

The background features a vibrant red color scheme. In the center, a night-time photograph of the Singapore skyline is visible, with several skyscrapers illuminated. The image is overlaid with large, expressive black Chinese calligraphy characters. A large yellow flower is positioned in the upper left corner. The overall aesthetic is modern and culturally rich.

SINGAPORE SWING

JOHN MALATHRONAS

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For Karen

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*But on her Land's End throned, see Cingapùr
Where the wide sea road shrinks to narrow way;
Thence curves the coast to Conchin's shore
And lastly trends Aurora-ward its lay.*

Canto X, 'Os Lusíadas', Luís de Camões

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PART ONE:
IN SINGAPORE
WITH A SLING

CHAPTER ONE



THE BUDDHA'S MESSAGE IS ETERNAL

Along, long time ago the pious monk Xuán Zàng undertook a long journey to procure the Buddhist sutras and enlighten the people of China. After a long and eventful expedition, Xuán Zàng and his three omnipotent followers – Monkey, the simian god, Friar Sand, the incarnation of a river spirit, and Pigsie, a creature half man, half pig – reached their destination. Two of the Buddha's most dutiful disciples, tall, thin Ananda and short, stout Kasyapa, were guarding the sacred scrolls.

'Oh, Devout Ones,' cried Xuán Zàng, 'we have arrived from afar, full of spiritual hunger for the key to Enlightenment. Please grant us the knowledge of the holy scrolls.'

Xuán Zàng waited in vain. Ananda and Kasyapa stood motionless in front of him.

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‘Oh, Sage Ones,’ cried Monkey with annoyance in his voice, ‘we have suffered many privations to come here. Please reward us with the Light of Knowledge.’

Friar Sand stretched himself in a huff, preparing for battle. Pigsie, impatient as ever, made a move to reach the trunks behind the two disciples.

Ananda stood firm, obstructed him and broke his silence.

‘The Buddha’s Knowledge does not come cheap, oh honourable pilgrims.’

Pigsie was astounded. ‘They want their palms greased,’ he squealed. ‘They want us to bribe them with gold!’

Kasyapa was the next to speak. ‘Do you lot know the cost of copying papyri nowadays? The scribes have formed a guild and demand ever higher wages.’

Monkey was well and truly incensed. ‘Call yourselves Keepers of His Bidding? *Pah!*’

Xuán Zàng was angry. ‘The Buddha *himself* sent us here,’ he bellowed, ‘and I will tell him of your profiteering.’

Ananda and Kasyapa smiled enigmatically.

‘So be it,’ they said. ‘You can have the scriptures. They are in those three crates over there. Go back to your land and spread His Message.’

Xuán Zàng, Monkey, Friar Sand and Pigsie cast incredulous looks at each other. This was easier than they thought. The invocation of the Buddha’s name must have alarmed those greedy con men.

The four pilgrims loaded the 8,048 hallowed books on their dragon-horse and flew away hastily in case the two custodians changed their minds. After a few hours, they dismounted to rest under a sacred Bodhi tree. Plus, of course, they were curious to begin reading the Word of the Buddha.

Xuán Zàng carefully unrolled one of the scrolls and shook with indignation.

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'It's blank!' he shouted.

He opened another bundle. It was also full of blank scrolls.

'They have given us nothing,' cried Monkey.

'The swines!' cried Pigsie in an unfortunate turn of phrase.

'The Buddha will hear of this!' said Friar Sand shaking with fury.

The four friends were despondent. They had failed in their mission. In desperation, Xuán Zàng prayed to the Buddha who immediately appeared in front of him.

Monkey opened his mouth to complain but the deity silenced him with a gesture.

'I know what happened,' said the All-Knowing One. 'You gave nothing and received nothing in return. Empty hands, empty scrolls. My disciples have been told: the sutras can not be given away lightly.'

The pilgrims lowered their heads awkwardly.

'But we don't have any money to give them, All-Powerful One,' cried Monkey.

The Buddha pointed at Xuán Zàng's golden begging bowl. 'Ananda and Kasyapa will accept this for payment, I'm sure.'

The four friends fell quiet. They never expected the Buddha to stoop so low as to demand money for a spiritual treasure.

The Enlightened One broke the pervading silence.

'Oh dutiful pilgrims,' he said. 'Let me reveal this to you: you carry the right load.'

The pilgrims looked up in surprise.

'These empty scrolls are the real wordless sutra. *They truly lead to Enlightenment.*'

'But –' started Monkey.

'But the rabble in your ignorant, distant land will not comprehend. They will require words. They will ask you how long you bargained for, how much you eventually paid, and whether you got a good deal.'

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‘So –’ started Xuán Zàng.

‘So it is to convince *them* that you have to pay,’ said the Buddha. ‘For this is the society you live in: they understand only the value of material exchanges.’

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‘Man’s brown wallet OUTRAM PARK 20:00 6/1’

The text messages flash on the black-and-green phosphorescent screen above the taximeter and linger there casually. My sleepy eyes follow them with the fascination of a toddler who is only just beginning to manage focusing in the middle distance.

‘In Singapore, first time, is it?’ asks the driver.

‘No. Second time,’ I reply, ‘but last time was seventeen years ago.’

The driver nods. He is a tall, lanky Chinese with a Fu Manchu moustache who is sticking to the speed limit with Confucian commitment. I long him to get on with it, for it is almost morning and I’ve had no sleep tonight. *Their* night. What is it now, my day? Or is it also *my* night 12 hours later?

‘Long time, *lah*. Changi not there then, *leh*?’

I try to think back in time. I look at the super-duper ECP Expressway we are on, driving into central Singapore in a night as thick as it is sultry.

‘No, I’ve been driven this way before,’ I say. ‘It was Changi airport I arrived at then.’ The driver doesn’t object. Maybe he agrees, maybe he thinks he should not antagonise a client.

‘JP Gaultier black bag DHOBY GHAUT 10:35 7/1’

‘Place different now, *ah*?’

I don’t reply to that. My sensory perception has been dulled after watching five films back-to-back on my in-flight video

THE BUDDHA'S MESSAGE IS ETERNAL

screen. My mind is full of plots and moving images. Maybe that's why I am concentrating on the message display; bright and beaming, it is the closest to a surrogate TV.

'Blue jacket ORCHARD ROAD 9:00 7/1'

'What are these messages?' I ask in return.

'Thing passenger lost.'

'In the taxis?'

I shouldn't have asked, for it all made sense immediately: a blue jacket had been left behind in a taxi to Orchard Road at 9 a.m. on 7 January.

'Lost thing – you return,' replies my driver in that staggered oriental singsong. 'Taxi company pay commission *lai dat*.'

I wouldn't expect less from Singapore's drivers and taxi companies. There is always something novel to admire in the city-state: tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime, tough on the temptations to crime.

We are approaching the centre and the night, always dense and hefty but never drab or gloomy, has begun to give way to a strange radiance of film-noir cinematic artificiality as structures appear etched against a bottleglass-green pre-dawn sky. I look at my right as we drive across the bridge over Marina Bay. By the Singapore River the skyscrapers of the Central Business District flash through momentarily, unreal and unnatural, wearing their windows like twinkling chain mail. If there exists any beauty in this vision, it is not the Creator's; it is the elegance of geometric lines and curves fashioning a horizon shaped by Man as master of the jungle's anarchy. This is a vantage point for a great photo: deservedly unreachable because we are in the middle of a motorway and – as its essence is human and ephemeral – appropriately transient, since the grand view lasts for only several seconds before my taxi swerves down the bridge incline into Prince Edward Street.

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'Man's brown wallet OUTRAM PARK 20:00 6/1'

Looping back to the first message? Just as well, since we've arrived in Chinatown. The sunlight is now seeping through and the lack of people on the pavement exposes the lack of street detritus for which Singapore is famous. I stare at the freshly painted, two- and three-storey shophouse façades of Neil Road trying to recollect my first impression all those years ago.

It's even cleaner than I remember it.

I shudder as I recall my sleepy shock at Changi Airport, when I realised that I was smuggling one half-depleted pack of chewing gum through customs into this most masticophobic of states. What awaited me if they had found out? Fine, flogging or imprisonment? Perchance all three?

'Hotel Pacific, *lah,*' the driver announces.

About time.

I get out and the smell of warm, wet asphalt hits my nostrils at once. I pay the fare – plus the trauma of the airport supplement – and cart my luggage on its rollers to the hotel door. By then, the sun has truly come up: Singapore lies just one degree above the equator and any suspicion of dawn or dusk lasts less than the drive from Changi Airport into town.

The big, fat Chinese receptionist inside the hotel is not too happy to see me – I seem to have disturbed his sleep. Yes, they had a reservation on my name but no, no indication that I'd be coming so early. 'We have room after eleven,' he says.

I'm cross: 'But I made a phone call specially to warn you about this. I said I was prepared to pay extra if need be.'

The receptionist doesn't appear to register and his eyelids, as sleepy and droopy as mine, hardly budge. 'No room until eleven,' he repeats.