

The Master of Wind and Water

by Thanh-Van Tran-Nhut

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I will never forget the day Master Celestial entered my life, or the day he disappeared from it. Fate has a strange way of tangling the threads of our existences, mysteriously weaving them into an ephemeral fabric only to suddenly slash it to pieces.

It was my young wife, Mist Flower, who first mentioned his name.

"Do you know that Mrs. Rose is hosting a tea party tomorrow afternoon? Several of us are going, because she will have a special guest, Master Celestial."

"A poet?" I asked, aware of my wife's dreamy nature.

"No, no!" she answered with a smile that dimpled her cheek. "A master of Time, a doctor of the Earth, a familiar of Wind and Water."

"A geomancer!" I couldn't help growling. "Another charlatan!"

I'm a basically pragmatic person, and I prefer the roughness of the concrete to the softness of the ethereal. I lack that lively imagination that made my wife so charming. Mist Flower would always grow enthusiastic when the talk turned to the immanent beauty of things. She believed that our world rests on top of another world, ancient but alive, that rises close to the surface here and there, visible only to those who are sensitive to it.

"He's a master of *phong thuy*, which the Chinese call *feng shui*," she said stubbornly. "He has an excellent reputation. That's why Mrs. Rose has turned to him. She wants Master Celestial's help in rearranging her garden. She's very unhappy with its present layout."

Visiting some friends would distract Mist Flower for an afternoon, I thought. We had been married for four years and I was often busy with my work at court, running the jail. What could be more normal than for my wife to have a social life?

The weather was beautiful that morning, I remember. Clouds were passing high in the sky and the frangipani was in bloom. Thinking back now, however, I might have heard fate chuckling in its corner.

* * *

I left for court early, leaving my wife still in dreamland. For a little provincial town we had quite a bit of work. It was small enough that we didn't feel overwhelmed by cases, but big enough that we had our share of odd or sordid affairs. Mandarin Doan, who was in charge of the jurisdiction, had seen many springs pass and now just wanted to complete this final assignment in peace, which explained the caution of his legal rulings.

Coming back from the courthouse that day I found myself in front of Mrs. Rose's house. My steps had unconsciously led me there, as if drawn by the mysterious geomancer whose skill I'd heard so much about.

Peering over the hedge, I saw a small group of women in shimmering dresses respectfully accompanying a man with his hair in a topknot. Among others I recognized the heavily made-up Mrs. Rose, cheery Mrs. Osmanthus, and Mist Flower, my slender wife. It made me heartsick to see her surrounded by this gaggle of ecstatic women. The geomancer had the body of a scholar

who rarely saw the light of day, draped in a tunic embroidered with puffy clouds. But set in his pale, clean-shaven face were two eyes so compelling that I could feel their power even from ten steps away.

I ducked down to watch this curious procession unobserved.

After slowly circling the little lily pond, the group came near the hedge where I was hiding.

"How can we fight the evil influences assailing us, Master?" I heard Mrs. Rose cry in a tone of despair. "As I said, my husband often complains of nightmares in which he finds himself completely naked in front of an audience that expects him to recite that erotic novel, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*."

"That is unfortunate," Master Celestial conceded calmly. "It all stems from an incorrect arrangement of your garden. Because of the recent heavy rains, its surface has changed, settling in some places and rising in others. As a result the Dragon's Breath is not expressed in a fortunate way."

With his thin arm he pointed to the mountains in the distance and continued:

"There you can see the undulations of the Dragon, in whose veins the vital essence circulates—the *khi*, or the Chinese *chi*, if you prefer. Our goal is to retain it so it impregnates this place and makes it beneficial. The pond is a good idea, because calm water retains the breath. The problem comes from the little stream flowing out of this crack, here. The water cuts the site in two, splitting the propitious vein and dispersing energy."

"Will Mrs. Rose's husband have to go on reciting a licentious novel in the all together?" asked Mrs. Osmanthus, who had a taste for sexual matters.

"No, he will be able to put his clothes back on when the stream is dammed. You should then plant a row of trees to the north to protect the site."

Having finished his analysis, Master Celestial turned and gazed at the women massed behind him.

From my hiding place I could sense the fascination the geomancer held for the group. His strangely dark eyes were almost liquid, like molten lead. He stared at the women without blinking. Facing him, they seemed to have stopped breathing, completely at his mercy.

It made me heartsick to see Mist Flower so enthralled. She was just a few steps away, yet out of reach, as if separated from me by a sheet of ice. Had the Dragon's Breath raised an insurmountable barrier at that moment? Was the fire that burns in the depths of the earth destroying the bonds that united us? Or was it jealousy, that invisible whore, draping herself around my neck?

I came home that evening feeling tense. Would my wife greet me with a vacant look, her mind elsewhere? Was her soul lost in the subterranean meanders of that damned garden?

To my surprise, Mist Flower opened the door eagerly, as if she had been waiting for my return. When I asked her about the afternoon she'd spent with the geomancer, she answered only vaguely, apparently not very interested in the matter.

"Master Celestial? Oh yes, he seems very competent. He told us about the Azure Dragon and the White Tiger."

I was reassured by the casualness of her answer. Where *phong thuy* is concerned, however, I would learn that winds could die down and waters become still, only to furiously whip up again later.

* * *

Life continued peaceably until one day I came home earlier than usual and felt the first gust of an ill wind ruffle my calm surroundings.

I had just crossed my threshold when I saw Mist Flower standing with her back to our bedroom door, wearing in her most beautiful silk dress. I was stirred by the sensual curve of her hips and the loose strand of hair curled on her neck. As I drew closer, she suddenly turned slightly, revealing the person facing her.

Finding ourselves nose to nose, Master Celestial stared at me in silence. His high cheekbones quivered as his eyes turned to molten lead.

"Your husband is home," he finally said.

Mist Flower jumped, turning a distraught face to me.

"I didn't expect you so early," she stammered. "I invited Master Celestial to try to improve the layout of our house. It's possible that good influences have trouble being expressed because of the poor placement of the openings..."

I was furious. The gods had not given us a child, and here, in order to circumvent destiny, Mist Flower had invited this charlatan into our home—who was now pointing an accusing finger at our bed.

"I can tell you right away that this bed is very poorly placed," he said. "Facing the door, it causes a weakening of amorous energy. And being wedged against the window aggravates the loss."

His tone was probably neutral but I sensed a vaguely ironic, underlying contempt, all the more insulting for being hidden. With such a beautiful wife, the geomancer seemed to be suggesting, how can one fail in the most deeply human of gestures?

In the center of the room, he had unfolded a stool with a round compass over a square socket. On the yellow lacquered surface, which was divided into a number of concentric circles, were engraved the names of the five elements, the twenty-eight lunar mansions, and the twenty-four periods of the year. In the center of the instrument a magnetized needle indicated the north-south direction.

"Before anything else, we have to check your dwelling's spatial orientation," Master Celestial decreed.

Unnerved by our sudden encounter, I watched as he proceeded. Bent over the compass, he aligned the needle on a mark on the first circle. Using a weighted wire that ran through the center of the compass, he then noted the orientation of the house.

"Your bedroom does not seem to be perfectly aligned in the *Niên Duyên* direction, which represents family happiness. That would explain your current difficulties. But we might be able to reestablish a good circulation of *khi* by hanging *phong linh* chimes in front of the bedroom door."

He hung up an assemblage of bamboo tubes that made a harmonious clinking sound.

Standing next to him, my delighted wife was blushing with pleasure, her hand on her chest. I swear she had never looked at me with as much admiration as she did him, and my heart sank. With an odd feeling of defeat, I firmly showed Master Celestial the door.

Mist Flower was talkative at dinner, convinced that she would soon experience the joy of being a mother. But when I held her in my arms that night, I felt that a leaden gaze was observing our every gesture.

The weeks that followed were gloomy, poisoned by bitterness and resentment. My wife's good humor and the love songs she kept humming filled me with suspicion.

I decided to watch Master Celestial's activities closely. The geomancer seemed to have many clients, all interested in fortune or success—as if you could attract good luck by hanging a trinket in the wind! His most loyal customers were Mrs. Sparrow the herbalist, who wanted to expand her shop, and Mr. Xa, an ambitious cloth dyer. The geomancer spent hours advising them, using his compass and his magic formulas. The dyer, a handsome man with a full head of hair, showed his gratitude by often inviting him to meals.

Around that time, a strange transaction concluded between the old Buu couple and Mr. Xa, the dyer, came to my attention. The Buus, who lived in a house with a big garden not far from ours, had decided to sell it to him for next to nothing. From a casual conversation with neighbors, I learned that a prediction Master Celestial made had terrified the couple. Because of a dire conjunction between the heavens and the layout of their land, they would soon experience a reversal of fortune that would include an atrocious death, he claimed. To avoid such a calamitous future, the couple had accepted Xa's offer without arguing. I suspected collusion between the geomancer and the dyer, but without a formal complaint by the old couple, there was nothing I could do.

Meanwhile, my relations with Mist Flower became more and more tense. I felt she was being seductive with me—was it to compensate for some sin she had committed?—but I rejected her, my mouth hard and my heart broken.

Then one evening an errand boy brought her a dress of watered silk. My wife turned pale, not knowing what to say.

"Go put it on, since you ordered it!" I said angrily.

She made no denial and obeyed, almost in tears. I watched her suffering, enjoying a vengeance that was tearing at my stomach. Go ahead and wear your gift from Master Celestial, I thought, and may you die of shame.

But while my home life was collapsing and I watched in vain for a misstep by the geomancer, something happened that completely changed the situation.

* * *

I had no sooner reached the courthouse the next day than I noticed an unusual buzz in the air. I slipped into the hearing room to watch the session underway.

Wrapped in his flowing robe, Mandarin Doan was presiding at a dais trimmed with green velvet, listening to his constituents' grievances. Before him lay a prostrate woman whose loud sobbing had attracted the whole courtroom's attention. When she stood up, I was surprised to see that it was my wife's friend Mrs. Osmanthus, the cheerful woman I had spied in Mrs. Rose's garden. She was in obvious distress, and her eyes were red from weeping.

"Venerable mandarin," she cried between two sobs, "have pity on the poor woman before you!"

"Speak," ordered the mandarin, taken aback by her outburst.

"I have come to you about an unfortunate business involving a grave! My mother-in-law just died, and my husband wanted to be sure that our family cemetery was propitious for her burial. So he asked the advice of Master Celestial, a geomancer whose skill I had praised to him."

Hearing that name startled me, and I listened more carefully to the woman's lamentations.

"Master Celestial strongly advised against burying my mother-in-law in the family plot because of incompatible *phong thuy*. If she were buried there, he said, she would be exposed to bad influences and be condemned to wander forever."

Moaning, she fell silent.

"Go on," ordered the judge.

"After consulting his compass many times, Master Celestial told us that the only place favorable to my mother-in-law's burial was located at the edge of the forest."

"So what?"

"Alas, there was already a grave there," she said, sniffing. "But since the geomancer had been categorical, my husband decided to..."

Unable to continue, she knelt and pounded her forehead on the tiled floor.

"Don't waste the venerable judge's time!" snapped the head guard.

Mrs. Osmanthus continued hoarsely:

"My husband decided to open the grave and put his mother's body in it."

A shocked silence fell on the court room. Violating a grave! That was an extremely serious crime, and severely punished.

"My husband knew that it was forbidden, but his filial piety drove him to commit the irreparable."

"Why didn't he try to hide this shameful action?" asked Mandarin Doan, intrigued.

"Because one of his colleagues who was passing saw him and threatened to report him. In a panic, and not knowing what to do, my husband—"

She gave a cry of despair before continuing:

"—hanged himself last night!"

A murmur rang through the assembly while the widow clawed at her face. Sitting there, I felt great sadness for her, but at the same time indescribable excitement at the idea that the geomancer was the source of this tragedy.

"What is the name of this colleague?" asked Mandarin Doan.

"Mr. Xa. He and my husband were the town's two dyers. I have come to demand justice, because that man caused my husband's death!"

The judge spent a long moment lost in thought, then delivered his verdict.

"This Mr. Xa drove your husband to suicide, but his intentions were basically good, because violating a grave is an odious crime."

Lying on the floor, Mrs. Osmanthus writhed in pain.

"However, it was Master Celestial's disastrous analysis that incited your husband to open the tomb. Profaning a grave is reprehensible, but inciting someone to do it is even worse. The laws of Wind and Water would never dictate such behavior. I want that imposter arrested!"

I could hardly believe my ears. Finally, I had Master Celestial at my mercy!

The geomancer was immediately hauled before Mandarin Doan, who ordered him to explain the advice he had given to Mrs. Osmanthus's husband.

"I translate the wishes of Heaven," said the geomancer, looking regal in his cloud-spangled tunic. "I am the instrument of the gods, the only one able to read the undulations of the Azure Dragon and the stirrings of the White Tiger. I am the Master of Time! Seek the guilty party among men, and not among the elect of the Immortals!"

His arrogance was more than the judge could stand.

"Lock him up!" cried old Doan furiously, and ordered that he be given ten strokes with a bamboo cane.

I personally supervised moving the geomancer to jail. He was very downcast, despite his haughty ways. People crowded around, muttering, excited by the arrest of a soothsayer. My men were about to lead him down to the cells when Xa suddenly pushed to the front of the crowd of spectators. A broad-shouldered man, he was impeccably dressed and looked elegant in his pleated jacket. He was clearly angered by the geomancer's last words, which seemed to implicate him. Master Celestial gave him that leaden glance I knew so well, nailing him to the spot. A strange connection seemed to spring up between them, but then Xa shouted:

"Charlatan! Swindler!"

The enraged geomancer broke free from his guard and rushed at the dyer. They struggled and punched each other, much to the spectators' delight. My men finally separated the adversaries and led the Master of Time to his cell, while Xa straightened his clothes, grumbling.

I had Master Celestial put in our smallest, dampest cell, where he sat down without a word. I was filled with fierce glee at the thought that Mandarin Doan would sentence him to a punishment that matched his treacherous ways.

The news of Master Celestial's arrest did not seem to affect my wife unduly. Her face impassive, she merely served me my evening rice in silence. I had given up trying to understand her, and hoped only that our life together would return to normal now that the deceitful louse was rotting in jail.

Next day the geomancer requested an audience with Mandarin Doan. I had him brought up, hoping that he would irritate the judge further with his pompous declarations. But the trickster had decided to change his tone.

"Honorable mandarin," he began in a honeyed voice, "I was wrong to get carried away yesterday. I never intended to offend you with my protestations. I am the Master of Time, but more than that, I am your humble constituent."

Flattered, Doan encouraged him to continue.

"I realize that this whole misunderstanding stems from the fact that the unfortunate Mrs. Osmanthus doesn't believe in my soothsaying gifts. I am prepared to prove the extent of my powers in order to clarify the situation."

"How do you plan to do that?"

"Leave me in my cell without any contact with the outside world. If I can make predictions and they come true, you'll recognize that I am a true soothsayer and able to see the designs of the gods."

Chin in hand, the mandarin thought for a while. As he did, I could feel my stomach tighten.

"Very well," Doan finally said. "I'll give you two days to prove your powers. If you're successful, you will be released. If not, I will double your punishment."

The geomancer gave a gratified smile and bowed very deeply. With a heavy tread, I led him back to his cell.

The guards were ordered to forbid him all visitors. Only a trusted officer was allowed to bring his food. The geomancer asked for a special diet of vegetables and eggs so that he could concentrate, claiming that meat clouded his visions. I personally checked the locks on his cell and when left, a thousand lugubrious thoughts were whirling in my brain.

The next day, after a meal of hard-boiled eggs and pickled cabbage duly inspected by the jailer, Master Celestial asked for an audience with Mandarin Doan. He prostrated himself before the magistrate and announced in a disembodied voice:

"You who doubt my gifts of second sight, know that a beggar will die under a bridge outside of town today."

"Explain yourself!" cried Doan.

But the geomancer refused to say another word, even when being severely beaten. He was dragged back to his cell practically unconscious, while I dispatched a group of men to the bridge in question.

We were too late.

Under the bushes lay the body of a beggar.

Mandarin Doan was now starting to see the prisoner in a new light. Suppose he really was a master clairvoyant? In that case, wouldn't he be an excellent counselor? To my great displeasure, I could feel the wind shifting. So I demanded a second prophesy in order to eliminate any chance of fraud. The first prediction could have been an unfortunate coincidence. For his peace of mind, the magistrate agreed.

The geomancer spent another night in total isolation.

Even after all these years, I swear I would give my life to take back the demand I made.

* * *

The pink dawn had barely begun to brighten the dark rooftops when I got out of bed. I left my wife still wrapped in dreams, her hair spread over our pillow like silk waving in the wind, and feverishly headed to court. What would that damn geomancer find to impress Mandarin Doan today? And how had he managed to predict that poor beggar's death? I couldn't bring myself to believe in his powers, yet he'd been completely cut off from the outside world...

The prisoner was still asleep when I appeared at his cell, and I had to busy myself with other cases while waiting for him to get around to delivering his prediction for the day. It was only at the hour of the Rooster that he agreed to speak.

"Another tragedy will take place," said the geomancer. "A violent death."

"Whose?" asked an impressed Mandarin Doan.

Master Celestial's eyes darkened as he said the name.

I never ran faster in my life.

Mist Flower greeted me in her beautiful shimmering dress, hair framing her unusually pale face. Her open arms silently called to me, and I rushed to them, weeping. She was lying in a pool of blood flowing from her slit throat. As I hugged her cold body, I felt an unquenchable hatred boiling up in me.

I strode back to the prison feeling shattered, my eyes dry and my heart dead. Master Celestial would die at my hands. I had no idea how he had killed my wife; all I wanted was to beat him to death.

But the jail was empty. My men had brought the news back to Mandarin Doan, and he had freed the geomancer while I was clutching my wife in her bloody clothes.

I buried her on a rainy day, and left town.

* * *

Prison administrator Banh fell silent, as old ghosts slowly faded from his haggard eyes.

"What a tragic story!" exclaimed the poetess.

"Did you ever see Master Celestial again?" asked scholar Dinh.

"Only in my dreams, where I kill him again and again," said Banh. "But he won't die, because he returns in my worst nightmares when the moon is full and the clouds are racing."

Their eyes downcast, the banquet guests fiddled with their chopsticks. Mandarin Tan murmured something to Hoang, the steward, who went to the kitchens.

"I wonder if it's better to have an innocent person in prison than a murderer on the loose," speculated the apothecary.

"Especially a monster as influential as a corrupt geomancer!" chimed in his wife. "*Phong thuy* masters have such powers of fascination..."

"Are you positive that Master Celestial killed your wife?" asked Mandarin Tan.

The guests all turned to the young magistrate in surprise.

"Who else could have such a powerful motive?" asked Banh. "He was trying to seduce Mist Flower, and I was the one who insisted that he be kept in jail."

"Let's not forget that he sent Mr. Banh's wife a dress," said the tailor. "A gift that revealed his love for her."

Mandarin Tan leaned forward and asked:

"But how could Master Celestial kill someone when he was in jail?"

"He's a master of *phong thuy*!" cried the poetess. "He speaks to Wind and Water, and probably to the infernal powers as well."

Dinh spoke up: "He may have had outside help."

"But he was completely isolated in his cell," said Dr. Pork firmly.

The prison administrator ran a hand through his white hair. "In any case I can't see who would have wanted to help that charlatan," he said.

They all looked at Mandarin Tan. He shrugged and turned to the tax collector, who hadn't said anything yet.

"What do you think?"

"I have a hunch there was someone else involved in this affair, but I can't imagine who," answered the young man thoughtfully.

The tailor agreed. "In that case this unknown person would've had to communicate with the geomancer somehow."

Mandarin Tan looked at the guests around the table. The mood was tense. They had put down their chopsticks and seemed to be thinking hard.

"Go over the geomancer's circle of acquaintances for us," Tan suggested.

"There was Mrs. Sparrow, the herbalist, and Mr. Xa, the dyer," Banh said. "But they didn't know my wife, so why would they kill her?"

Dr. Pork raised a perfectly manicured finger. "Didn't you say that Xa moved into the house he got from the Buu couple?"

"Thanks to the pernicious advice given by the geomancer," added the tax collector. "I bet the dyer was his accomplice."

"The dress!" suddenly exclaimed Dinh, slapping his forehead. "What if the gift didn't come from the geomancer but from this new neighbor instead? Suppose the handsome dyer had plotted to get rid of the old couple to be near a woman he desired? Mr. Banh's wife found his advances unwelcome, but Xa persisted. That's why she was upset when the present arrived."

Frowning, the prison administrator began to look pale.

"So you think it was handsome Xa who was chasing my wife, and not the geomancer?"

"You better believe it," said the doctor smoothly. "Scholar Dinh is a specialist in the affairs of the heart, particularly immoral ones."

"But how did the two men manage to communicate?" asked the apothecary. "Mrs. Osmanthus's complaint was unexpected, so nobody would have predicted that the geomancer would be arrested."

Mandarin Tan said nothing, forcing them to come up with the answer on their own.

The tailor furiously scratched his temples, then cautiously said:

"They made contact only once after Master Celestial's arrest: when they fought in the courtroom."

"That's correct," said the magistrate encouragingly.

"That's when the dyer was able to pass the geomancer a message," interrupted the tax collector. "And in his note he outlined a plan..."

"What plan?" asked Tan.

At a loss, the guests fell silent.

"The prediction stratagem," said the doctor confidently.

"But how?" cried the apothecary's wife, her cheeks flushed with excitement. "That's what we have to figure out."

The unanswered question hung in the air.

Prison administrator Banh was now feeling very agitated. What if he had been looking in the wrong place all these years, directing his hatred and bitterness at an innocent man?

Suddenly Steward Hoang appeared at Banh's side and handed him something wrapped in a cotton cloth.

Banh glanced at Tan, who signaled him to unwrap the package.

"A hard-boiled egg!" he said in surprise, examining it carefully.

"Crack it open," said the magistrate.

He obeyed, under the curious eyes of the other guests.

As Banh peeled away fragments of shell, written characters appeared on the firm egg white that spelled the name "Mist Flower." Wide-eyed, Banh stared at the egg as if he were suddenly gazing into all the shadowy parts of his past.

The tax collector turned to Tan.

"How did you figure out the trick?" he asked admiringly.

Said Mandarin Tan: "When I realized that the person who was really pulling the strings was Mr. Xa—a man furious at a beautiful woman who had rejected him—I immediately thought of his profession. Dyers use alum to fix dyes in cloth. Alum is extracted from a mineral and is also used by doctors as an astringent. I asked the steward to make an alum solution and write these characters on the raw egg. When cooked, the egg white hardens and retains the brush strokes, but they are invisible on the shell."

Finally rid of his ghosts, the aged prisoner administrator looked up.

Banh said simply, "Thank you, Mandarin Tan."

About the Translator

William Rodarmor (1942–) is a veteran French literary translator. His translation of *Tamata and the Alliance*, by Bernard Moitessier, won the 1996 Lewis Galantière Award from the American Translators Association. He recently edited and translated *French Feast: A Traveler's Literary Companion* (Whereabouts Press, 2011), which features another Tran-Nhut story, "The Plate Raider." Rodarmor lives in Berkeley, California.