

Story for performance #985
webcast from Canberra at 07:41PM, 01 Mar 08



Source: Martin Chulov, 'US sends warship to patrol Lebanon', *The Australian online*, 01/03/08.

Tags: [China](#), [language](#), [travel](#)

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There are very few lifeless objects which one can say are irreplaceable but my stick is one. This is not a walking stick but it is a crutch—of a fashion.

My stick takes me places. And brings me back. It's a feng stick. A wind stick. Like the ancient Chinese wind sticks. But a bit more modern! Thin long cold silver metal with a bullet tongue. At the other end, a pinched head with an eyehole, through which threads the fine metal fibre that holds the tangle of red beads and cloud heads that create the weight for the feng.

Feng needs something to fan. That's what the beads are for. To be moved by the wind. No beads, no wind. No feng, no journey.

Sliding the feng stick into coils of my long hair is pleasure, just the ease with which it enters, then the faint tremor of a breeze which heralds the edge of another world.

My first time in Tang China was a surprise because it was the first time.

The whisper of the feng followed by the whisper of women. It was minutes before I understood that I was understanding their whispers, spoken in an ancient Chinese tongue. I don't speak Chinese. The room I found myself in was commodious. The white wattle and daub walls appeared thick but did not meet the floors so that the driving snow was filtering into the room through the gap, settling in icy piles on the hardstone floor.

I was sitting up in bed as if I had woken wildly from my sleep, my hands gripping the heavy feather quilt with its red silk trim. The whispered words were so soft as to make it difficult to dissect the meaning but I understood that the women were gently mocking each other over the men they had met that evening in a great hall. The intermittent laughter, giggling, muffled exclamations, added to the melee of soft sounds and were backed by driving icy winds against the paper screen windows.

The whispers faded with the lights passing my room. Looking down to follow the yellow light as it moved in waves through the gap between floor and wall, I spotted the small feet wrapped in the heavily embroidered slippers of a courtesan, tottering as she would need to on her painful stumps, attentive only to the conversation as if in a dream.

I never saw her face because the stick never took me back there.

The best and worst time the stick took me somewhere was the best because, well, wait and see and I will tell you. The worst, well, because I came back here and knowing the ways of my feng stick, I fear I will never return.

The chill was the first thing I noticed after the feng hit the beads. I was alert to rapid change of place.

So cold, bone-cracking cold and although I was dressed warmly, there was something more that seeped in. A fear, I think, a collective fear for I was suddenly standing on a mountain side above a wooded valley and down there were two warring groups of black men, yelling, brandishing weapons, painted bodies, clashing and cursing. I stamped my feet and blew on my hands surreptitiously.

It was hours before the battle ended. Now my feet and hands no longer had feeling. Too frightened to move far and not knowing where to go, I waited. Many men wailing from injury were carried off but none was lifeless. Such a bloodless battle! When the noises had died down, I moved and had not gone more than five feet when a tall black woman wearing an exotically wrapped mound of red and blue cloth on her head stood before me. She clicked her tongue and pointed with her lip to a path that wound horizontally around the mountain side. Who was I to disobey?

She continued clacking her tongue and I thought either she disapproved of me greatly or it was her language that caused the curious sounds. The movement warmed my body and by the time we had reached the other side of the mountain and were descending to a long and wide red earth plain, I had stripped off my coats and woollens. I don't remember the time of day, only the walking and stopping occasionally for her to ignite her long smoking pipe from a small grass fire built into the edge of large rocks. She stared at me, and clicked. Her face, although wrinkled, was young and her eyes reflected the red earth in a warm, welcoming way. She meant me no harm, perhaps just companionship on her walk home. I will never know.

It was on the third stop we had made to light the pipe and smoke when she noticed my feng stick, pointed to it with her lip and chattered. I pulled it from my tresses and my hair swept down across my shoulders. I held out my precious feng stick for her to look at. But she had leapt up and run to stand beside me, touching my hair, talking rabidly now. Her eyes shone and she laughed. I remember her teeth, small, white, strong. The wrinkles on her face disappeared. She laughed and waves of wonder overcame me. Her delight was so simple. My stick in my hand, my hand in mid-air, the long low red earth plain stretching out before me, and the woman at my shoulder laughing.

And then she was gone, or at least, I was gone. It has been years since then, and that single moment of wonder has never left me.

The feng stick is fickle. I know it will never take me back there to the that wide red earth plain but I often dream that I am walking alongside the woman who clicks her tongue, in search of what she seeks just over the horizon.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Miriam Taylor Gomez.