

Lesley Walter

ASIA FROM AN ARMCHAIR

Ang Chin Geok, *Wind and Water*
(Random House, 1997).

Coming upon Ang Chin Geok's book, *Wind and Water*, seemed, itself, somehow fated. An aunt and uncle dropped in over Christmas, and happened to mention they'd had a *fengshui* (also known as *hongsui* or *fongsoi*) reading of their home carried out. I hadn't heard the term before, but was fascinated by the concept, as I am by many things oriental. The spiritualism (as distinct from religiosity) that appears such an integral part of everyday life in eastern cultures makes western cultures seem comparatively devoid of spirituality. My relatives had been quick to point out that the wealth corner in our home housed the laundry tubs and washing machine, which meant that our fortune was being wasted, our wealth, washed down the drain ... But what was even more alarming, the area designated important in terms of relationships (i.e., the back right hand corner of the house) was missing! Our house, you see, is recessed in that spot ... However, some consolation was afforded by the fact that a large (Chinese, in fact!) mirror on the internal wall facing out onto this void did manage to reflect some of that space back into our living

room. Perhaps, I reasoned, things might still work out ...

Anyway, next day was Christmas, so there was no time to get the builders in just then. Also, when I told my husband of our doubtful personal prognosis later that evening, he responded (not uncommonly) with a fair degree of scepticism. Our relationship survived Christmas Eve and—here's the fortuitous part—my step-daughter sent me *Wind and Water* for Christmas. For in the beginning of that novel, the narrative voice of Soo Teen explains that, according to Chinese belief, an individual's destiny

had all to do with one's *hongsui*, a word formed from the characters for wind and water ... in the *hongsui* scheme of things the influence of natural topography and the directions of the compass could bless or blight the destiny of individuals, families, clans, ancestral groups and whole communities. To jinx one's *hongsui* was to attract a curse which might affect untold generations (4)

She continues:

[People's] whole physical environment was an expression of hidden forces, but if they were adept they could manipulate the elements to promote their own *hongsui* (5).

The novel explores the way in which a damned *hongsui*, or a malign fortune, was thought to be passed down from one ancestral generation

to another. *Wind and Water* is a book rich in culture-based "superstitions," in belief in black magic, sorcery and the supernatural. Chapter 1 opens with Soo Teen claiming: "In my parents' country the landscape teemed with demons and spirits." This refers not just to the physical landscape of mainland China, but to the "spiritual landscape ... carried in the hearts and minds" (8) of all those with a Chinese heritage, including Singaporean-born Ang Chin Geok herself. Not that the novel gives total credibility to Chinese geomancy. Comparatively uneducated herself, Soo Teen concedes,

that amongst the sophisticated elites, lettered in the works of Confucious and Lao Tzu, hong sui was regarded with amusement or contempt, dismissed as the popular superstition of the peasantry, or even some elaborate scam to relieve the new rich of their money. Nor was it regarded with equal awe by all the clans and groups (11).

And by the end of the novel, Soo Teen's Australian-born granddaughter rejects the "unhelpful Chinese [notion of] fatalism" (302) and, forsaking "the bonds of hong sui which imprisoned [her] ancestors" (303), assumes responsibility for her own destiny. While the West, then, has become increasingly interested in recent decades in oriental mysticism and eastern philosophies, western influence upon the East has meant a

renunciation of the same, at least in part, by many eastern people. With advances in technology, increasing opportunities for travel and easy access to global information, countries' rituals are becoming hybridised.

A good book should not only transport the reader into a different realm through its characters and story, but to another world and/or time through its setting. Books are a wonderful (as well as a safe and cheap) means of travel. Place is of ultimate importance in this text, and people and place are artfully woven together throughout to make a richly-textured, multi-dimensional and wholly satisfying novel. Since I have spent two years of the past decade living in Singapore, the topography, customs, festivals and rituals to which Ang refers in knowledgeable detail throughout the novel evoked special memories in me. But while I could readily be transported back into the steamy vegetation of Newton or into the noise and pollution of Selegie and Orchard Roads, Ang's emotive and sensuous attention to setting will, I'm sure, similarly transport the uninitiated and the untravelled.

For food-lovers, the text contains many mouth-watering descriptions of lovingly prepared Chinese cuisine. From page 73, we are "fed" four pagefuls of rich, aromatic dishes and exquisite Chinese delicacies. In many of the descriptions of food, language is so distilled and so subtly imbued with emotion, that it becomes pure

poetry. Take, for example, the presentation of the tempting delicacies brought to Madam Seah after her confinement (21) or the jewel-like clarity of the writing in the following description of a bowl of congee:

Threads of fresh ginger root, pungent and pale yellow, and bright rings of shallots, green as jade, decorated the surface. A drop of aromatic sesame oil, gleaming like an amber bead, balanced on a tiny ring of shallot (97).

Ostensibly, this is a book about women. It traces the lives of four generations of the one family, from the emigration of Madam Seah from Swatow to Singapore as the affianced bride to a groom she has never met, to the life in Australia of her great-granddaughter, Lettie Hamilton, whose father is white Australian. As rich and satisfying as the novel is at this personal level, Ang also traces, through these women's fortunes, not only the gradual changes wrought upon East by West, but a colourful and living history of Singapore from the time of British colonisation in 1819.

In the financial ruin and change of fortune of individuals such as Ong Hock and Madam Seah and their family, we see, on a larger scale, the move of middle-class Chinese citizenry from leafy residential areas to a more crowded existence in commercial downtown Singapore. It is a transition from "spacious halls

and courtyards" to a bathroom shared between four families and a communal kitchen (43). Given Singapore's physical size, this can be seen as foreshadowing the problems confronting modern Singapore in housing its millions of residents. As well, the move of this one family from a purely Chinese existence into an existence within a diverse cultural community marks the birth of Singapore as a multicultural nation (44-5). Where Ong Hock unsuccessfully attempted to turn his mind "from rare songbirds and Sung Dynasty poetry to balance sheets and the intricacies of company tax" (45), Singapore, as a nation, succeeded. That the interests of the private citizen are subsumed in Singapore for the benefit of the state, is an incontrovertible fact. In the move of Soo Teen and her sisters from a sheltered domestic environment within a hitherto wealthy family into the noisy industrialised one of the Bata shoe factory (45-6), we are shown something of the effects of Singapore's industrialisation upon personal lives and histories.

Residing in Singapore during the year the country celebrated 21 years as an independent nation, I was witness to the fervent nationalistic spirit exhibited at that time, despite racial hierarchies which still exist there. It was especially interesting to read, then, of the origins of such nationalism in "Metamorphosis," of the ways in which race boundaries, in particular between the Malays and the Chinese, began to alter after

the Japanese invasion. But well before that time, Singapore was already becoming a "melting-pot," in which "hybrid rituals" were inevitably evolving (74). In "Metamorphosis," we also witness the introduction of technology to an island which, despite its size, has become, in the past fifty years, one of the most highly industrialised countries in the world. With so much of the "old Singapore" now erased, it was enlightening to read about life there during those early years of emigration of the Chinese to Singapore. I could visualise Ong Hock in the figures of the Chinese men my family and I sat amongst at the Tiong Bahru coffee shop, where every Sunday morning, they gather to show their songbirds off in finely-crafted cages to fellow-Singaporean and tourist alike.

Wind and Water is, paradoxically, a bitter indictment as much as a joyous celebration of traditional Chinese culture. It is both an elegiac tribute to, and a relieved casting off of, Singaporean/Chinese cultural history. While the book acknowledges the cultural prominence of China in centuries past, Ang praises western progress (through Soo Teen's narrative in particular) in terms of the educational opportunities, hence intellectual freedom and power, available to women in the western world. Allowed a too brief taste of education herself, Soo Teen states:

... through knowing, I saw how one might fashion a vehicle to escape

from the imprisoning web of mindless, pointless, interminable household chores, from illiteracy, ignorance and powerlessness. More than anything else, I sensed that through the avenue of education lay the greener pastures of freedom from the rigid walls of middle-class Chinese convention (31-32).

She acknowledges the isolation, frustration and deprivation of the traditional Chinese woman, and advances a powerful feminist argument for female liberation through education. The traditional and age-old Chinese custom of foot-binding becomes symbolic of an even more insidious form of hobbling. It becomes a trope for the past mental crippling of the female quotient of the Chinese population. For, while Chinese women might be seen to have wielded certain power within the family, the sources and effects of this power were often only negative. In Madam Seah's case, power resides solely in her indomitable will (38) rather than in intellectual acumen. Soo Teen notes:

From early childhood I had watched my mother's mind resist growth and enlightenment, watched her superstition stiffen into dogma and her suspicions harden into orthodoxy, of a domestic but no less damaging kind (70).

Chinese women, traditionally, were "handmaidens, lesser beings ... drilled in subservience" (47); slaves to autocratic brothers, fathers, husbands and husbands' families. In a

social system which, for thousands of years, worshipped male children, a daughter was nothing more than an "onerous responsibility" (42), "without value" even in her mother's eyes (47).

Yet, despite Chinese women having "a life of no significance" publicly (title of Chapter 5), *Wind and Water* is very much a women-centred text. It describes a pervasively female world. Soo Teen remarks that, "Happiness in a Chinese family equates with many members and lots of bustle. And plenty to eat" (73). The scenes in which women are involved together in domestic activities such as food-preparation evoke a very real sense of emotional sharing. In "Metamorphosis," Soo Teen reflects:

As much as ever, we poured our energies into making our family gatherings the focal point of our lives. Because we were illiterate, our retellings and reminiscences were the vehicles for transmitting our family histories, folk wisdom and mythologies, our only means of receiving and passing on our culture. Through such gatherings my mother had learned about her mother's life and society, and my sisters and I repeated the process for our daughters in an attempt to preserve the seamless tradition which binds our womenfolk and their sorrows ... Our men were not involved in our gatherings: ours is a saga of long-suffering women (133-4).

Since a Chinese woman's worth resided only in her beauty, her feminine submission and her ability to bear an heir to her husband's lineage, Madam Seah suffers the greatest ignominy of all when she produces five daughters and no male offspring. The pregnant bondmaid, Lily, to whom Madam Seah offers refuge (in the hope of thereby exacting a "son" for herself), is, like every other Chinese woman, merely the "incubator of a potential son" (26). With regard to beauty, the youthful Bee Tin tragically precipitates her own rape and subsequent death because she is unable to subjugate her own acculturated sense of female worth (as her husband's beautiful new bride) by wearing men's asexual apparel upon the Japanese occupation of Singapore. Ironically, the husband whose approval she so single-mindedly seeks, tragically rejects her as a consequence.

It is humbling for the western reader of *Wind and Water* (as it is for any traveller in a distant clime) to be put in the position of foreigner, or *angmo*. Western readers are forced to see themselves through Chinese eyes, and what's more, the picture is far from flattering. While the British may have considered themselves Singapore's white masters, to the Chinese, they were "red-haired apes" (28), "ugly little men with pink skin mottled by patches of freckles" (203). As a western woman, I must accept that my nose appears large, my teeth protruding (203), my arms hairy and my voice too loud (45).

Much of the writing is delicately poetic. Soo Teen's realisation of Bee Tin's death has the quality of a Chinese brush painting:

A young life had flitted out of our world like a moth unseen, and I had been quite oblivious of the whisper of its wingbeat (112).

In keeping with its eastern flavour, the novel incorporates meditative, philosophic moments that are both poetry and inspirational credos. Soo Teen reflects:

If there is a measure of how useful we have been on this earth in our short lives, I wonder if it might not be the gap which we leave when we die (68).

For me, the narrative loses pace and a good deal of its interest when the voices of Peng An and her daughter, Lettie, take over. This is due in part to poor editing. Large slabs of information with which the reader is already familiar are repeated in unnecessary factual recounts. But the overriding weakness in these latter sections has to do with setting, and reinforces my earlier comment about the importance of place in this novel. For it seems to me that *Wind and Water* becomes less compelling, the further it moves away from Singaporean soil. When it crosses the water to Australia, the novel tosses much of its magic and its poetry to the wind.