

Oracular Spoons in Peter Dickinson's *The Ropemaker*

Donna R. White, Arkansas Tech University

Early in *The Ropemaker*, Peter Dickinson introduces readers to one of the most unusual characters in children's fiction: Axtrig, an ancient fortune-teller of immense magical power. Axtrig can locate a missing person, tell the future, knock down walls, and even stop time. None of those abilities is that peculiar in a fantasy novel; however, what truly makes Axtrig unusual is that she is a wooden spoon. Carved from a peach tree many generations ago, Axtrig has been passed down from mother to daughter for more than two hundred years. As unique as she is, Axtrig, nevertheless, has roots in the folk practices of several different cultures, particularly those of Wales and ancient China.

In a personal interview, conducted after this essay was first presented, Dickinson claimed ignorance of the Chinese connection but expressed a strong interest in how it supports his own theory of creative imagination. He spoke of that theory in an earlier interview with Raymond H. Thompson: "Since magical practices are largely the creation of the human imagination, you have really only got to imagine a plausible magical practice, and it will probably be true." This statement implies that something like Jung's collective unconscious is the operating principle behind the invention of Axtrig. On the other hand, Dickinson admits that he also uses real-world sources to feed his imagination:

Obviously there are certain kinds of research which you need to do in advance, but I do as little as possible beforehand. If your imagination is really on song, you feed into it four or five elements, which are connected with the real world, and they form fixed triangulation points. (Thompson)

Another possibility, then, is that at some point in his long life, Dickinson came across information about Chinese folk practices but did not consciously remember the information. In that case, Axtrig emerged from his personal subconscious rather than from humanity's collective unconscious. Since Dickinson is an avid reader and lifelong learner, the second possibility seems a more plausible explanation for the presence of so many strong connections to Chinese thought and practices in *The Ropemaker*.

The novel introduces readers to an unnamed Valley that has been magically protected from unfriendly incursions for twenty generations. The barbarians on the north are kept at bay by a line of male millers who sing to the melting snow waters each year, thus calling an ice dragon that blocks the mountain pass with snow and ice. In the south, the aggressive Empire used to send unwanted troops to "protect" the Valley from the barbarians by means of high taxes and moderate pillaging. Now, however, men cannot cross through the forest without falling ill (and often dying) of a mysterious illness that is maintained through the efforts of a line of female farmers who sing to the cedar trees as well as to the unicorns that inhabit the forest.

When the novel opens, the magic is failing because the twenty generations are coming to an end. Two members of the miller family—an elderly man and his grandson—and two

members of the farming family—an elderly woman and her granddaughter—leave the Valley to seek out Faheel, the magician responsible for the protective spell, and to beg him to renew it. Meena, the elderly woman, takes with her three wooden spoons, ancient family heirlooms that are used to tell fortunes in a manner reminiscent of reading tea leaves. Men carved these spoons during the long winters brought by the ice dragon, and they whittled elaborate designs on the handles.

The tradition of carving wooden spoons with elaborate handles is the only obvious Welsh connection in the novel. These are Welsh love spoons. Love spoons were carved (also on long winter nights) from one piece of wood—most often sycamore but sometimes fruit trees—and each of the designs on the handle had symbolic significance. Young men carved these spoons and gave them to girls in whom they were romantically interested, thus the name “love spoon.”

Since Dickinson merely mentions the elaborate handles of his spoons and does not describe them in more detail or discuss designs and symbolism, he obviously does not wish to conjure up love spoons in anyone’s mind. In a personal interview, he admitted a general familiarity with this Welsh folk practice, so he was likely thinking of it when he described Meena’s spoons. Although particular designs on a love spoon might bring good luck, these spoons were not used for divination of any kind; they were, and remain, a token of affection used for decorative purposes.

Meena’s spoons look like Welsh love spoons, but they do not act like them. The oldest of Meena’s spoons is Axtrig. The tree from which she was carved grew from a peach stone that came from Faheel’s garden. Spoons carved from this tree are considered much more powerful than other spoons, so Axtrig is important enough to have a name, a gender, and a personality. Meena’s other two spoons have no names. Named spoons are more important than unnamed ones, but any old wooden spoon can be used for divination. Telling a person’s fortune with the spoons is not difficult for someone who has the gift of reading them:

To read a spoon, all that was needed was to unwrap it, wipe it lightly with fine oil to bring out the grain, lay it under a good light, and study the smooth back of the bowl in silence, thinking steadily of your need, or the need of whoever was consulting you, and after a while some of the lines in the grain would seem to become more marked. You could then “read” these lines, much as a palmist “reads” the lines of a hand. It was as simple as that, and as difficult. (70)

The first time we see Meena read the spoons, all she learns is that she’s going on a long journey, a typical fortune-telling line. The minute she gets the spoons out of the Valley and into the Empire, however, the fortunes get much more specific, and Meena says it is easier to read them. There is more loose magic in the Empire than in the Valley, which is why the spoons are easier to use. All of the magic in the Valley is focused on the two areas of protection against invasion—the ice dragon in the north and the unicorns in the south—so there is very little free to operate the spoons.

The travelers soon discover, quite by accident, that Axtrig has another magical ability. When Meena says Faheel’s name out loud, Axtrig points in the direction where he can be found. Tilja, the granddaughter, is looking at the spoons when Meena shares the magician’s name with a

woman who is helping them, and she sees Axtrig point. Everyone else in the room is stunned into near coma by the power of suddenly released magic. This event wakens Axtrig's true power, making her an object of desire for every magician in the Empire. Using Axtrig like a compass, very carefully and in secret, the travelers eventually succeed in finding Faheel.

Axtrig is not the first fortune-telling spoon that can act as a compass. Long before Dickinson imagined her, the ancient Chinese were using Si Nan, the south-pointing spoon of the early Chinese compass. All compasses, both Chinese and European, pointed south until the eighteenth century, when north became the norm (Thrower). The Chinese are usually credited with inventing the magnetic compass although they did not at first use it for navigation. According to one scientist, "the principle of the compass was in active use in China as early as 2637 B.C." (Ricker).

Most sources agree that the earliest compass was actually a metal spoon on a metal plate, and it was originally used for divination rather than for direction. The spoon was made of lodestone, a magnetized piece of magnetite. It was placed on a bronze plate used as a diviner's board. The plate had two parts: a square bottom marked with I Ching symbols, the square representing Earth, and a round piece of bronze centered on that square to represent Heaven. The round piece revolved over the square one. The way this worked for telling fortunes was that the diviner's board would first be adjusted to correspond with the current day and hour. The bowl of the spoon would be placed on the circular Heaven piece and spun. "The pointing handle would indicate the prophecy or fortune of the person for whom it was consulted" (Thrower).

The south-pointing spoon became an important tool for Chinese geomancy, better known as feng shui, many centuries before it was used for navigation (Earnshaw). But Si Nan eventually developed Axtrig's talent for pointing in a particular direction. The Chinese were aware of the magnetic poles, so they figured out the practical use of an instrument that always pointed south. Axtrig's first use as a compass results in her pointing more southeast than south, but every other time Meena uses her as a compass, she points directly south, like some kind of single-minded GPS device: "Every few days as they rested for their midday meal, Meena and Tilja would find somewhere hidden from the road and once again put their question to Axtrig. Each time the answer was the same. South" (196). Axtrig is definitely the south-pointing spoon. As she gets closer to Faheel, she is so determined to point south that she moves of her own accord.

The fact that Axtrig points south leads us directly to the ancient Chinese compass and somewhat less directly to two important concepts in Chinese philosophy, *wuxing* and *yinyang*. South is important in Chinese thought. It is one of the five directions or five principles or five phases or five elements or five processes underlying cosmic order. English translations cannot settle on a term because the Chinese concept includes all of these in the single term *wuxing*, which is a theory of association sometimes called correlative cosmology. South, the direction, is associated with a particular season (summer), a particular planet (Mars), a particular element (fire), particular animals and qualities and items, and a particular aspect of *yinyang*—Yang at zenith, or the masculine principle at full strength. Dickinson plays with these five phases and with *yinyang* throughout the novel. (Again, he insists that none of this is of conscious intent.)

One of the best explanations of *yinyang* I have found is in an article on Chinese art:

The universe is created by an Ultimate One whose nature remains mysterious, beyond the power of words, an Absolute pervaded by the spirit of motherhood, and thus moved to the acts of creation, using two agents of creation. These two agents are invisible but real forces that operate by the tension of polarity, the dynamic interplay of negative and positive energies, much like male and female forces. The female power is called Yin, the male power Yang. The female power is seen wherever there is fluidity, softness, openness, receiving, emptiness, or darkness. The male power is at work in hardness, assertiveness, force, and light. Everything that is made is a blending of the Yin and Yang polarities, and the dynamism and flux of reality is based on the tendency of Yin and Yang to advance and retreat, the tendency of one to become the other, just as summer changes into winter, and day changes into night. (McMahon 64)

Yin and Yang together constitute a single whole and maintain a perfect balance with each other. The substance of that whole is constantly changing: when there is more Yin, there is less Yang and vice versa. Everything contains both Yin and Yang. Even the strongest Yang thing—such as Ursula Le Guin’s description of utopia as a “big yang motorcycle trip” (90)—will contain a small circle of Yin. Yin and Yang are part of the five phases (*wuxing*), constantly cycling into one another.

A closer look at the travelers from the Valley will provide one example of how Dickinson uses these concepts in *The Ropemaker*. As females, Meena and Tilja are Yin. They live on the southern end of the valley. South, as I have said, is very Yang, so there is a proper balance here between the female principle and the male principle. Alnor and Tahl, the grandfather and grandson, are obviously male and, therefore, Yang. They live on the northern edge of the valley. North is associated with strong Yin, so again we have balance. Every spring Alnor sings to the waters from the snowmelt. In correlative cosmology, water is associated with the north and with strong Yin. However, spring is part of Yang ascending, not yet at full strength, and Alnor’s mill is at the foot of the mountains, which have strong Yang. Balance yet again. The cedar trees that Meena sings to are wood, an element associated with Yang ascendant, but she sings to them in autumn, a time connected to Yin ascendant. These balances seem carefully constructed.

Dickinson is often extremely subtle in his use of *yinyang*. Water has aspects of both principles. Meena sings to the cedars on the shore of a forest lake. Alnor sings to flowing water. According to Cliff McMahon, “the receptive fluidity of water is Yin, strongest in a deep quiet lake, but the brightness of water is Yang, and the power and passion of water in a waterfall is Yang” (67). In other words, still water is Yin and moving water is Yang, so Meena has the quiet lake and Alnor has all the streams and rivers.

Axtrig is Yin, not just because she is assigned a feminine gender, but because the south-pointing spoon of the Chinese compass is Yin, being made of lodestone, which follows a maternal principle, according to Master Kuan’s Geomantic Instructor from the 8th century (Silverman). When Axtrig reaches Faheel, a male magician, he reincorporates her power into himself, restoring his own strength and creating a new balance of Yin and Yang that allows him to complete a vital task. Alas, however, that is the end of Axtrig’s real magic. For Tilja, the spoon is no longer a “she” but an “it.” Meena’s last attempt at reading the spoons indicates how much Axtrig has weakened:

“I don’t know,” she said. “It wasn’t like when we were here before, clear as clear. It was more like it used to be in the Valley, little bits of stuff you’ve got to decide what they mean.” (360)

No longer the south-pointing spoon, Axtrig has reverted to a humble folk object. Her powers of divination are gone, never to return. In *Angel Isle*, the sequel to *The Ropemaker*, nobody reads spoons any more. Oracular spoons are merely a part of an old folk tale passed down in two families. But Alnor’s descendants still sing to the waters, and Meena’s continue to sing to the cedars.

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