

Mary Loh

## “Sex, Size and Ginseng”

*Mary Loh (Mary Loh Chieu Kwuan), born in 1959, obtained her master's degree in literature from the National University of Singapore with her thesis entitled Structure, Style and Strategy in the Singapore Short Story. In 1989, she collaborated with two other local Singapore writers to produce the anthology Mistress and Other Creative Take-Offs and in the same year won the Shell Short Play Competition. Currently she is working on a full-length novel on the theater in early Singapore.*

*“Sex, Size and Ginseng” humorously reveals a changing world of Chinese gender roles and shifting double standards. The subservient position of women in society is an important theme for many Southeast Asian writers, such as Leila S. Chudori in “The Purification of Sita” (Indonesia), Sri Daoruang in “Sita Puts Out the Fire” (Thailand), Marianne Villanueva in “The Mayor of the Roses” (the Philippines), and K. S. Maniam in “The Kling-Kling Woman” (Malaysia).*

Night. She goes to the cupboard and takes out a small glass bottle. Inside it, there is a small, pink, paper-wrapped packet. She takes out the packet and unfolds it carefully and shakes the precious golden flakes into the waiting mug. Going over to the stove, she heaves the heavy black kettle over to the table and pours. The hot clean water rushes from the spout and sends the gold swirling in the white mug. The bitter root-smell rises and wafts through the kitchen. She returns the kettle to the stove and then brings a cover for the mug. She leaves the tea to infuse for a few minutes and then carefully carries it into the study where the old man sits reading.

Daily rituals. We all have them. Sometimes our lives are measured, not by minutes, but by the little carefully attended duties we each have to perform. For Ah Lan, it is the making of ginseng tea for her Master. Ah Lan marks her days by it. Every night, night after night, before she

goes to sleep, it is Ah Lan's last duty of the day. This was the first duty she was entrusted with, and one which she has carried out for more than a quarter of a century. Ah Lan remembers.

The old man smells of ginseng. How much ginseng has he drunk already in his lifetime? More than a quarter of a century? More than half a lifetime? Night after night and yet he still has no male heir to carry on his name. The Big Mistress has accepted that the fault is hers. She has given him no children, neither male nor female. She has failed in her duty. Hence Mistress Number Two.

Mistress Number Two had two beautiful daughters by him, but they say that her womb is also dried up. It cannot fulfill a wife's first duty, which is to produce sons to carry on the family name. The man was in a dilemma. That's when they told him that he should drink ginseng. It would not only purify the lungs but increase the secretions of the hormones which would urge fertility, especially those which helped to produce sons. Ginseng has been tried and tested. After all, the little roots were shaped like little men. Surely, drinking ginseng would help to produce little men. So convinced, the man went to a medicine shop in the heart of Chinatown.

The medicine shop was a small, cramped and dingy room, lined with walls of little drawers carved with the names of the different herbs etched in gold. The smell of dried roots and bark pervaded the air. Here and there, on open shelving, were bottles of preserved snakes and squirrels with their insides gutted and stretched out. Black beetles, specially bred and bottled, stood on the open counter, ready to be mixed with other elements for coughs and catarrh. In another bottle, they kept the precious rhinoceros horns. These were all guaranteed health tonics brought straight from Mainland China and their quality was never in dispute. The *sinseh* was there and he backed up the recommendation that ginseng be consumed regularly to achieve the desired result and, for proof, quoted many different examples of those who had taken the brew and produced many male offspring.

So the old man bought a large quantity. Expense was no object. He brought it gleefully home, handed it to young Ah Lan, and instructed her as he had been instructed. He drank the potion that night and half imagined that it took effect immediately for he could feel it in his system. He took the ginseng regularly and persuaded Mistress Number Two to do the same. Then she conceived and her stomach grew big and round and her eyes shone with health and everyone predicted that the next child would be a son. The great day arrived. After the relatively

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“Sex, Size and Ginseng,” by Mary Loh. Permission to publish granted by the author.

short period of birthing, two children were born, the fruit of her labor: two beautiful bouncing twin girls.

The man groaned and covered his face in dismay. What would put an end to this great shame? Four children. All girls. Disgusting. Much as he loved his first and second wives, he knew that he had to take another. There was no other solution to his dilemma. A man of his standing in the business community could not very well take the ignominy of having no sons.

The matchmaker was summoned. He commended her choice of the second mistress, but shaking his head with an exaggerated gesture of disappointment, he told her that Mistress Number Two was also unable to produce sons. The matchmaker felt responsible, of course. It was her duty to make sure that the marriages made on earth were blessed by heaven with beautiful children. For this purpose, she had checked the genealogy of each candidate, read their faces, and then looked at the size of their hips to see that they would produce children. Her method had been foolproof until now.

The man shook his head again. Again he explained. His quarrel was not that Mistress Number Two couldn't produce children. After all, he had four beautiful daughters, but he wanted sons and the matchmaker was assigned the task of making sure that Wife Number Three was a son-bearer. Matchmaker agreed to help but it was not going to be an easy task. One could safely assess the potential fertility, but how could one guarantee sons?

Wife Number Three-to-be was ugly, fat, and coarse. She looked more like a man than a woman. Her face was riddled with large pockmarks and her thick arms hung by her sides, testament to having come from a family that toiled. No one in their right mind would marry her. But, according to the matchmaker, she came from a family of eight sons. She was the only daughter. If she descended from such a mother, would she not also be capable of such a feat, the matchmaker reasoned. Further, her physical structure and the matchmaker's reading of her fortune foretold that she would bear many sons. The man agreed to see her.

When the man met his potential bride, he shuddered. She was almost as tall as he was and was large and grotesque. He had been warned, but it was almost a great shock to see this man-woman before him. Her appearance was made all the more incongruous by the fact that she had a thin, high-pitched voice.

The matchmaker reiterated all the woman's positive points, and

once again the man's desire to see his line continue was fueled. He was prepared to make this small sacrifice. He would endure.

And endure, he did. Night after night, night after night, he suffered Wife Number Three's heavy presence. Meanwhile he continued his visits to Mistress Number Two and she conceived. Ginseng was consumed in large quantities. Wife Number Three also conceived. The man looked forward expectantly to the days when both his wives would deliver. Surely the gods could not be so unfair? Surely of the two, at least one could produce a boy?

Again the day arrived for Mistress Number Two to deliver. Damp from the perspiration of exertion, she lay on the bed and watched the midwife as she carried the little baby, swabbed it clean, and placed it in her arms. The little diaper cloth was undone. It was a girl. The midwife was consolatory. There was still Wife Number Three.

The man was not daunted. He had faith. He had to have faith. The matchmaker, midwife and the *sinseh* could not be wrong. Or could they? Daily he went to the temple and implored the gods for their blessing and their mercy. He brought the gods fruit and gave large donations so that the gods could have larger dwellings. He promised them more. Then every day he went home to wait and drink ginseng.

There was a sudden shout. "Labor, labor, Mistress Number Three is in labor. Call the midwife!! Quick!!" The whole household sprang into action. Everywhere, there was the frenzy of activity. The midwife arrived along with the matchmaker who was all ready to crown her success and perhaps receive an *angpow* gift.

The midwife stood at the doorway. One look at her face told him the truth. Girls again. Twins again. Now seven daughters in all.

I do not have to continue this story. The cup of ginseng tea sits on the table, its aroma wafting up to me. Ah Lan has placed another small cup at my elbow. But I'm sure you are curious about how the story ends. How does it all end? Did the man take another wife? Did he go crazy from grief? No. The old man resigned himself to his fate and added another few more daughters to his line. The old man became known as the "Keeper of Beautiful Jade" because all of his daughters were named Jade-something; and, yes, they were all beautiful and sought after. The daughters married well and his sons-in-law, well-chosen, reinforced his business connections, and he was now aligned with many powerful people in the community. They added to his wealth by big contributions. His daughters, in turn, produced sons—all sons, surprisingly.

The old man was pleased at least that he had grandsons, even if they did not carry his surname. The three wives were treated well, and they all lived happily as one large and happy family. All his daughters did well in marriage, except for one.

And that is me.

I did not marry. I did not bear him a grandson. I live in his house and every night, when Ah Lan brews his ginseng tea, she brews me mine. It doesn't do him much good. I know from my science degree that it is a matter of genetics and chromosomes. It doesn't matter, of course. It is a special quality of ginseng. The Cantonese describe its unique flavor as being like *kum*—gold and glinting in a transparent glass. It is the color of pale gold; the best ginseng, of course. I should know because I own the ginseng farm and the best roots come from it. After all, someone must maintain the duty of managing the family business empire.

1997



Philip Jeyaretnam

## "Painting the Eye"

*Philip Jeyaretnam, born in 1964, is married with two children. He won second prize in the 1983 National Short Story Writing Competition and first place in the same competition in 1985 for his short-story collection First Loves, which was on the best-seller list for fiction in Singapore for over forty weeks, a record. He was named Young Artist of the Year in 1993 by Singapore's National Arts Council. His most recent novel is Abraham's Promise (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995). Currently he works as a lawyer in private practice.*

*Jeyaretnam's writing signifies an important shift during the 1980s toward an acceptance of Singapore itself as the subject of writing. "Painting the Eye" conveys a sense of the modern cosmopolitan cityscape of an ethnically polychromatic Singapore through the eyes of*

"Painting the Eye," by Philip Jeyaretnam. Permission to publish granted by the author.

*the protagonist Ah Leong, an artistically talented insurance salesman with a penchant for mystery. Stories that have an urban landscape as a backdrop for action, often from a critical perspective, include Sila Khomchai's "The Family in the Street" (Thailand) and Mey Son Sotheary's "My Sister" (Cambodia).*

Now that Song Jiang was abroad doing his doctoral thesis on some obscure branch of Chinese literature, Ah Leong suddenly felt his absence keenly. They had not really been together for a long time, eight or nine years, and especially once Song Jiang had entered the National University of Singapore, they had seen one another not more than once a month. Yet Song Jiang's being overseas, almost on the other side of the world at Harvard University, seemed to create a hole in Ah Leong's picture of his nation. He wondered why it was necessary for Song Jiang to disappear across half the world in order to study something that ought to be at the center of our lives, right here, and yet wasn't. He wondered whether all these scholars, streaming outwards from Singapore, brought more back when they returned than they took when they departed.

He worked as an insurance salesman, not a very good one, for just as he reached the crescendo of a sales pitch, his mind would wander. He'd wonder why his target, or victim, had chosen to paint the walls of her flat that luminous blue color; and drifting skywards, his thoughts would fly. And he'd see a thousand salesmen just like himself, all across the island, trying to convince people to buy, and then doubt would strike—was this policy really the best for her, could she really afford the policy—and he'd end up stumbling towards the door, mumbling apologies.

Of course, in the evenings there was his painting; he'd signed up for all the courses he could, wondering why they were termed extra-mural, imagining a course for vandals, spray-painting walls, and then finding himself squirming in his seat, as if the *rotan* were already making contact. But the instructors were always pedestrian, teaching skills as if their purpose were merely to pass the time, and for his course-mates, often housewives, perhaps that was true. After all, what meaning could be found in the constant repetition of black branches and red blossoms? After a while though, he found his facility with ink and brush growing, and then with watercolors and oils. Then one day at the Substation, he came face to face with a collage, scraps of *The Straits Times*, and *peranakan* fabrics, and lurking behind them, a face—smoldering, a