa wondered.

As if the bird could read the girl's mind, it rose gently, flapping its wings.

"Wow, you do listen." The girl was intrigued.

Suddenly, a squealing lightning struck again. A jittering neon-blue indigo snake, as Phoenixa beheld it, broke through the window, slashing her pages, struck the bird, setting it aflame.

As if being invigorated, the bird fluttered its wings and turned into a luminous being with an iridescent purple sheen. Its feet lowered, ready to leap into the air.

Phoenixa, wild-eyed, shaking in shock, involuntarily shut the thick book closed, for fear that the bird might escape the pages. She jumped off Grandpa, hands pressing down on the cover protectively.

"Stay in!" Phoenixa uttered. She turned around, facing her Grandpa, an old man with a white beard and kind eyes, framed by a pair of stylish gold-rimmed round spectacles. He smiled at her lovingly, knowingly, as if beholding an unfolding secret.

"Well," his thick eyebrows danced.

"Well, almost!" The girl yelled out, still savoring the indescribable thrill of that magical interlude.

"Still remember the bird?" Grandpa guided with a grin.

“Yes, Grandpa. I will try to paint it!” Phoenixa responded on cue.

Recently, she grew fond of Grandpa’s brushes, a whole assortment of them, long and short, thin and fat, all dangling on a meticulously carved brush rack standing on this large solid sandalwood desk, where they sat by.

Grandpa stood up and turned to face his wall-to-wall antique cabinets shelved with all sorts of classical books and other memorabilia collected from around the world. He pulled out a sheet of rice paper from a bottom shelf and placed it on his spacious desk next to a large, exquisitely carved inkstone adorned with a Feng Huang motif.

Phoenixa reached out for a dainty floral porcelain bottle and dripped a few drops of clear water onto the dry surface of the inkstone, while Grandpa opened one of his many drawers and took out a set of colored inksticks. He picked a red stick and ground it in circular motions against the now-wet surface. Within seconds, rich silky red ink oozed out of the dark stone.

“This is energy transmuting from one form into another,” Grandpa explained.

“Yes, Grandpa, like ice turns into water.” Phoenixa was quick to associate.

Grandpa was pleased.

Phoenixa grew up fast under the wing of Grandpa. His daily teaching stimulated her imagination and exercised her emotional resonance. Grandpa’s words were like oxygen. It nourished the girl’s mind all the time and at any time.

“Very good, my Little One,” Grandpa now started grinding the red ink as Phoenixa got on a wooden stool and picked a medium-sized brush for herself. She paused, facing the large canvas presented by the rice paper as tall as her. She dipped her brush into the red ink, took a deep breath, and launched her first set of bold strokes on the soft but enduring cloth-like material.

“Well done!” Grandpa acknowledged, having the second color, the blue ink ready for her, and then the third, green, the fourth, yellow, and the fifth, gold, all ready for her passionate rendition.

Phoenixa, imbuing the tip of her brush in the colors again, painted layer over layer symmetrically on both sides, leaving the imaginary body in the center blank. While in motion, she imagined the open wings of an eagle-like scarlet bird soaring into the sky, frolicking a vigorous dance.

Phoenixa laid down her brush on the mountain-shaped brush holder and turned to Grandpa, who had been watching her every move and every stroke.

Grandpa picked up a slender brush and rendered the bird’s head, the eye, the beak, adding its crown and its body with meticulous details. Then he dipped the brush in the gold ink and contoured the wings with defining vigor.

Grandpa’s masterful touches mesmerized Phoenixa who did not blink. She traced every line, every curve, every dot that Grandpa’s brush executed. Within only a minute, a majestic being came vividly alive on paper.

“A beautiful Feng Huang, Grandpa!” the girl applauded, jumping on her toes.

A ray of sunlight fell on the painted plumage. The gold-tinted feather became iridescent and shining.

“Yes, indeed, Little One. Feng Huang, a Messenger of Peace!” Grandpa uttered, smiles in his voice.

While Phoenixa pondered over Grandpa’s words, Grandpa turned around and pulled out several sheets of shimmering paper and placed them on the desk. He folded the paper into a strip with multiple layers and cut it zigzaggingly with the tip of a pair of very sharp scissors.

Phoenixa held the strip and peeled it gently until Grandpa finished it, about two meters in length.

“Shining long tails, Grandpa!” Phoenixa exclaimed joyfully.

“Ready for your birthday flight, Phoenixa?”

A calm male voice sounded from behind them. It was Zhen, in his youthful 50s, Prof.Cheng’s nephew and adopted son. Zhen came in with a toolbox just in time to make a bamboo frame for the painted kite. He cut, pasted, and assembled all parts meticulously, with prayers on his lips.

Phoenixa stood by, observing every detail in great anticipation to test its wings. Phoenixa dashed out of Grandpa’s study, ready for the debut of her brand new Feng Huang Kite.

Today, Phoenixa turned a delightful six.

At the very back of Cheng Courtyard, there was an expansive lush Garden with a lotus pond. A large Scholar’s Rock stood tall behind a gurgling fountain.

Phoenixa bounced around the rock in her blue lacy dress and a pair of dark red leather boots. She hid herself behind the large Taihu rock, looking through one of its many holes. Grandpa and Zhen, carrying her kite, came into her view.

As soon as they approached the rock, Grandpa, the 'seeker', suddenly dashed around the rock, finding Phoenixa, the 'hider'. They burst out in a loud cheer.

"There you are! My precious little girl."

"Yes, Grandpa!"

Grandpa acted surprised with his arms open. They gave each other a tight hug.

'Hide and Seek' was one of many garden games they played often in Cheng's idyllic realm.

"We are ready!" Zhen proclaimed, holding the Feng Huang Kite over his head.

They bowed, facing east, to the "Auspicious Standing Feng Huang Singing To The Sky," a sculptural image they found in the shapes of Cheng's Scholar's Rock, an exquisite formation of an enchanted limestone that followed Prof.Cheng from the south to the north.

It had been Cheng's ritual to pay homage to Cheng's ancestral spirit before the eldest in the family launched the virgin flight of a new Feng Huang Kite, so Cheng's ancestral energy could be passed on and infused into a new life.

Grandpa placed his right hand on the crown chakra of the bird kite as he sent his prayers into the sky.

*Ancestor Lord, we honor you.
Peace in our country,
Peace in our family,
Peace within our souls.
Rise! Feng Huang! Rise!
May the cosmic force be with you.*

Grandpa passed the kite to Zhen, whose gloved hands held the kite up by its bridle point. He started running as Grandpa unwound the line from a wood spindle. By pulling the line against the breeze, they set the Feng Huang Kite into the fresh spring air.

Grandpa stood murmuring to the wind.

As if gaining consciousness or waking to its mission, the Feng Huang Kite leaped into the sky far beyond the confines of Cheng's rooflines. It climbed higher and higher, meeting a pool of radiant sunlight.

"How liberating!" Phoenixa tiptoed in her silky blue dress, arms reaching skyward, eyes brimming with rapture.

Phoenixa stood in the center of Cheng Garden, flexing her invisible wings that must have grown out of her lacy dress, she thought. She waited patiently until Grandpa placed the line into her hand.

Phoenixa flew her kite, treading every corner of Cheng's playground.

"Oh, the rapture of the flight!" Phoenixa's young heart blossomed.

"Wind, my best friend, thank you for taking me up. I can see far and wide. It's so peaceful up here. You are so gentle and kind... I know sometimes you are sad and angry for things that go wrong on the ground. Thank you for being so forgiving... I know there is so much to be changed... You can hear me, right?"

"Yes. Do... you... have... a... wish?" The wind asked.

"Yes. I do. I do have a wish."

"Care to share?" The wind inquired.

The girl leaned forward and whispered into the ear of her best friend.

Phoenixa felt so free and energized to be in conversation with the sky.

With the iridescent Feng Huang Kite in view, standing under the giant Wu Tong Tree, Prof.Cheng played an ethereal melody of peace with his father's favorite bamboo flute.

To Grandpa, Phoenixa was the gurgling fountain of life. Her energy had always renewed and restored his. Phoenixa was an indispensable part of his life, he realized. He took great solace in seeing his bubbly granddaughter running around in Cheng's sanctuary, away from a world he could no longer

control or recognize. By beholding the girl's joy and her innocence, he himself could indulge in a moment of peace and perhaps bliss. That was all he could live for as of now.

Carried by the flower-scented air and Grandpa's flute melody, Phoenixa's kite climbed into the clouds, overlooking a panoramic view of Cheng's courtyard compound nestled in a massive amount of the grayish glistening roofs in a web of ancient lanes west of the Forbidden City.

Click, click, click.

In front of the giant Wu Tong Tree, Zhen took ample photographs capturing the virgin flight of Phoenixa's new kite and the interaction between the old and the young.

Carpe diem. Zhen had never failed to seize every inspiring moment in Cheng's richly peaceful life, which, he knew, could be stolen from them at any moment.

Months later.

Moonless night. Thunders struck. A bolt of lightning split the sky into half, illuminating the silhouette of Cheng Courtyard shrouded in mystery.

A downpour was imminent.

Through the misty window of her bedroom in the West Chamber of Cheng Courtyard, Phoenixa's wide-open eyes pierced the darkness. Fixated on the Crabapple Tree, and through the intricacy of the twigs, she found some flickering lights behind the tree and some human shadows on the walls of the Eastern Chamber. Someone was digging with urgency, dragging something heavy.

Phoenixa now understood the merit of being a watchful six-year-old. She was here to behold or be part of a secret!

While Phoenixa was rationalizing, the rain poured down. She could no longer see or hear anything. She recoiled to her blanket, lying still with eyes wide open in the dark.

"Was it an illusion or was it real? Was it a dream?"

Phoenixa wondered in her little, unsettling mind. She could have slept through the night without catching any of these.

For some reason, Phoenixa felt somewhat obliged by such fortuitous circumstances.

"Someone has to guard the home and do homage to the trees, flowers, and all the spirits here."

Phoenixa tossed and turned, burdened by the energy of her potent imagination and the instinct for truth.

Suddenly, an alarming sense of danger crushed her like a hundred-pound blanket pressing over her body.

A burst of shattering chaos by the next dawn.

Sound of vehicles braking, men cursing, antique porcelain hitting the ground, fighting, kicking, even a gun firing.

Sounds of endless violence and destruction.

For a few days in a row, Phoenixa laid in her bed in torment. Sometimes she curled up by her very pregnant mother, Shu Ying. Nothing would solace her except peace itself, which was in shortage. She felt an all-around portentous atmosphere enveloping her and Cheng's house.

Something menacing had stared into her face.

For days, Phoenixa had the weirdest re-occurring dreams.

The world was in total inversion.

Day was night, night was day. Heaven was earth, earth was heaven, sky was ocean, ocean was sky. There was no sun during the day.

In pitch black, people walked on their heads and hands, feet holding orange-shaped candles. They had nowhere to go but to congregate around a giant gnarled ancestral tree standing upside down with its trunk full of scars and its shimmering roots entangled, squirming in the air.

People there seemed hungry, neurotic, and mad. They fought with their fists, cutting the roots for food with sharp stones.

Soon the roots were consumed, and the tree collapsed to the ground. The hungry chopped the tree with axes and divided the tree until the tree was gone. Nothing left except themselves and their bones. The survivors started to cut and eat each other.

In the end, the last human dried up and turned to dust.

Twirling in the dark was pitch black.

Red vortex in the East.

An incredible amount of red-shoaling sardines swirled around a gigantic red sun sitting at the bottom of a murky ocean. The red source radiated propulsive sonic baits for the mass of fish circling in a maddening frenzy, some killing each other.

Red flooded everywhere, literally everywhere, and it polluted everything.

Waiting for a surge of heavenly wind in the color of ocean blue, coming from the West, wiping it all clean...

End of Chapter One



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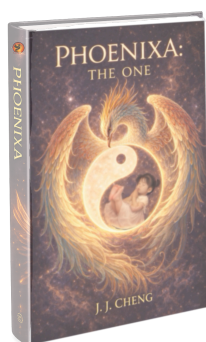
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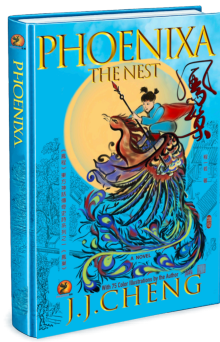
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