

Shanghai, late 1800s

Two friends meet each other.

One of the two characters, for simplicity, we will call him B., tells the other that he is moving, because before he was living in a rented house, but now the factory where he works has built a dormitory for his employees. B. tells his friend about the complicated situation he was in before. Previously he lived in the "backside" of the main room of a house with his whole family, composed of eight people, both adults, and children. Intrigued, the friend, who for simplicity we will call A., asks what the "backside" of a room is.

At that point, B. replies: "The "backside" is created from the division of the rear part of the main room into two separate rooms. We lived right in the back. The space was hot and suffocating, I could not sleep, I had to move into the corridor to be able to fall asleep. That house tormented us!" At the time, it was difficult for the badly-off to rent a home, the few who could afford to rent an accommodation, exploited the situation to their advantage, dividing the building into several portions and subleasing them to the poorest, thus becoming principal tenants. "Principal tenants usually have a black heart," says B.

A., to agree to his friend and highlight the drama of this condition, starts narrating about the building that once stood in front of his house, a three-story building rented to seventy-two tenants. B. is skeptical: "Are you kidding?! How can you rent a house to seventy-two tenants?" In response A. begins to tell the story of the building, of how the principal tenant had managed to rent it to so many people. "Can't you believe it? The three floors of the building have been transformed into nine; in fact, a new level has been built for each story. Two new levels were built on the balcony. Finally, the roof was demolished, shifted into a living space, becoming the ninth floor of the building, where the principal tenant¹ was living.

"Why didn't the principal tenant live downstairs?" questions B.

"The rooms below were rented out to others, as no one was willing to live on the roof."

"What a miser, to live in those conditions only to earn more! Didn't the wind blow him away?

"He wasn't concerned about it. Indeed, he tied his head to the main beam with a rope, to not be swept away.

"That's odd! But even if there are nine floors, how can a house be rented to 72 tenants?" asks B. doubtful.

A. begins by explaining the division of spaces: "The patio was rented out to six tenants. The first tenant came from Shandong and sold rolls made in a clay oven. In less than a month, his space was split in half, and the principal tenant decided to rent it to a tailor. In less than two weeks, without consulting the two tenants, another space was created dividing their rooms in half; this new room was given to Mr. Shaoxing, who used it for his ironing business. Besides, a person who recycled gold teeth and old gold watches rented the stone staircase that connected the courtyard to the living room.

"But I count only four tenants," interrupts B.

A. goes on saying: "In the corner of the courtyard, above the drain hole, a stand was built, it was rented to the lottery ticket vendor. This tenant was in the most challenging conditions; he couldn't sit down but stand with his chest against the counter. When he wanted to leave, he had to take the bar with him, as the street vendors of Poria's² cream cake. In conclusion, the front door was demolished and, after installing an electric

light, it was possible to rent that area to the greengrocer; in summer, he sold mint water and ice cream; in winter, he sold baked sweet potatoes.

"You were right: that's six tenants!" comments B.

"If this seems incredible, think that on the ground floor, there was a total of 16 tenants! The living room was rented to a Shandongnese who performed the Wushu martial art; the back of the living room was occupied by a cigarette vendor from Suzhou; the space behind the latter was given to Shaoxingnese, who recycled the ashes of paper money³; the side part used as a garbage room and finally the back of the stairs was rented to the shoemaker. Although living behind the stairs may seem uncomfortable, it's the ideal position for the shoemaker, as he always keeps his head down for his work. The upper part of the stairs was rented out to the rickshaw driver.

"But how do you live on the stairs?" asks B. puzzled.

"He couldn't afford to rent a house; he didn't have a choice. He slept just lying down on a mat.

"Poor boy!"

A. goes on, saying: "And there's more! The kitchen was used as a grocery store, and next to it there was the Tiger stove, where hot water was sold. The side aisle was full of fried noodles stalls; the tea stand was near the sink, a convenient location because when the tea was finished, being near it allowed extra water to boil quickly." "So here you are, the sixteen tenants."

A. narrates: "From the second floor to the eighth floor, each level housed eight tenants, divided into these spaces: the main front and rear hall, the front wing, the rear wing, the front mezzanine, the back of the mezzanine, the front attic and the rear attic. Then multiplying the seven floors by eight tenants, present at each level, we arrive at 56; adding the 16 tenants of the ground floor, which I have already spoken to you about, we count a total of 72 tenants!

B. stunned: "Unbelievable! Who else lived in this house?"

"I forgot about many of them, but I could tell you about some.

On the second floor, there were two elderly who lived in front of the main room: the fishmonger and the newsagent. The back of the main hall was occupied by a temple of monks; a restaurant was opened in the attic and a bathroom under the roof. On the third floor, there were two dancers in the front of the main hall, the seller of fake gold rented the back; there was then a billiard room in the mezzanine and a ballroom on the attic."

A. continues: "On the fourth floor, the front of the main room was a night garden; in its back, there was a swimming pool. In the mezzanine, there was a bar; think that in the attic, there was a circus."

B. amazed: "Wow! And it never collapsed?"

"No, the circus only housed small animals."

"Wasn't there even a big snake?"

"No, just an eel."

"Were there whales or crocodiles?"

"A catfish!"

"Was there a tiger or a lion?"

"Yes."

"Ah! Were there?"

"Yes, but made of clay. There were also clay statues from Huishan."

A. goes on: "On the fifth floor, the main room was rented by an opera actor from Beijing; on the back of the same place there was a photographic studio; a real estate agent rented the mezzanine; the attic was occupied by an employment agency, but the latter had no job for six years. At the same time, on the sixth floor, in the front part of the main room, there was the Hua hui Tong⁴ gaming table; in the back part of the room there was a table for gambling; the mezzanine was transformed into a pawn shop, and the loft into a sauna: to open this activity the owner pawned his clothes and, having nothing to wear, he could just stay there.

"On the seventh floor, the part before the main hall was occupied by a Taoist temple; the back by a coffin shop; the mezzanine was rented by a gravedigger, and in the attic, there was a vegetarian restaurant. This arrangement was extremely functional: indeed, when a person died, the Taoist priests started the ceremony, the body was then deposited in a coffin (chosen in the shop on the back), the service continued later in the mezzanine, in the space rented from the funeral home, and finally there was a reception in the vegetarian restaurant, where you could eat tofu.

"Remarkable," replied B.

"On the eighth floor, there was a Catholic Church. Finally, the ninth floor housed the principal tenant of the house," concludes A.

"It must have been all bizarre and lively.

"You're right, but there were also many problems; actually, there was chaos all day.

"Tell me, what was going on?" asks B. intrigued

A. begins to tell: "One day, at dawn, the roll vendor from Shandong⁵ started arguing with someone. In fact, the cigarette salesman from Suzhou wanted to eat at his stand, but having no money with him, he asked the Shandongnese to credit him, but the latter refused. The two tenants quarreled, the rolls merchant got very angry and to scare the cigarette dealer picked up a knife from the ground, pointing it at him. The Suzhouese, seeing the knife, turned and ran away, fleeing to the corridor, but seeing the door closed, turned back, letting the Shandongnese reach him. The Suzhouese, in a hurry, seeing a basket of coal nearby, picked it up and threw it, intending to defend himself, but did not expect it not to be a basket of coal ..."

"What was it?"

"He was the three-year-old son of the owner of the fried noodles booth."

"How can you confuse a child with coal?"

A. explains that the aisle was dark, and it was not possible to see clearly. "By the time they realized it, the child had already fallen out of the basket and thrown into a frying pan, which in turn turned over.

"The baby must have burned."

"Yes, the Suzhounese knew he was in big trouble and fled immediately, the Shandongnese even slipped!"

A. goes on saying that the child's mother then cried desperately, calling the principal tenant "Principal tenant!". He came down from the ninth floor, and the baby's mother immediately said, "Principal tenant, my little monkey! My little monkey!" referring affectionately to her son; however, the principal tenant, not understanding what she was referring to, replied, "If you are so poor that you can barely afford rice, how can you financially support a monkey!".

The mother said: "My monkey is my son, in our Pudongnese dialect we call him monkey; the real problem here is the Shandongnese and the Suzhounese quarreling, the Suzhounese has thrown my son on the coals!" The principal tenant, however, replied: "The quarrels are not my concern, and I have nothing to do with the child!" The mother contradicted by saying: "The truth is that it is also your fault, you have to take some responsibility for it! In fact, the house is completely rented out and there is no place for the children to play. I have no choice but to have him playing in the hallways." However, the principal tenant replied, "Okay! All right! I'll be honest; I think you're very poor, I did you a favor by renting you a room; if you want to live here, fine, live here, otherwise you can go. It's too easy to find another tenant since there are many requests.

B. comments: "The principal tenant is clever! So what happened to the owner of the fried noodles stand?"

"The owner was very agitated, he said, "Principal tenant! If you think you're not responsible and even ask us to move, don't even bother going back to your room, as I'm going to report everything to the police, saying to them that you built the attic. But the principal tenant replied, mocking him, "I'm scared to death! I'm scared! It's like I've seen a ghost! Know that the commander of the judicial department is my godfather!"

"Damn, the police can't be trusted either. What happened next?" asked B., who was intrigued.

"The principal tenant went upstairs!"

"And what about the child?"

"The neighbors have collected money to send him to the hospital."

"Only the poor are willing to help the poor."

A. continues the story saying, "Immediately after solving this problem, something went wrong! The tailor and the ironer quarreled; a Qipao⁶ disappeared from the tailor's stand. Later it was found on the ironing board, which is why the ironer was found guilty of stealing the dress. However, it wasn't his fault: due to a gust of wind, the Qipao flew there. The ironer was wrong: he thought it was a dress of the second-floor dancers, which had been brought to be ironed.

B. comments: "What a complicated story!"

"You're right! Moreover, the tailor did not believe him and wanted to beat him up. That's why the ironer was very nervous and forgot to lift the iron from the cheongsam⁷, which was ironing. This burned out, creating a hole in the chest. By chance, this cheongsam belonged to a doctor who lived in the back of the living room. He was very poor, in fact he only owned one of these clothes. The only solution was to call the principal tenant."

According to A., the principal tenant had a role in that. He just wanted to make money, and he also rented all the corridors. With stalls so close together, something like that could easily happen.

After calling him, the principal tenant came down from the ninth floor. The owner of the ironing booth said first, "Principal tenant, even if I didn't steal the Qipao, but the wind brought it to my cabin, the tailor still wants me to pay for it; discussing with him, I forgot the iron on the cheongsam, creating a hole! The truth is, it's your fault too, you have to take some responsibility for it! The debate was born because the house is rented to too many people!"

The principal tenant then replied: "The quarrels are not my concern, nor I burnt the cheongsam. I'll be honest, and I think you're very poor, I did you a favor by renting you the room; if you want to live here, well, live here; otherwise, you can go. It is too easy to find another tenant since there are many requests."

B. interrupts by saying, "These two sentences again."

A. continues: "After talking, the principal tenant returned to his room. The tailor and ironer decided to share the cost of a new cloth again. However, at that moment it was too late, so they bought an already made dress, although, given the physical shape of the doctor, the dress was uncomfortable. It was already time for the doctor to visit the patients, so the only solution was to wear a shirt and shorts, put on wooden slippers, and borrow a fan to go and see the patients. In this way, the doctor pretended to be passing through his patients to justify the lack of the cheongsam."

A. goes on saying that despite having solved this problem, something went wrong. A Hua Tong Hui betting was taking place on the sixth floor. The rickshaw driver won a bet, and the next day, he went to collect the money. However, the gambling dealer was a rogue, and to avoid paying him, he beat him up. The two of them began to quarrel and beat each other up. Still, seeing many people coming to the dealer's aid, the rickshaw driver wisely decided to run away because the odds of winning were very low.

In a hurry, he escaped through the mezzanine door on the second floor, pouring boiling water on a coal stove. As the environment was dark, the rickshaw driver did not notice that his pants were stuck in a typical Chinese bucket-shaped oven that was on his way. Running around, with the small oven entangled in his trousers, he also bumped into the coal stove. That's how the stove's fiery coal fell and began to roll down the stairs. At the same time, on the back of the stairs, the shoemaker was quietly working on some shoes when suddenly he was hit by the burning charcoal that slipped into the collar of his shirt along his back. The shoemaker immediately called the principal tenant, as he held him responsible: if the stairs had been illuminated, this would not have happened.

The principal tenant came down from the ninth floor, asking for information about what had happened. The shoemaker said, "Look at how I am burnet!"

"It seems to be a slight burn, like a slice of smoked pork. It's not a big deal to me; it's not my problem," replied the principal tenant.

The shoemaker, in response, threatened him by saying, "Fine! If you're not going to take any action, I'll go to the police and say you built the attic!"

The principal tenant replied, "Dead! You're all dead if you dare talk about that!" "I'll be honest, I think you're very poor, I did you a favor by renting you the room; if you want to live here, well, live here; otherwise you can go. It's too easy to find another tenant".

B. interrupts A. concluding, "since there are many requests!"

A. surprised: "How do you know what the principal tenant was going to say?"

B. explains: "The principal tenant always repeats this sentence to avoid any problems."

The argument went on: "Principal tenant, go ask the gambling dealer for explanations!"

"You're a fool if you think I'm going to talk to him! He's a sworn friend of mine," said the principal tenant going back to the ninth floor.

Undeterred, the shoemaker began to curse him: "I hope the heat suffocates you! Or a flood will kill you!".

"I've got a raincoat!" the principal tenant mocked him.

The shoemaker continued: "Then I hope that you fall off a bridge or that it is the bridge itself that collapses on you, crushing you to the point of death!"

"I'd come out unscathed."

"I wish you all an electric shock while you're taking the tram!"

"I'd take the bus!"

B. comments: "This principal tenant is impertinent!"

A. clarifies that the story is not yet finished because immediately after solving this problem, something went wrong. "The two dancers on the third floor were practicing in their room. The room was very small, and in adverse conditions, indeed, several buckets covered the floor to remedy the water leaks. As they danced, one of the two overturned a bucket full of dirty water, which also wetted the entire room below, where two old men lived: the newsagent and the fishmonger.

The two were sleeping when the water began to flow into their room. "What's going on! What's going on! Old Ningbonese⁸! Wake up," said one to the other.

The Ningbonese replied, "What's the problem? But how is it possible that there is such a loss! It looks like a waterfall! It's probably the dancers upstairs! Who knows what they're up to!"

"Even the blankets are getting wet, but don't worry about it now, rather call the principal tenant immediately, and the house is battered, the floor is full of infiltrations, so this problem should concern him!"

As soon as he arrived, the principal tenant said, mocking them: "What's going on here? Ah, the two old ghosts of the building! What are you doing? Are you playing the 'san cha kou'⁹?".

"Principal tenant, the dancers upstairs have spilled water, flooding even our floor, now all the blankets are getting wet, you have to pay for them!"

"Yes, my Indian silk quilt is also being ruined; it's so precious that it never crumples; it costs 9 yuan and 9 cents!" said the newsagent.

The principal tenant replied, "You're kidding me! This is not my business at all! I think it's a joke. Addressing the newsagent, he made fun of him by calling him little Wuxi¹⁰.

"How dare you to call me like that," replied the newsagent.

The fishmonger meddled: "Since you, the principal tenant, think you are not responsible, well! We will behave accordingly! We also have a bucket of dirty water and a hole in the floor. We'll flip the bucket of water downstairs and tell everyone who wakes up that it was you who told us to do it!"

"What?" Said the principal tenant frightened

"Pour it down!" the fishmonger encouraged him.

"Stay calm and don't get angry old ghost! You know the Shandongnese practicing wushu¹¹martial arts rented the space downstairs, his fist is the size of a sink! I can't handle it," said the principal tenant.

The newsagent replied, "Well then, pay us back two blankets!"

"One?" He tried to haggle with the principal tenant.

"Pour the bucket," he urged the fishmonger.

"All right, I'll pay you two!" said the principal tenant, returning to his room.

B. comments the story: "The principal tenant never moves a finger except when he is in the corner! He only does something when he is frightened, as in this case, where he should have faced a stronger person!"

A. goes on saying that despite having solved this problem, something went wrong. While on the fifth floor, an actor from Beijing opera was practicing singing, Changshu's new servicewoman, on the second floor, was about to go to bed while thinking about her work. The bathroom cleaner¹² thought that someone would soon reuse the bucket; she whispered to herself as she walked, "This job is exhausting. The bathroom is never empty, not even at night. If I clean the bathroom at two o'clock, the bucket is full at three o'clock. I won't clean it tomorrow, but I will do it now."

Who knows who ate a banana, and then throw the peel on the stairs, the fact is that the maid did not see it and slipped over it with the toilet in her hand falling on the stand of fried noodles. All this happened while four bowls of noodles had just been placed on the table...

The owner of the noodle stand said, "Waiter, send these four bowls to the hotel across the street!" In the hotel there were four people who had been playing Mahjong¹³ for two days and two nights, so their eyes were tired. When they saw the noodles coming, they ate immediately, not noticing any problem. They didn't even smell anything because they all had a sharp cold.

One of the customers said to the waiter: "Honestly, in the past, these noodles were not bad, but today they are particularly good, there is also oil and water in the right quantity, and you have also added a meatball" ... but immediately after the chaos happened.

The result was that the noodle stand was almost destroyed; the owner called screaming the principal tenant, who came down from the ninth floor and asked why they were so loud. He said to the maid: "The bucket of the bath is empty, which means that you are responsible for this inconvenience. For this reason, you have to pay five bowls of noodles; dropping the toilet is also bad luck, so I demand that you buy me a great incense and a candle, to have three years of peace!"

The maid replied, "Even though I caused this damage, there were only four bowls. Why do I have to pay for five of them?"

"The truth is, I want to eat one: it's night, I wasn't hungry when I was sleeping, now that you've woken me up I'm hungry," he said, grinning.

"What a shameless man," comments B.

A. clarifies that the story is not yet finished because immediately after solving this problem, something went wrong: "From my property, I've heard that in the house next to mine there was a boisterous and agitated person. I immediately thought he was a thief and promptly notified the police station. The officers instantly intervened with two patrols, surrounding the house inhabited by the seventy-two tenants. They shot at the building, surrounding the house for more than two hours. Nevertheless, the robbers were not captured, so the cops returned to the station. Almost no one was injured, except the principal tenant, who found himself with some bullet residues in his mouth, stuck in his throat."

B. then asks: "How could this happen?"

A. resumes: "The principal tenant was collecting the first installment of the rent from a new tenant, who paid with a gold bar. The principal tenant, happily with the ingot in his hands, opened his mouth, and smiled; it was at that moment that he was surprised by a gunshot!

Sent immediately to the hospital, the doctors promptly called the police to make sure it was a large bullet residue, tough to extract.

"Has fire been opened around the house of the seventy-two tenants?" a doctor asked the police.

"No, not even the machine guns were used."

"So, you only used one sniper rifle?"

"No, not even that!"

"All this is very strange," said the doctor closing the call. He went on to refer to the nurse: "Miss Wang, prepare everything for surgery, prepare the X-rays, projectors, pliers, scissors, scythes, awl, ax, hoe and borrow the hook from the butcher's shop, a drill, explosives...".

"What is it? A mining operation?" asked Miss Wang

"Don't move! Cough! Cough! Cough!" the doctor ordered the principal tenant. "There it is!" "Who would have thought! It's not a bullet; it's just a pot cap," concluded the doctor.

B. intrigued asked, "How could this happen?"

"A bullet hit the cap of the pot that bounced into the mouth of the principal tenant," replied A. concluding the story.

NOTES:

Principal tenant¹: Who grants a building in a sublease; who gives in sublease. The principal tenant does not own the asset in question, but he also pays the rent.

Poria's cream²: Poria is a fungus that grows on the roots of various conifers.

Paper money³: During the day of the deceased, Qingmingjie, it is a tradition (especially in non-continental China) to burn earthly goods, in paper version, to deliver them to their dear deceased, in the world of the afterlife. The most common practice is to burn the paper with the appearance of a banknote so that the smoke and then the money go up in the sky.

Hua Hui Tong⁴: Traditional Chinese gambling. The goal of the game is to guess the exact combination of figures and names, chosen by the game dealer. The game consists of 60 characters, which can be combined with 60 names.

Shandong⁵: Shandong is a coastal province located along the easternmost region of the People's Republic of China. Its abbreviated name is Lu, thus inheriting the historical name of an ancient kingdom, the kingdom of Lu that existed in this region during the Spring and Autumn Period.

Qipao⁶: typical Chinese dress, worn in China by women.

Cheongsam⁷: another typical Chinese dress, worn in China by men.

Ningbonese⁸: a person from the province of Ningbo, China.

San Cha Kou⁹: name of a famous opera, which tells the story of Shui Hu Zhuan.

Wuxi¹⁰: Person from Wuxi, a city near Shanghai in East China.

Wushu¹¹: The term Wushu, literally translated from Chinese to "Martial Art," was born in China and is considered the forerunner of all Martial Arts. Wushu has developed for millennia, being an integral part of different Chinese religions and cultures, not only providing a physical preparation but also a psychological ability to strengthen thoughts, vitality as well as health. For this long period, it has also been adopted as an art of defense.

Bathroom¹²: the bathroom, in Chinese shikumen, was at the time composed of a simple bucket, which had to be emptied periodically by a person in charge of it.

Mahjong¹³: Mahjong is a board game made up of several tiles; the game requires skill, intelligence, calculation, and luck and is usually played by four people. Born in China probably in the nineteenth century is now also widespread in the rest of the world, especially the United States and Japan.