

**Contemplating the Mind: A Zen Reading of
Lee Kok Liang's short story 'Ronggeng-Ronggeng'**

Chuah Guat Eng

Published (without Abstract) in Manjit Kaur et al (eds), *Towards New Paradigms in Language Studies*, 153-164. Bangi: Penerbitan UKM, 2001.

ABSTRACT

(added here for the benefit of readers unfamiliar with Zen/Buddhist teachings)

This paper is a Zen reader-response analysis of Lee Kok Liang's 'Ronggeng-Ronggeng', a short story in which the main characters are Malays, and the religion referred to is Islam. Lee's seeming disregard for 'political correctness' in his treatment of racial and religious issues tends to leave the reader uncertain about what he really 'means', and therefore uneasy about forming any conclusion. This is particularly true when one approaches the story from a purely socio-political angle. Given Lee's professed leaning towards Theravada and Zen Buddhism, the philosophical discourse common to these two schools of Buddhism may be a useful framework with which to approach the story.

As this paper attempts to show, the approach enables a reading of the story as a systematic examination of the various characters' state of mind in relation to their actions or non-action. The story's resolution depends not on a neat twist to the tale but on the reader's understanding that the Buddhist criterion of ethics is not theological but psychological. Actions are right or wrong, perfect or imperfect, skilful or unskilful, according to the state of mind in which they are performed. Further, the story's fulfilment lies not in a tidy moral at the end, but in the author's ability to project a vivid impression of the 'suchness' of the world, of life, and of human nature. The story thus becomes an object of contemplation, for the reader's own spiritual enrichment or, perhaps, enlightenment.

.....

Synopsis

The story is set in a small town in Peninsular Malaysia in the 1950s. The narrative concentrates on one evening at a ronggeng stage, in the course of which Che Siti, one of the dancers, dances with three young men: a Malay called Madzir, a Chinese called Ah Peng, and a British soldier whom his friends call 'Johnnie'. During the last dance, Johnnie, who appears to be drunk, grabs hold of Che Siti. Madzir, who seems to have formed an attachment to Siti, reacts by jumping on to the stage. A fight ensues between Madzir and Johnnie and their friends, and the military police intervene. At the end of the narrative, the stage is in chaos, and Mat, the drummer and leader of the ronggeng troupe, is faced with the grim prospect of having his license taken away from him by the authorities and of having to find Siti a 'quick and profitable' occupation 'with men', so that he can save enough money for his pilgrimage.

On this bare story line hangs the free indirect discourse of the narrative, which reveals to us the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of Mat, Che Siti and Ah Peng.

Publishing history

The story was first published in *Death is a Ceremony and Other Stories* (Federal Publications, 1992). A year later it appeared in SKOOB Pacifica Anthology No. 1 (1993), where the copyright year is given as 1989. There is one minor difference between the two versions: where the book version has 'With men' in the last paragraph, the SKOOB version has 'With me'. For this analysis, the book version will be used.

History of reception

Only one literary critic has singled out this short story for comment. In an obituary in *New Straits Times*, dated 30 December 1992, Kee Thuan Chye had this to say: 'Even a story as unfulfilled and weakly resolved as "Ronggeng-Ronggeng" has its moments of insight and evocativeness.'¹ Kee does not elaborate on this comment, and we can only guess at what he means by its quality of being 'unfulfilled and weakly resolved'. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that part of the reason for this effect lies in the text's plurality.

The text's plurality and problematics

The text's multi-racial setting and its emphasis on racial prejudices invites one to read it in the context of a theme central to much of the country's discourse on nation and identity, namely that the danger of conflict and violence is ever present in the racial, cultural, and economic differences found in Malaysian society. However, it is not easy to come to any clear conclusion as to whether the text is a critique or an endorsement of the theme.

While it is true that the characters view each other in terms of ethnic and religious differences, they do so without violence. Around the ronggeng stage, each one knows his place. In recognition of the fact that it is a Malay entertainment centre, the Chinese and Indians remain at the back, leaving the front rows to the Malays. The fight at the end of the story is an instance of intercultural conflict, but it is between Malay youths and British soldiers. Further there is textual evidence to suggest that social domination and conflict are equally, if not more, likely to be *intra-cultural* in nature. Siti's unhappy past is the result of the values of her own ethnic milieu; and her implied future as a prostitute is being planned for her by none other than Mat. Mat, who seems prepared to finance his pilgrimage with money earned through Siti's prostitution, presents a conflict that is not inter-cultural but personal, moral and religious.

Language differences, too, do not lead to intercultural conflict. In a narrative that is highly polyphonic and dialogic, there are only three points when words are actually spoken by the characters: the crowd's 'wild taunts and wisecracks'; the pantuns sung by Abass and Siti; and the brief conversation between Siti and her fellow-dancers. Although in all these exchanges a common language is used, words serve as weapons of mocking aggression or self-defensive armature, pointing to a breakdown of language as a means of communication. Paradoxically, true communication is achieved at a level that transcends language -- with a smile, a nod, a look, or a sound from the fiddle and the drum.

This ambivalence brings to the surface a number of questions:

1. Why is there so much emphasis on racial differences and racial prejudices?
2. Why is Mat's religious antinomy foregrounded?
3. Why are we shown Ah Peng's mind in such detail when his character does not contribute to the plot's movement to its crisis?

4. Why are we not given any insight into Madzir's and Johnny's state of mind when they are the ones responsible for the violence and conflict?
5. Since Mat is forced to consider a life of prostitution for Siti only because the fight will lead to his losing his ronggeng license, who is morally responsible for Siti's future?

Why a Zen Reading?

The decision to seek answers to these questions through a Zen reading is motivated by the following considerations:

1. In the Introduction to his monograph, *Reflections on the Theories of Religion*, Syed Hussein Alatas makes the observation that 'Asian societies are through and through permeated with religion' and suggests that '[a]n understanding of Asian religious phenomena is an urgent requirement for the understanding of Asian societies'².
2. In an essay, 'In Memory of Lee Kok Liang', Syd Harrex gives Lee's description of himself as a 'skeptical Zen Buddhist leaning towards Theravadaism and a sprinkling of Ganeshism'³.
3. As a reader with some 'insider' knowledge of both Zen and Theravada Buddhism, I perceive Buddhist elements in the texts that may be brought to bear on the problematics outlined above.

However, this reading is not intended as a 'Buddhist interpretation' but as a reader-response, from a Buddhist point of view.

Methodology

The reading involves the following steps:

1. Identifying the narrative elements that evoke a response from a reader familiar with Zen and Theravada Buddhist teachings.
2. Establishing the significance of these elements in the context of Zen values.
3. Inferring the text's central discourse from these elements and their significance.
4. Considering whether and to what extent this Zen reading helps to answer the questions identified above and contributes to a better grasp of the story's narrative 'fulfilment' and resolution.

Narrative elements with Zen undertones

The narrative elements with Zen or Buddhist undertones may be divided into three groups: motifs and imagery, the description of the outer world, and the characters' thought processes.

Motifs and imagery

The story's setting -- a ronggeng stage in an amusement park -- calls to mind the Buddhist belief that the world and all its attractions are not what they appear to be. In this context, the dance exemplifies the illusory nature of human attachments that must come to an end when the music stops.

The dominant role of Mat's tambourin suggests the role of the drum in Zen meditational ritual. Its sound -- each beat loud and arresting, then fading away into silence - - reminds the listener not only of the impermanence of worldly phenomena but also of how we depend on our senses for our perception of the world.

The frequent references to the heat and the dust, the characters' drive to seek pleasure and 'make money fast', and the equating of love with 'gold', 'fun', 'haste', and 'mistakes' in the pantuns all bring to mind the Buddha's 'Fire Sermon' in which he declares that 'All things are on fire with the fire of passion, greed, hatred, infatuation, birth, death, sorrow, and despair....'⁴.

The name of the fiddler who sets the pace for the dance is Tok Payah -- another reminder of the Buddhist teaching that 'Life is suffering'.

Description of the amusement park

The amusement park is described in a way that engages our senses. The story opens with a sound -- KA-TUM-BONG: KA-TUM-BONG: KA-TUM-BONG. We are led to 'see' its source -- Mat beating on a small drum. Next we are made to 'feel' the heat of the night, the dry dust rising into the air, and the sand between our toes; and then we 'smell' and 'taste' the food and drinks being sold at the stalls.

This sequence of sense-impressions brings to mind an analogy used in Buddhist teachings to illustrate how the mind works -- that of a man sleeping under a mango tree. The sound of a fruit dropping wakes him up. He seeks the source of the sound, sees the fruit, grasps it, feels it, smells it, decides it is fit to be eaten, eats it, swallows the last morsel,

and then goes back to sleep.⁵ Thereby is one cycle or wave of conscious thought activity completed, after which the mind sinks back into a state of subliminal or non-conscious mental activity (the state of sleep in the analogy) until it is impelled into conscious activity by another stimulus.

The reader is thus drawn to the possibility that the focus of the text is an exploration of mental processes and states. This is confirmed by the fact that the story unfolds as a series of impressions and thoughts occurring in the minds of three characters, namely Mat, Siti, and Ah Peng.

The characters' thought processes

Everything we know about the characters, their appearance, their histories, and the events of the evening are the result of these three characters' sensual and mental responses to their surroundings. In the process, we get an insight into how their minds work. We see how the consciousness 'free wheels' from thought to thought, from present to past to future and back again, always taking its direction in response to a sense-stimuli received in the present. Against the 'busyness' of these three minds the 'silence' surrounding the minds of Madzir and Johnnie becomes conspicuous.

Significance of elements

All these elements suggest that if the text is to be read as a discourse on racial differences and conflict and its underlying values understood, it may be necessary to read it as a Zen discourse on how the human mind perceives and responds to the phenomenal world, and how these perceptions and responses affect judgment, motives, and therefore the ethics of behaviour.

Zen discourse on the mind

According to Zen philosophy, the 'true' mind or heart of all human beings (including Buddhas) is pure, wise and compassionate. This is a quality it shares with the 'One Reality', which is beyond all human concepts of dualities, such as form and void, phenomenon and noumenon, 'is' and 'is not'. However, man's innate conviction of himself as a self-existent being (ego) has obscured his 'true mind'. In order to understand the world he now has to use his intellect, which interprets the data received by his imperfect sense organs through a

process of discrimination (e.g. categorizing) and abstraction (e.g. forming ideas and ideals). As a result, he creates a subjective version of 'reality' that is based on difference and dualities, and that consists of mental and social constructs such as race and gender. Of all these constructs, the most enduring is that of the self or ego, because its perceived self-evident nature is taken for granted. But until these mental constructs are understood for what they are, and dismantled, man cannot know his true nature. And the only way to eliminate them is by purifying the mind or heart of all attachments, particularly to the ego.

There are two corollaries to this premise. The first is that the most important stage in the mental process is the determining or discriminating stage, because it influences one's judgment, decisions and actions. If the object is determined 'wrongly' (i.e. if its external and temporal being is mistaken for its essential and permanent nature) and any kind of attachment to it is formed, the judgment, decision and final act will be 'unskilful', i.e. based on ignorance or selfishness, and likely to have undesirable repercussions. If however, the object is determined 'correctly' (i.e. in its 'true nature') and without attachment, the judgment, decision, and act that follow will be 'skilful', i.e. based on understanding and unselfishness and likely to have happy consequences.

The second corollary is that processes of thought and understanding are central to Zen ethics, the rightness or wrongness of an act being based not on theology but on psychology (motive) and intelligence (reason). There is thus no concept of 'sin' in Buddhism, there is only ignorance. If a person does anything morally wrong, he is regarded as having acted out of ignorance and therefore in need of compassion and guidance rather than punishment.

This, in brief, is the philosophical framework used to read the text as a discourse on the mind.

The text's discourse : contemplating the mind

Three types of mind: Mat, Siti & Ah Peng

Essentially, there is little difference in the way Mat, Siti, and Ah Peng perceive and give meaning to the world around them. Each thought is initiated by a sensory perception: the heat, sounds, words, skin colour, smells, and taste. Through a process of discrimination, these sensory data are classified in terms of inherited social constructs: race, culture,

language, religion, economic status. Then they are evaluated against sets of preconceived ideas or ideals of these constructs. At this point, judgment and decision takes place. If the attachment to the ideals is strong, there will be dissatisfaction with the status quo. If the attachment is less strong, a mental adjustment takes place, and there is either tolerance or acceptance of the situation.

Mat

The most notable thing about Mat's mental process is that it is driven by the power dynamics of authority. The word 'warn' occurs frequently in his vocabulary, and he favours Siti over the other dancers because she is a 'serious' and 'was always such an obedient woman'. In Bakhtinian terms, his 'speech' is monologic. In his reflections on other people, we do not 'hear' their voices. Not only is he the lone speaker in his ruminations, he also 'speaks' or 'thinks' for others -- 'How many times had he *warned* Tok Payah not to go so fast.... But *the man easily forgot* ... and then *all the girls complained*.' '[Siti] was the most serious girl of the lot She *had the idea that*' 'He had been *warned* that if there was any trouble....' '*He would find* Che Siti a quick and profitable occupation.' 'She was *always such an obedient* woman.' [All italics mine]

We recognize in him an authoritarian primarily motivated by the fear of not doing the right thing. In its negative form, this fear creates in him the habit of responding to this imperfect world with discontent, and of judging people by some undefined standard of 'should' and 'should not'. In its positive aspect, the fear prevents his emotions from precipitating him into impulsive action and motivates him to acts of kindness to Siti and concern for his girls -- even though there may be an element of self-interest.

The clue to Mat's mind lies in the line 'He was getting old and *he wanted* to make the pilgrimage...' (italics mine). Here it is revealed that his strong attachment to the idea of making his pilgrimage arises from his own ego's highly developed sense of doing what 'should' be done. His desire is commendable, but if he were a Muslim who understood his religion, he would leave both the means and the realization of his desire to the will of God. This inability to surrender his ego mars his piety, leading to the 'unskilful' thought of using immoral means to achieve a spiritual end.

Siti

In contrast to Mat, Siti strikes us as someone who is down-to-earth and in touch with the reality around her. Her language is heteroglossic, consisting of a variety of voices, many of them belonging to people from her rural and ethical past -- 'Hardly any rain for two weeks now. Good for ronggeng, but *not good for the paddy farmers.*' 'Only 20, she thought, and spending so much money by dancing with her. *How could he save and bring up his family?*' 'They said girls there took off their clothes -- *shameless, shameless -- what a thing to do.*' 'The first child should be a girl, her grandmother said, *as a daughter would be such a great help when the others came.*' [All italics mine]

To see the mundane world clearly for what it is and therefore not expecting to find in it the permanent, satisfactory and wholly real qualities of the Absolute is part of the 'Perfect Vision' heading the list of the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path.⁵ In Siti we find a strong element of this quality. It is perhaps not by whim or accident that the authorial emphasis is given to Siti's inner thoughts, which at the same time provide us with a relatively full account of her life. It is a life more unfortunate than the average person's, but her disposition is generally positive and she has the ability to focus on the present. Apart from her concern with saving for a better life, the future is left to look after itself. The past is considered only when it is evoked by something in the present. Generally, they are happy memories. The memory of her unfortunate experience with the 'village ruffians' comes to the fore only at the end, as a response to the violence of the fight.

From the viewpoint of western psychology, one might say that she has unhealthily repressed her thoughts. But from the Zen perspective, it is far healthier to try and be happy in the present and not to worry overmuch about the future or dwell too long on unhappy memories. Temporal happiness is, after all, not a permanent state; it is always felt in relation to a previous state of unhappiness. In the same way that Siti 'felt fine' once she had loosened her shoe strap to ease the ache in her foot, so her present may be considered 'happy' when compared to her past. Further, since the idea of a permanent 'self' is an illusion, a person is given the freedom to 'construct' himself anew at every moment of his life. In this sense, compared with Mat whose fixed ideas of what is right and wrong make him a habitually discontented and disapproving person, Siti, with her ability to remain positive despite her past suffering, is a person with a healthy state of mind.

Her ability to see beyond the superficial and to respond with kindly sensitivity to other people is noteworthy. To her, Mat is a 'good-hearted man'. She concludes from Madzir's dark skin and the roughness of his figure that he is probably a 'street sweeper', but his youth and shyness remind her of her younger brother and she responds to him with big-sisterly concern. Even when she feels an aversion to certain traits of the cultural 'Other', these feelings function as markers defining the outer limits of her own cultural and moral space, and not as standards to be imposed on others. To her Ah Peng smells of stale rice, but she notes that he has 'very kind eyes'. Repulsive though Johnnie appears to her, when she 'looked up at him', she sees his youth and his 'tired-looking eyes'. And although she thinks that what the Chinese strip dancers do is 'shameless', she is able to concede that 'the money was good for them'. Her ability to argue in favour of things she does not understand or like shows that she has both intelligence and tolerance, qualities the Buddhist aspires to in the practice of his belief system.

Ah Peng

In Ah Peng, we have a depiction of the inattentive mind, exemplifying the 'restless Monkey Brain' that is the Zen practitioner's major challenge. His thoughts are on the whole focused on where and with whom he would rather be than where and with whom he is. He likes dancing but does not take the trouble to do it well. He has a crush on a young girl with the strip-tease show but does not dare to approach her, and the only way he can think of to impress her is with 'expensive watches and shoes'. So absent is he from the present that he is insensitive to his surroundings and Madzir's look of 'ferocity'.

Like Mat and Siti, his evaluation of people is based on surface differences; for instance, he finds Siti too dark for his liking. However, he shares with Siti the ability to see beyond the surface. His cultural and moral spaces seem to be borderless. He enjoys the ronggeng, even though he seems incompetent at it. He has no qualms about courting a strip dancer. He is capable of entertaining the thought of being married to Siti. And for all his gaucheness, he is courteous enough to bow to Siti at the end of the dance.

Two types of mindlessness : Madzir and Johnnie

Madzir

In contrast to Ah Peng, Madzir seems to be totally absorbed in and by the dance. It appears

as if he has so mastered the art of the dance, that he *is* the dance. From this we may infer that we are not shown his state of mind simply because he is in a state of 'no mind'. This forgetfulness of the ego leading to unhesitating spontaneity of action is what the Zen Buddhist aims for through discipline and practice, both in his art and in his life. The high point of a Zen Buddhist's achievement is when he is so in touch with his true, wise and compassionate nature that he no longer has to think before he acts. There is a difference, however, between the spontaneity of a mind rigorously disciplined to free itself from all attachments and the instinctive spontaneity of a mind conditioned by attachments.

Thus Madzir, once he is off the *ronggeng* stage, acquires a different personality. His attachment to Siti makes him unreasonably possessive. The text does not say whether this attachment is based on racial, sexual, younger-brotherly, or purely chivalrous emotions, but it is of no relevance. From the Buddhist viewpoint, all emotional attachments are based on an erroneous understanding of the true nature of the object of attachment, of the relationship between the subject and the object, and of the subject's own desires. It is this attachment combined with his tendency to 'lose himself' in the moment (as evident in the way he dances) that leads to the unfortunate fight with the British soldier and his friends.

Johnnie

Johnnie too is in a state of 'mindlessness', but there is a crucial difference between his and Madzir's state of 'no mind'. During the dance Madzir's mental state is based on skill and an egolessness that puts him in full, almost supernatural, control of his physical self; later, it is influenced by a strong attachment to Siti. Johnnie's mental state, however, is one of confusion. This confused state may be viewed as both the result and the cause of breaking four of the five precepts of Buddhism. As a soldier, it is inevitable that he has to break the first precept, which is to refrain from killing. By grabbing at Siti, he breaks both the second and the fourth precepts, which are to refrain from taking what is not given and to refrain from sexual misconduct. By being drunk he breaks the fifth precept, which is to refrain from consuming alcohol and other substances that impair the mind's clarity. (The third precept, to avoid harmful speech, is of no relevance here.) The situation is aggravated by his physical tiredness

New light on the text's problematics

How does this reading address the problematics raised above?

First, the apparent emphasis on racial differences and racial prejudices. From the Zen viewpoint, the particularities of individual differences have no intrinsic reality. Here they serve to illustrate not only how the mind depends on them to give meaning to the phenomenal world but also how unwise it is to mistake them for the essential and the real.

Secondly, Mat's religious antinomy. This may be read as an instance of how difficult it is to let go of the ego, even for those conscientious of doing what is good and right. Here we find a consonance between the Islamic ideal of surrendering the self to God's will and the Zen idea that one cannot achieve enlightenment until one gets rid the ego.

Thirdly, the insight into Ah Peng's mind. In some ways, Ah Peng has the role of an Everyman, his restless mind acting like a multifaceted mirror that faintly reflects the dominant characteristics of the other minds. What is foregrounded, however, is his role in the wordless 'dialogue' of the eyes between himself and Siti, where we see the potential for harmonious relationships lying beneath all cultural differences and prejudices.

Fourthly, the silence surrounding Madzir and Johnny. It illustrates the different varieties of 'mindlessness'-- that which arises from training and concentration, that which arises from attachments, and that which arises from psychological and physical debilitation. At the same time, it shows that a person's mental state manifests itself not through words but through actions and behaviour, thereby underscoring the theme mentioned earlier of the non-verbal nature of true communication.

Finally, who is morally responsible for Siti's future? It might seem possible, even tempting, to apportion moral responsibility to the characters according to a Buddhist value system. If such an attempt were made, the scale of values would presumably be based on whose state of mind was the most likely cause of the 'unskilful' acts leading to the final outcome of the story. But the attempt would be contrary to the spirit of Zen which requires that we look on human weaknesses with compassion and understanding rather than with the wish to lay blame or punish.

Narrative fulfilment and resolution

All Buddhist works of art encourage contemplation, and there are undoubtedly moral lessons to be gleaned from *Ronggeng Ronggeng*. If the story seems 'unresolved' because these lessons are not spelt out, it is unresolved in the same way that a brushstroke in a Zen painting or the last line of a haiku seems unfinished -- broken off in mid-stroke or in mid-thought. The emptiness, or the silence, is the space left for the viewer/listener/reader to 'enter'. In that space he may or may not find a 'truth'. From the Zen viewpoint, it is enough that the text succeeds in evoking in the reader a sense of pity and compassion by projecting a vivid impression of the 'suchness' of the world, of life, and of human nature.

NOTES

1. Kee Thuan Chye: 'Foremost of the first generation', *New Straits Times*, 30 December 1992, p. 33
2. Syed Hussein Alatas: *Reflections on the Theories of Religion* (Drukkenj Pasmans-- 's-Graverhage, 1963) p. 9
3. Syd Harrex: 'In Memory of Lee Kok Liang', *SKOOB Pacifica Anthology No. 1* (1993) p. ix
4. Burt, E. A. (ed.): *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha* (Mentor Paperback, N.Y. 1992) p. 97
5. Ven. Maha Sthavira Sangharakshita, *The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path* (Manjushri Publishing Co. Penang, 1987) p. 80

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Al-Ghazali: *Inner Dimensions of Islamic Worship*, transl. Muhtar Holland (The Islamic Foundation, London, 1983)
- Burt, E.A. (ed.): *The Teachings Of The Compassionate Buddha* (Mentor, New York, 1992)
- Harrex, Syd: 'In Memory of Lee Kok Liang', *SKOOB Pacifica Anthology No. 1* (Skoob Books Publishing, London, 1993)
- Holquist, Michael (ed.): *The Dialogic Imagination, Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press, 1988)
- Jayasuriya, W. F.: *The Psychology and Philosophy of Buddhism, An Introduction to the Abhidhamma* (The Buddhist Missionary Society, Kuala Lumpur, 1976)
- Kee Thuan Chye: 'Foremost of the first generation', *News Straits Times*, 30 December 1992
- Lee Kok Liang: *Death Is A Ceremony and other short stories* (Federal Publications, Singapore, 1992) pp 62 - 71
- Lee Kok Liang: 'Ronggeng-Ronggeng', *SKOOB Pacifica Anthology No. 1* (Skoob Books Publishing, London, 1993) pp 199 - 206
- Lu K'uan Yu, trans. *The Surangama Sutra* (B. I. Publications, Bombay, 1989)

Syed Hussein Alatas: *Reflections on the Theories of Religion* (Drukkenj Pasmans-- 's-Graverhage, 1963)

Ven. Maha Sthavira Sangharakshita, *The Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path* (Manjushri Publishing Co. Penang, 1987)

Watts, Alan: *The Way of Zen* (Arkana Penguin, 1990)