



One World

[Foreign Bodies](#)

by Hwee Hwee Tan

Washington Square Press, 2000

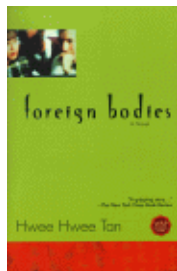
Paperback, 288 pages, \$12.95

Riding A Tiger

by Robert Abel

Hong Kong: Asia 2000, 1998

Paperback, \$12. [Special Order](#)



[Xu Xi](#)

If you can't stomach getting away with murder, you may not find modern Asia comic, or even funny. That is the implication in two brilliantly comic novels, [Foreign Bodies](#) by Hwee Hwee Tan and [Riding A Tiger](#) by Robert Abel. Tan's novel is Gen-X Singapore (and the rest of the world), where the innocent white male remains behind bars while two Singaporeans "allow" murder and other crimes, justified by a perverse, or not-so-perverse sense of Christian morality with Singaporean (and global) characteristics. In Abel's novel, a "foreign (American) expert" in China just prior to Tiananmen confesses his "guilt" in a Communist style "self-criticism" that digresses into a rant on the country's morality (and that of the rest of the world). However, he unwittingly causes a suicide attempt as a result of his "innocence," and it emerges that there is a murder among all the "crimes" of his "confession."

It is the "rest of the world" that causes the dissonance. If young Singaporeans like Mei, one of Tan's three protagonists, could just be content remaining in Singapore, instead of envying friends who scoot off to an isolated expatriate existence in the Netherlands (the land of "spontaneously disintegrating pavements") or to university in England, then all would be right with the world, or at least with Singapore. Mei's mother thinks so, but what daughter will listen to a parent whose idea of an evening's entertainment in their shared HBD flat is "the sound of fifty-something housewives wailing songs from the Karaoke Hit List from Hell"? Mei, who is a lawyer and her widowed mother's financial guardian, goes on to say, "Trust me, you haven't seen something truly Satanic until you've seen your mother belting out 'Chain Reaction' complete with Diana Ross hand actions and bum wiggles."

Likewise if Arnold Fisher, foreign expert at the China Electrical Engineering Company, could keep his American-style capitalism, and lusts, in check, his Chinese friends wouldn't be murdered, sent off for re-education, or forced to sweep the streets of Beijing in atonement for their crimes, while he escapes back to America. There, his government refuses to submit to China's demand for his extradition. The unlawful enterprise? Transporting watermelons from Xinjiang and refurbishing abandoned Russian bicycles for Beijing's consumers—among other activities—all in the quest to turn a profit in *renmenbi* and FEC's (foreign exchange certificates). In the meantime, this middle-aged, overweight (aha, yet another Western excess!) satyr even incites Cao Song-wen, a married woman, to commit adultery, while exciting the passions of the innocent and much younger Tai Hai-yan, who is mortified to learn of his other liaison (thanks to his "confession"), and thereby attempts suicide. Fisher simply can't help himself, even while incarcerated, as he attempts to explain to his captors in his self-criticism:

Let me try to follow your instructions, comrades, and try to focus on Tai Hai-yan, even though Cao Song-wen and Wen Da-xing [his chauffeur and the driver in his enterprise] are now driving around in this narrative with a carload of watermelons and have yet to find a place to deliver them.

Be objective: my heart rate has increased. My palms are sweaty. I am sure my temperature is higher now. All of these reactions occur whenever I think of Tai Hai-yan. Sometimes there is another reaction, but comrades, after all, have you *no* imagination?

The problem with these accidental criminals, besides their hapless nature, is that they are "mised" by the confusion of Asia's hybrid culture and shifting moralities. In the process, they track the shifts in their own moral visions of right and wrong, good and evil. Tan's novel is especially intriguing because the narrative is told by all three protagonists, each in the first person. When Mei's English friend Andy is arrested for running an illegal gambling syndicate, she holds sympathy in check. Andy is nonplussed; he has converted to Christianity a week earlier in an attempt to win over Mei, because she told him, when he asked her out, that she cannot be "unequally yoked," quoting "2 Corinthians 6:14 at me—'Do not be yoked together with unbelievers'—which basically meant she wouldn't go out with anyone who wasn't a Christian." No matter what he does, he can't seem to get things right, as further evidenced in this exchange with Mei:

"There wasn't any gambling in my flat when I was arrested. I told you, I've turned to God. No more gambling. I'm a changed man."

"So what really happened?"

"I was in my flat, on my way out to see you—just putting your gift in my pocket—oh you'll love what I bought—it's this packet of diet chocolate bars. It's got all these cool centres—orange, apricot, mint, toffee, coconut—sugar- and fat-free, only a hundred and six calories each. I know how you worry about your thighs. Is that a good gift or what?" I looked longingly for approval.

"You were supposed to get me some shampoo."

This seemingly callous attitude has roots. Mei and her childhood friend Eugene, the "lucky" one who gets to leave Singapore and who rooms with Andy at university, are the victims of what Mei calls their "foreign bodies." Her own father calls her a "banana"—yellow on the inside and white on the outside—the same father who rapes her as a teenager, something her mother has never acknowledged and probably never will. Eugene believes that Loong, a Singaporean from a wealthy diplomatic family, has murdered Charlie Lim, a boy whose biggest mistake was yearning to be "cool." Yet even while wanting the Loongs of the world to be punished for their crimes, Eugene has no compunction about sending the jobless Andy off to Singapore to live for below-market rent in Loong's family flat in exchange for running the gambling syndicate. Values and morality are as expedient as the fast-paced world, and narrative, of Tan's novel; we are all invaded by "foreign bodies" in this universe that rewards evil over good.

Despite the more leisurely pace of Abel's narrative, he depicts a no less intriguing world than Tan, and an even more complex moral universe. Abel's advantage is experience: this is his third novel and sixth book of fiction, while *Foreign Bodies* is Tan's debut book, albeit "indecently accomplished for a 23-year old" (*The Economist*). He is not afraid to be epic, and in the process, does articulate a profound vision in the comedy of our "global" yet still so tribal world.

I don't know what it's like out there in the grasslands, know next to nothing about Mongolia. After eighteen months in China, I still can't be sure that I can tell the difference between Mongol and Han any more than I can with certainty tell the difference between a Korean and Japanese. No more would I expect you to distinguish between an Australian and a Canadian

by sight alone, or tell Frenchman from Spaniard, Berger from Jew, Ibo from Dahomian. There are differences to be sure, but it takes considerable experience to make such distinctions readily and accurately, and who among us is so worldly? . . . It is hard to imagine a place like Mongolia in the thermonuclear age—a land of cowboys and horsemen.

. . . Sometimes geography is bunk, comrades, by which I mean identities are never as definite as boundaries. As Texas is Mexican, so Mongolia is Russian, Afghani, Pakistani, one image stamped on another. The Kurds? The Meo? Boundaries are nothing to them but nuisances. They cross borders like clouds. And human boundaries always blur. Besides war, the one thing the world will always know is Midnight Integration. I myself, I might have had children with yellow skin!

Comrades! I am taking the epic approach tonight because it became apparent to me in the course of events that our little, unofficial enterprise of selling watermelons was becoming entangled in a web of outlaw associations that spanned the city, the nation, and the globe.

Yet Fisher himself is no less immoral, or more appropriately, amoral, despite being ultimately undone by Wen, whose intentions are dubious but not clearly immoral, being a victim himself of some unnamed, and potentially more dangerous, criminal element. The enterprise is Fisher's undeniably illegal brainchild, and his Chinese associates, especially his lover Cao Song-wen, are seduced by the promise he represents. Yet Cao often seems to see more clearly than he the inevitability of their chosen path. When Wen fails to show up to drive their truck for the final unloading, Fisher notes, somewhat hypocritically, that "it had never occurred to [him] . . . that [Wen] would be so low on both cash and scruples" and complains to Cao.

"I wonder if he is hiding," she said.

"Maybe so. But from whom?"

"Whomever he owes money to."

"I don't like it," I said. "If he really is in that much trouble, he might just turn himself into a revolutionary hero and report everything to the police."

"I have trusted him so far," Song-wen said. "I still

trust him. I don't believe he would betray us."

"But he could, don't you agree?"

"All living things struggle most violently just before death," she said.

"Don't talk about death!" I demanded. "Nothing we've done, nothing Wen has done deserves anyone's death."

Ms. Cao gave me a grim smile. "I hope you are right. But some debts are more serious than others."

"Oh shit," I said. "I wish I'd just given him the money."

Ms. Cao said something in Chinese.

"Which means?"

"You cannot change the course of the river."

"Of course you can," I said. "Ever hear of a dam? You people are becoming masters of flood control and . . ."

Ms. Cao turned back to the melon pile, leaving me lecturing to myself.

There is a strange order in the seemingly random madness that is China and the world. In the end, the quixotic Fisher recognizes his own inability to break the cycle that causes the insanity. In the end, safe in his American home, the persistence of laughter is his best hope for salvation.

I know all too well now . . . this is a short existence. If I grow old, if I survive, what will I have to remember that will make me feel I have lived a *life*, and not a charade? I do not scorn Wen, for all the trouble he made. I aided and abetted him. I am his brother. We ride into town. We rob banks. . . So I am through confessing, comrades. Tomorrow I will get in my car and I will drive along the polluted river to the obscene shopping mall, and contain my disgust enough to carry out our Christmas rituals . . . Santa Claus still has me by the balls. It's a rather common, slightly desperate and unfulfilling act, this buying of holiday gifts. What *thing* can I give them (wife & daughter) that will help them to be free?

Ah! I have it.

Bicycles!

Conversely, everything is fair game for Tan's acerbic wit because her fictional universe remains random. She pokes fun at the paucity of our collective imagination, showing us the pathos of our existence. At times, her dark vision is chilling, because her characters are privileged, elite, international, and young; in other words, the world's future is in their hands. Eugene's meditation on Loong and Michael Fay is a case in point.

When I first saw Loong's bedroom, I couldn't believe it. It was full of stolen stuff. His bed leant against the wall, and on the wall were over fifty dark green cans of Diebels, a German beer. Loong got all of them in Dusseldorf. He broke into different hotel rooms and stole the cans from mini bars . . . "Um, don't your parents mind?" I said.

"Mind what?"

"Mind that your room is full of stolen stuff. Don't they ever say anything?"

"No. As long as I'm doing well in school, they let me do whatever I like. Good grades are a sign that everything's heaven in my life. My grades are absolutely storming at the moment, so I can get away with anything."

When I first met Loong, I wouldn't have dreamt of stealing anything at all. They had indoctrinated me too well in Singapore. Don't talk about shoplifting, I didn't even *chew gum*. But I guess Loong was different; though he was born in Singapore, he'd been an expat kid all his life. He never lived in any country for more than three years. And after I'd been an expat kid for a year, I started stealing too. When you're an expat kid, you get your kicks from smashing in headlights, lobbing rocks at lamp-post bulbs, and watching porno videos like *Driving Miss Daisy Crazy* and *Thunderballs*. Why did we do all that stuff? There was nothing else to do as an expat kid. Things were so boring everywhere. That's why I understood Michael Fay, that American expat. He acted just like any normal kid would, only it was bad luck that he was in Singapore, where they don't take any crap.

Whether we're in Europe or in Singapore, whether Asian or Western, life is equally as meaningless and random. It all comes down to not getting caught. Yet even when we are,

we do not rise above the traps of our existence. Here is Andy at the moment of arrest when the police confront him with the planted Filofax in which are entered the gambling records used as evidence against him:

"I've never seen the Filofax before in my life," I say. "And if I'd seen it, I never would have bought it."

I mean—huuurgh, it was ugly. The cover had this blotch of yellow, brown, white squiggles, like someone shat on it, wanked all over it and then topped it off with a sprinkle of pond scum. It looked like something that dropped out of the Sphinx's nose. I knew that I should be worrying about jail and shit, but all the time, the only thing I could think of was—how the hell can they even think that I own a Filofax like that? I mean, I'm a cool, hip guy. I'm always aware of what's in the UK Top Twenty. I know who's in, who's out, who's on the move. I mean I'm the "in" guy who's the smart one in *Beavis and Butthead*. So I say to the inspector, "You don't *seriously* think that Filofax belongs to me? You know, like I have more *taste* than that," and he just gives me this look that says that, in his eyes, my cool quotient equals to zero. And I feel like a pile of cack. And I tell myself, "Andy, you are one mind-fucked boy. You ought to be worried about spending the rest of your life in jail for a crime you know nothing about, instead of worrying about whether Inspector Koh thinks you're hip or not." But you've got to see it to believe it—the Filofax was so ugly, it was traumatic.

The world according to Tan is perhaps so "mind-fucked" that the only path is the kind of spiritual salvation she ends with, one that is darkly comic. Satan and God are one and the same, because the innocent suffer while the guilty are rewarded. The only hope left is a willingness to wait for freedom from the foreign bodies that trap us all, a time when, as Mei says, "the trumpet sounds, and the dead in Christ arise, when the old becomes new, and the corruptible, incorruptible."

Like Abel's comic vision, Tan's illuminates the magnitude of human folly. Unlike his world, however, hers cannot be redeemed by the purification of laughter.

Hwee Hwee Tan grew up in Singapore and the Netherlands. After studying creative writing at the University of East Anglia, she published her first novel, *Foreign Bodies*, at the age of twenty-two, while still a graduate student at the University of Oxford. She

received her MFA in Creative Writing at New York University, where she won the New York Times Fellowship for Fiction. She now lives in Singapore.

Robert Abel is a contributing editor of *Frigate*.

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