

**Amanda Lee Koe and Ng Yi-Sheng, eds. *Eastern Heathens: An Anthology of Subverted Asian Folklore*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2013. 137 pp. ISBN: 978-981-07-5680-2.**

In September 2011 an intriguing call for submissions appeared on Facebook, Tumblr and other websites for “an anthology of short stories based on [Asian] folklore,” expressing the editors’ wish “to hear these tropes subverted, perverted or simply adapted to reflect our times.” The result is *Eastern Heathens: An Anthology of Subverted Asian Folklore*, a collection of fourteen stories inspired by folktales from the Near and Far East, India and Southeast Asia.

The brainchild of Singapore-based Amanda Lee Koe and Ng Yi-Sheng, *Eastern Heathens* is a handsome digest-sized volume published by Ethos Books, a small press actively engaged with Singapore’s thriving literary scene and its young avant-garde. The cover features the contributing authors’ names arranged around a carpet-like graphic that suggests the finely-wrought interweavings of past and present, myth and realism, contained within. Stories by familiar Singaporean writers Cyril Wong and Alfian Sa’at (the latter deemed the country’s literary *enfant terrible*) share space with those of up-and-comers like Bryan Cheong and Anila Angin. Each story is followed by a brief synopsis of the folktale that inspired it – a placement which suggests that enjoyment of the story need not depend upon the summary. The tales draw variously from the *Arabian Nights* and *Ramayana*, Vietnamese and Japanese fox-spirit legends, the *bantu* demons of Malay mythology, and various folktales of Chinese, Cambodian, Singaporean, Javanese and Philippine origin. If the overall result seems aesthetically uneven owing to the project’s ambitious scope and range of authors and influences, this is somewhat offset by its ethos of inclusivity and the reflection that with any anthology (to borrow a phrase from Jason Erik Lundberg’s story) such unevenness is “always a risk.”

Most of the stories deal with issues of gender identity and sexuality, subverting the patriarchal ideologies that inform the original folktales. Among those that explore the theme of female resistance to male domination is Hoa Pham’s “Fox Wedding,” which inverts the plot of a common East Asian myth in which a fox spirit is captured in human form, betrothed to a selfish man, and later attacked by the family dog. In Pham’s version, the fox-woman is a sort of freelance liberator of women, an outsider who gleefully sics the family’s caged and “starved German Shepherd” on its cruel master (12).

Similarly, Li Hujia’s “First Weave” attempts to offer its protagonist, the youngest of seven immortal Chinese weaving fairies, the agency denied her in the original – although her ultimate choice between the domestic “easy life” of weaving at the celestial court and the more difficult, mundane matters of

“survival, or putting food on the table, or feeding children” on Earth drags with it some unquestioned, possibly Confucian-inflected cultural assumptions about the roles of women in society (90).

Abha Iyengar’s “The Gods of War” – a sophisticated, tightly-plotted retelling of an episode from *The Ramayana* – seems to suffer from a similar myopia. The male characters are without exception sexist, morally reprehensible and brutal in their treatment of women. Malini (a name associated with the “invincible” Mother Goddess Durga and her incarnation as the fierce Kali, the embodiment of *shakti*, or feminine empowerment) is stereotyped as emotionally volatile, cunning and vengeful: “Her eyes wild and her hair an untamed black cloud all around her. She looked like Kali” (103). What saves the story from this banal polemic is the more circumspect consciousness of the narrator, Tanya, through which the bloody gender wars that ensue are filtered. At the story’s climax she reflects, “So much death and destruction, mistrust and mutilation. No one won such wars” (103). This formulation neatly ironises the otherwise too simplistic dialectic – while taking nothing away from the story’s powerful indictment of male chauvinism and violence in India.

In Cheong’s story, drawn from a Cambodian myth, a neglectful mother is transformed into a caring one who attempts to save her three daughters from being turned into birds by a forest spirit. Ironically, the villagers that discover the woman’s “body pecked full of holes and drained of blood” do not understand her maternal sacrifice, clamouring that she “must have been an evil mother who received her just punishment” (8). Here Cheong cleverly subverts the original tale’s moralistic “warning to all wicked wives and mothers” by inducing the reader to identify with the mother on her nightmarish journey (8).

Other stories challenge traditional constructions of gender and sexuality from LGTB perspectives. Wong’s “The Dragon Prince’s Letter to His Father” invokes the Chinese myths of Ao Guang, the tyrannical Dragon King of the Eastern Sea who exacted onerous tributes from the people through his ability to unleash terrible natural disasters. Here the prince has renounced his claim to the throne by running “away with a human (a man, no less; and not even royalty at that, but a carpenter’s son)” (19). The prince writes a moving letter to his father asking him to read “with an open heart and an equally expansive mind,” then casts his message-in-a-bottle to the waves, in “a symbolic gesture of moving on from the past, so that I may live happily in the future” (21, 19). Angin’s “The Switch” updates the popular tale of Kamar al-Zaman in *The Arabian Nights* by permitting the Turkish prince to fall for his male counterpart from Shanghai, who responds to his concerns about Qur’anic strictures on homosexuality with the progressive question, “Can a God of love [Allah] forbid love of any kind?” (61). An elaborate ruse involving cross-dressing and the adoption of a baby allows the princes to wed unchallenged, although the closeted lifestyle they are

obliged to conduct complicates the otherwise fairy-tale happy ending – perhaps less a compromise than a pointed commentary on Islamic orthodoxy.

While seemingly an obvious point, the blending of mythology and literary (or magical) realism in these stories is worth consideration, as this genre-splicing is accomplished in such a variety of ways. Lundberg’s “Always a Risk” blends science fiction, fantasy and Pure Land Buddhism to create an East-Asian steampunk world where hydromancy and technomancy are established sciences and “Fleetline Coupes” with “phlogiston engines” are driven into the “interstitial realm, the buffer zone between the dominions of man and demon” (120, 117). Alfian Sa’at’s scathingly funny social satire, “A Penunggu Story,” describes how Malay *bantu* poltergeists perpetrate acts of resistance to the ironic forced resettlement of the local Malay population for the construction of a “new Malay Heritage Museum” (modelled upon Singapore’s Malay Heritage Centre in the Kampong Gelam precinct) (29). Jennani Durai’s “Tenali Raman Redux” is another humorous, modern updating replete with Tamil newspapers, corrupt prison wardens and airmail stamps, inspired by one of the apocryphal South Indian tales surrounding the sixteenth century court poet and trickster figure, Tenali Ramakrishna. Those familiar with this folktale will anticipate the ending of the story almost before it begins – although Durai’s deft, irreverent handling of the material makes the reader’s foreknowledge one of the *plaisirs du texte*.

The anthology’s principal flaws are the preponderance of Chinese and Singaporean settings, characters and folktales (six of the fourteen stories) and the concomitant lack of stories drawn from the Korean, Thai, Mongolian and Persian traditions (to name a few). Given the project’s locus of operation in Singapore, this is likely attributable to the particular quality and variety of submissions received by the editors, and therefore the omissions are probably less egregious than they appear. That said, the collection would be impoverished without the inclusion of editor Amanda Lee Koe’s “Siren,” the only story to tackle a distinctly modern (and capitalist) myth – that of the “Merlion,” a “creature with the head of a lion and the tail of a fish... created in 1964 as the logo of the Singapore Tourism Board (STB)” (45).

The real value of the stories compiled in *Eastern Heathens* (including those of which limitations of space preclude mention) is how they illuminate the cultural value systems underlying the original myths. Twentieth century thinkers such as Carl Jung, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Joseph Campbell, Alan Watts and Mircea Eliade emphasised that myths are crucial to the formation of social collectivities, while simultaneously pointing out that the Axial, early Judeo-Christian and Islamic mythic symbols (which still predominate in the modern world’s major religions) are no longer able to function as they did (or were intended to) in the respective eras of their formulation and development. Religious fundamentalism – with its monolithic dogma and tendencies toward

intolerance and violent oppression – these thinkers argued, emerges precisely from a blind acceptance and veneration of the symbols themselves, resulting in discourse utterly dissociated from the religious, spiritual or mystical truths the symbol is meant to contain or express. According to this way of thinking, what are needed today are modern myths that speak to us, that unite us as a species, that lend meaning and significance to our fragmented lives. The stories in *Eastern Heathens* work to expose the extent to which our present values, mores and attitudes remain consistent (or part ways) with those found in the original folktales – a valuable exercise in an era in which national myths are embraced, adored and passed on, but rarely questioned.

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