

THE
ADOPTED

The Adopted: Stories from Angkor

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**THE
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STORIES FROM ANGKOR

HENG SIOK TIAN

PHAN MING YEN

YEOW KAI CHAI

YONG SHU HOONG

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AN INTRODUCTION: THE ENIGMA OF ARRIVALS

ON the afternoon we arrived at Siem Reap, it was drizzling and the queue at the immigration counter at the arrival lounge of the airport stretched out to the tarmac.

We saw a sky filled with grey clouds and despite the breeze we felt the weight of the humidity. We were grateful that the queue moved quickly.

Throughout the journey to our hotel – which was at the outskirts of the town and near the Angkor area – the countryside reminded us of the Malaysia and Singapore we knew when we were growing up or which we had seen in old photographs. The road that turned off to the hotel was tarred but littered with potholes so that, after the rain, half of the road was covered with mud. The rooms were comfortable although after a day we noticed there were no mirrors in them except in the bathrooms.

Across from the hotel was a temple. One night, after we had returned from the ruins of Angkor, which most tourists jostle to see, we asked the girl at the front desk where else we could visit. She said we should go to the temple across the road to see the skulls.

On the morning of our final day at Siem Reap, we finally visited this temple. When we returned to the hotel, we struck up a conversation with a man whom we later learnt was the hotel owner. From what we understood, the temple served as a detention centre during the Khmer Rouge period. The hotel was built on part of the former Killing Fields in the Siem Reap district. The owner said they found bones on the grounds when they were building the hotel.

During the five days we were there, we ate at the same restaurants, watched DVDs together in the same room and visited the same shops and temples. On the second morning of our holiday, at the eastern gate of one of the temples, we saw, standing out from a crevice of a fallen, moss covered boulder, three joss sticks freshly lit. “Don’t ever tempt the spirits,” one of us had remarked at that moment.

Exactly when, why and how we decided to write stories from this holiday we might have all forgotten, or rather, each of us may remember differently. But once we had set our minds on making a literary project from this holiday, we proceeded to set ourselves parameters to work within: partly to ensure commonalities for our project and partly as a challenge to our creativity.

We decided that we would write a story for each of the days that we were there. We decided that for each day, there would be a separate theme: that we would take turns contributing a “stimulus” and a quote, which would have to be featured in our respective stories for that day. And we decided that we would feature a character with flawed traits in all our stories.

So as you read through the following pages, if you find the above image of joss sticks on a boulder and the remark for caution recurring in the second story of each of our individual sets, do not be surprised.

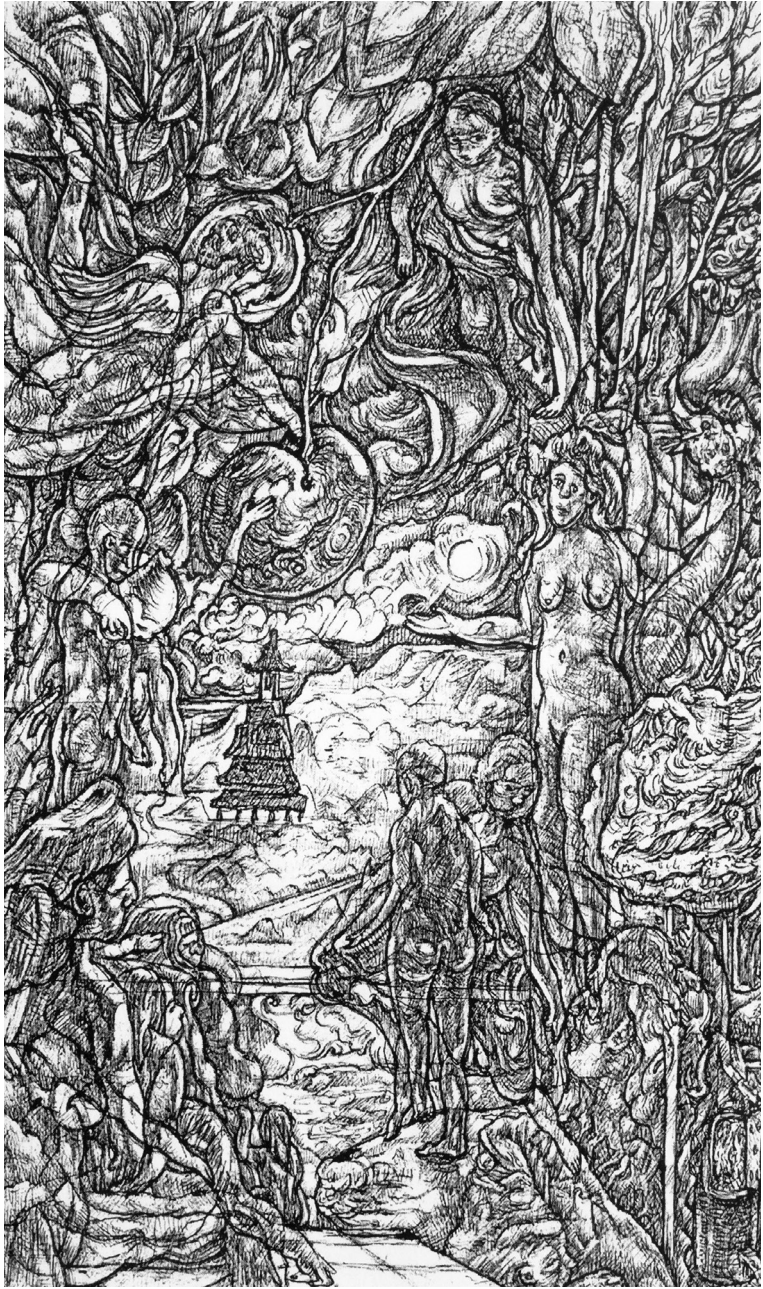
At the same time, you will also notice that the ruins of Angkor spoke differently to each of us. The order of presentation of our stories, which was partly inspired by the four movements of a

symphony or a concerto in the Western art music tradition, is perhaps telling of the differences among us.

Shu Hoong's set, which begins the collection, is evocative of a first movement with clearly stated themes and expansive melodies which flow with a gentle forward momentum. After this, we move on to a concise and compact second movement: Siok Tian's set, with its underlying currents, shifting of narrative perspectives, and taut style, presents a contrast to Yong's.

My set serves as a slow movement, with an almost imperceptible tension that is not unlike the first few drops of a Chinese water torture. A furious and rousing finale comes with Kai Chai's set in which the ferocity of language and pacing literally explodes off the page.

Phan Ming Yen



YONG SHU HOONG

As a tourist, one often gets only a fleeting impression of a certain place of interest. This could well be at odds with the experiences and perspectives of those born and bred on native soil, or long-time residents. So despite (or because of) the ruins, one can uphold Siem Reap for inspection through rose tinted lenses. The romanticism of travel is intact, if we do not dig up the past.

Interestingly, the boutique hotel where my fellow writers and I had stayed at was built over a former Killing Field overseen by the Khmer Rouge regime. We only found out from the owner on our last day that we had been sleeping over history and past atrocities without any knowledge or care in the world.

So instead of wallowing in historical research, I seek to coax fiction out of images and feelings gleaned from this short trip with the naivety of a tourist. And as a traveller moving between places, I likewise oscillate my stories between two lands – which, for some of my characters, also represent two notions of home. Film references surface as a recurring motive – just as different scents and smells intermingle across plotlines, as if to rouse us to meanings underlining postcard-perfect memories.

LANDFALL

“**W**HAT a waste of an expensive candle,” Cassia thought as she hastily blew out the candle that she had forgotten to extinguish the night before. A trail of smoke snaked from the blackened wick sticking out of the pool of liquid wax. She was suddenly conscious of the scent of blackcurrant, citrus and French oak in the guestroom.

It was her first morning in Siem Reap. The day before, she had taken the late-afternoon budget flight from Singapore, and it was dark by the time she made her way from the airport to this rustic guesthouse located in a quiet neighbourhood on the back road to the temples. She thought about having a quick dip in the small but inviting pool set amid a lush garden decorated with replicas of ancient statues, but in the end decided she was far too tired. She had a simple salad at the guesthouse’s restaurant and fell asleep in the four-poster bed shortly after returning to her room.

The candle, contained within a greyish glass holder, was a gift from a close friend who had visited her at home after she was discharged from a recent hospital stay. On its black box, a silvery

tagline read, “Breath, relax, dream.” But even though Cassia had left the candle on for the entire duration of the night before, the scent had not untangled her emotions or invoked pleasant dreams.

She had woken early – it was barely seven in the morning – but it was just as well, since she had arranged for a tuk-tuk to pick her up at 8.30am to visit Angkor Wat. And, thank goodness, the tuk-tuk driver arrived on time, cutting short a feeble attempt by a middle-aged German backpacker to flirt with her over the guesthouse’s all-you-can-eat breakfast.

It was her fault, partly. She didn’t bother to mention, or at least hint, at the onset to the recently-divorced man that she was already married. So when he – or Reinhold the nanotechnology professor from Munich, as he had introduced himself – found out that she was a film-maker from Singapore, he had eagerly asked for her name card, rambling on about how they could meet in Singapore later that month, and she had to lie that she didn’t have any cards left on her.

After a brief stop along the way to purchase a three-day temple pass, Cassia was soon stepping off her tuk-tuk to the well-known sight of Angkor Wat before her. This largest religious monument in the world looked no less magnificent than what she had recalled glimpsing in one scene from the *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* film. There weren’t as many tourists as she had feared, but then again, it was the lull period in June when Siem Reap was hot and prone to downpours.

A local boy of about five years old, good-looking but with a black patch over his left eye that made him look like a dwarfish pirate, approached her with a shy grin and a canvas bag filled with animal stuffed toys. The tuk-tuk driver shooed the young vendor away, but after she had instructed the driver on what time to pick her up, she found the boy still lingering a short distance away, peering at her and waving a colourful rabbit toy with one hand.

“Hey, boy,” she called out to him, and he scurried over, trying

to thrust the rabbit into her right hand. She picked the toy up for examination and noticed that it had a patchwork of fabrics of different colours and patterns for its skin, and a small ball of red fur as its nose.

“Ten dollars,” the boy said, before – a little too quickly, upon seeing her shake her head – reducing the price to eight dollars. Eventually, Cassia settled on five dollars with the boy, even though she felt she could have bargained the price down further. After stuffing the rabbit into her tote bag and fishing out five crumpled dollar bills to pay the boy, she asked for his name.

“Khiev,” the boy said, and Cassia reached out to shake his much-smaller palm. For a little too long, perhaps. She couldn’t explain why she had decided to hold on to his hand for that amount of time – she usually squirmed slightly during handshakes before recoiling as quickly as she could from the embarrassment that she would usually get from such physical contact with strangers. But this time she held on, and the boy let her... until their separate skins felt clammy, then strangely familiar, as if glued together as one, with wordless communication passing through the pores.

And then abruptly she said goodbye, before turning in the direction of Angkor Wat. She quickly rummaged for her sunglasses in her tote bag and put it on, as she felt tears welling in her eyes. She kept walking, away from the boy, filtering past the crowd of tourists snapping photos in the morning sun and partially blocking her way upon the stone passageway leading across the moat towards the temple complex.

Cassia did not stop walking even after she found herself within myriad passages winding throughout Angkor Wat. She entered doorway after doorway, passing by columns and stone carvings until they seemed to whirl into a greyish blur tinted with green, orange and brown, before it dawned on her the real reason why she had wanted to visit Angkor Wat so badly.