

Suchen Christine Lim, *The River's Song*. Twickenham, UK: Aurora Metro, 2013. 306 pp. ISBN 978-1-906582-98-2.

In 1977 Singapore's Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, ordered the cleanup of the polluted Singapore River and its squalid urban banks. The project, which took nearly a decade and cost an estimated 2.85 million dollars, coincided with the economic and cultural rise of Singapore. What tends to get silted over by this narrative of modern progress is the forced displacement of the several thousand riparian squatters, hawkers, boatmen and coolies that lived and worked beside the river – a compulsory mass relocation that deprived many families of their livelihood, community and way of life. These physical and cultural dislocations form the headwaters of Suchen Christine Lim's latest novel, *The River's Song*, an ambitious exploration of love and loss, memory and hope, an ungraspable past and uncertain future.

As with much of her work, Lim's sixth work of fiction gives potent, evocative voice to Singaporeans marginalised or left behind by the inexorable march of modernity. Malaysian-born Lim moved to Singapore at age fourteen, later attended the Iowa Writer's Workshop and worked for the Ministry of Education before retiring to dedicate her energies to writing full time. Her third novel, *Fistful of Colours* (1992) won the Singapore Literature Prize, and in 2012 Lim was awarded the Southeast Asia Write Award in recognition of her work. The subtitle of her recent short story collection, *The Lies that Build a Marriage: Stories of the Unsung, Unsaid and Uncelebrated in Singapore* (2007), neatly delineates the contours of her concern for the voiceless and downtrodden as represented in her fiction.

At its core, *The River's Song* is concerned with exploring Heraclitus' philosophical proposition that "one can never step into the same river twice" in terms of personal identity – for Lim uses the Singapore River as a figure for the ever-changing, developing self. The novel charts the currents and eddies in the life of Wong Ping Ping, a Stanford music professor and one-time street urchin who escapes poverty by mastering the *pipa*, a pear-shaped Chinese string instrument. Through a loosely organised assemblage of scenes and flashbacks, the novel follows Ping from her youthful days as a squatter on the banks of the Singapore River to her ambiguous, Odysseus-like homecoming some thirty years later. Ping's often painful coming-of-age is mirrored by the development of the river and the social upheaval this public works project creates, the parallel nature of these narratives lending a kind of unity to what is otherwise a highly fragmented, chronologically chaotic story told from multiple points of view. For the river, for the city through which it flows, and for Ping, the novel argues, "Change was inevitable" – and as the novel's allusions to Nichiren Buddhism suggest, with change comes suffering (289).

Ping's hardscrabble life begins in earnest when at age ten she is effectively disowned and all but abandoned by her mother. Yoke Lan, the "Pipa Queen of Chinatown" who entertains men by night in the local teahouses bordering the river, has been maligned by a jealous wife and journeys to Hong Kong in hopes of securing work and a husband (18). The dribbles of money she sends don't cover the tiny room Ping inhabits above a local coffeehouse, and she soon finds herself downgraded to a "wire cage above the stairwell," where her budding body attracts the leering attention of the landlord's teenage son, Fatt Chye, and his chums (70). When Yoke Lan eventually returns as the respectable wife of a wealthy trader, Ping is sent for on the condition that she address her mother as "Auntie" (93).

The only bright spots in Ping's adolescent life are the handsome, slightly older Weng, his father, Uncle Chong Suk, and the music they share. From Weng, an aspiring flautist, Ping learns urban survival tactics such as how to sell vegetables of dubious provenance and how to catch guppies to sell to the local pet store. Weng's father, a kindly but exacting *pipa* teacher, quickly takes Ping under his wing, nurturing her natural talent for the instrument. A romance blooms between the young couple, but is cut short when Ping is sent to college in America and Weng is arrested for protesting the forced relocation of the riverside community – leaving Ping with an appalling, unspoken secret that will haunt their severed relationship for decades.

Music is central to the novel. Against the backdrop of the city's new glass-and-steel towers that loom "like steel-clad warriors ready to do battle with the rest of the world," the ancient Chinese folksongs that Ping learns to play function as an attempt to hold onto tradition and cultural identity, a plaintive counterpoint to an ever-encroaching modernity (233). Living "as a free woman in Berkeley these past thirty years," the adult Ping admits that she is "surprised that my heart still feels pulled both ways," expressing her "ambivalence about who I really am sometimes" (129). Yet through it all flows the music. Attending her first class at the Wong Clan Association, Ping's mind becomes

filled with the tumultuous music of Uncle Chong Suk's *pipa*. Like a fierce white gorge in the mountains, it had rushed through her heart. Listening to him that night, she realised that there were two kinds of music in the world – one that stirred and troubled the heart, and one that soothed the senses and dulled the brain. There was no mistaking which music she most wanted to learn. (66)

Such passages contrast sharply in tone with the many descriptions of the changing cityscape:

Office blocks tower above the river mouth, shrunken by landfills. The city's hunger for land has eaten up parts of the river. The placid ribbon

rippling darkly between the grey concrete embankments is much narrower now than the broad, meandering, congested, teeming, busy waterway of my childhood when the expanse of blue sky arcing over the river mouth was wide and high. Instead of bumboats and twakows crowding its banks, now it's the pubs and restaurants that pack the riverfront. (279)

For Weng as well, music is cathartic and soul-saving. Now the Singapore Chinese Orchestra's "principal flautist and dizi player," Weng returns to the river to play his bamboo flute just after a ceremony declaring the Prime Minister's "Clean River campaign a success" (229, 12). His music turns the heads of the elderly men gathered along the riverfront, "their hearts stirring. They knew that sound. It was part of a forgotten song.... The man's music choked their hearts" (11). "Only Music Can Save Us" is the title of the penultimate of the novel's eight sections, a potent reminder of the threat that globalisation poses to cultural diversity (227).

The River's Song is marred by two particular flaws. First is the shifting point of view. Lim uses first-person present tense narration for scenes dealing with the adult Ping returning to Singapore, yet slides into third-person past tense when presenting Ping's flashbacks, as well as scenes written from Yoke-Lan's and Weng's points of view (the latter to which Ping often has no direct access or knowledge). Thus the narration is split between a limited-omniscient authorial voice and that of a first-person character in the story – a paradox that is neither explained nor logically reconcilable. Second, while Ping is generally drawn as a highly sympathetic character (as in the scene where an office worker spits on her and calls her a "Whore's daughter"), there are moments of mawkish melodrama that strain credibility (13). For example, spending her first winter at the snowbound University of Iowa, the lonely and isolated Ping reflects upon her indefensible betrayal of Weng in a maudlin scene that concludes:

Weng, Weng, her heart called out to him. Forgive... forgive m – but the word was stuck in her throat.
That night, she slashed her wrists. (210)

Encountering such a passage, creative writing teachers (Lim herself is one) might very well wince, having been reminded of the countless stacks of undergraduate short stories about suicide they have been obliged to read.

Despite these stumbles (which may draw some readers up short), taken as a novel about identity and "what it means to be Singaporean," *The River's Song* is absorbing, thought-provoking and full of beautifully crafted prose that evokes that particular blend of haunting melancholy and yearning with which readers of Japanese novelist Murakami Haruki are familiar. Early in the novel the young Ping learns that just as "Every river changes course the further it flows from the

source,” people can work toward shaping their destinies – even though this often entails a difficult swimming against the currents swirling around them. As Weng suggests to her at the novel’s close, “Identity is an act of will, you know. You can choose” (284). There is perhaps some irony here in that Weng’s notion is generally regarded as a Western (one might even argue an American) conception. Whatever its provenance, the idea that each individual is inherently capable of agency (despite the inexorable historical, social and cultural currents in which one may find oneself swept up) is a compelling one, and *The River’s Song* champions this worldview with great beauty and not a little pluck.

Roderick B. Overaa
University of Tampa, USA