

Suchen Christine Lim, *Rice Bowl*. 1984. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2009. 242 pp. ISBN 978-981-261-896-2.

Suchen Christine Lim, *A Bit of Earth*. 2001. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2009. 420 pp. ISBN 978 981-261-895-5.

It is unfortunately the rather common fate of many Singapore writers for their work to fall into that dreaded black hole of out-of-print books. Luckily for us, as the recent re-publication of two of her novels by Marshall Cavendish, *Rice Bowl* and *A Bit of Earth*, proves, Suchen Christine Lim's books have tended to avoid this fate. Separated by time as much as thematic content – *Rice Bowl* (first published 1984) is Lim's first novel while *A Bit of Earth* (first published 2001) is her latest novel – both works are important contributions to Singapore's literary tradition in English.

Rice Bowl is the story of religious aspirant Marie-Therese Wang and her gang of idealistic students. The novel, set in 1970s Singapore, explores the politics of student activism and the nature of idealism in a complex local environment of competing political ideologies and a global atmosphere of split geo-political loyalties embodied by the Vietnam War. Marie leads her students in agitating for change in Singapore by setting up a student-worker alliance which sees university students trying to educate their counterparts in the factories and organise them to press for their rights. Anticipating the so-called Marxist Conspiracy of the late 1980s, the novel traces the intricate interconnections among religious affiliation, intellectual idealism, and political conviction. As Marie finds herself increasingly drawn to Hans Kuhn, the American Christian missionary with liberal and left-of-centre views, she becomes disillusioned with the Singapore Roman Catholic Church's passivity in the face of social ills and also gets inadvertently more involved in the radically charged leftist politics of the activist-academic Mak Sean Loong, who can command support from Chinese-speaking students and workers.

In the meantime, her so-called gang of students who had early been attracted to Marie because of her unorthodox ways, charisma, and ability to relate to them individually, find their loyalty tested as they watch their "Sis" increasingly caught up in these larger political struggles. Thus one of the most sensitively-drawn characters in the novel, Yean, looks upon the unfolding chain of events with dismay and private grief at how Marie appears to be changing ironically into an increasingly more self-centred and self-absorbed individual despite her activism on behalf of an increasing number. Through Yean, we thus glimpse the unattractive righteousness and self-congratulatory nature of those who would agitate for change on behalf of others. If the novel is ultimately

critical of an idealistic Marie in its staging of the conflict between rice and poetry, it also resolutely seeks to deny us the opportunity of seeking refuge in the philosophy of pragmatism embraced by the Singaporean elite. Such unattractive and soulless pragmatism is embodied by the character Paul Tan, Marie's first love and a government scholar who becomes a high-ranking police inspector. It is significant that the novel ends with Paul. As Marie and Hans are forced to leave the country after a disastrous anti-war demonstration, Paul feels a palpable, if inarticulate, sense of loss.

Apart from the binary opposition between idealism and pragmatism, the novel also dramatises the fissure between English-speaking and Chinese-speaking groups in Singapore. This fissure appears again in *A Bit of Earth* when Lim deals with the Straits-born Chinese in Malaya also known as the King's Chinese for their ability to speak English and their loyalty to the British empire, and the newly-arrived immigrants from China who can only speak the Chinese languages. In *Rice Bowl*, the Chinese-speaking character of Mak Sean Loong becomes increasingly paranoid as he seeks to translate his Communist-inspired views into action and presses for more radical social action. The culmination of his final descent into insanity occurs when he pisses in front of the American embassy in the anti-war demonstration that goes awry. Mak is interesting to me for raising possibilities that remain ultimately unanswered and unanswerable in the novel. Is a political alliance between English-speaking and Chinese-speaking communities – now evolved perhaps into a tension between heartlander and cosmopolitan elite in today's Singapore – ever possible?

With the departure of Marie, the question of national belonging raised at the end of *Rice Bowl* is taken up in *A Bit of Earth* and reframed in an earlier historical period amid forces at work in the emerging anti-colonial struggle against the British. Working with a broader canvas, Lim sets the novel in nineteenth-century Malaya and chronicles the life of an immigrant coolie, Wong Tuck Heng, who starts off working in the tin mines of Perak before eventually building an economic empire. Loyal to his clan, the White Cranes, Tuck Heng rises to become their leader; in this and other respects, he serves as a foil to his adoptive Straits-born Chinese brother Ong Boon Leong who comes into his own as a prominent figure in colonial politics as the president of the Straits Chinese British Association. The English-speaking, Oxford-educated Boon Leong trains his gaze steadfastly on the West and on Britain while Tuck Heng's eyes turn to his native China in patriotic sympathy as the latter struggles to shake off the humiliating cloak of Western imperialism. The specific issue of Malayan independence is left to the next generation but it will be his father's patriotic feelings for China that Tuck Heng's son, Kok Seng, remembers as he joins the fight against the British colonial government.

Adding another dimension to the intricate web of ties in the novel is the story of the Malays, the indigenous population who find themselves increasingly

marginalised as the British consolidate their power and the Chinese gain economic ascendancy. Omar, grandson of the once much-vaunted Datuk Long Mahmud, the former menteri of Bandung, ends up as a clerk in the civil service. This dramatic fall in status is compounded by the sense that Omar's friendship with Kok Seng will probably not last as the latter prepares to leave for further study in Britain. Even as it fails to suggest a possibility for ameliorating inter-racial tension, this epic story of multi-ethnic families is valuable for managing to capture at key moments in the text the ordinariness of inter-racial ties borne out of pragmatism, expediency, as well as genuine feeling. In boldly attempting to represent different racially-inflected points of view, the novel forces us to take a hard look at the imbricated meanings of self, racial, and national realisation.

In both novels, Lim's concern for gender issues invigorates her writing. In *Rice Bowl*, Marie's story and her eventual marriage to Hans inevitably ushers into focus the woman's role in the public sphere. The sub-plot in the novel about Ser Mei, one of Marie's students who is prostituted by her mother, brings the economic and sexual exploitation of women in ostensibly modern Singapore, uncomfortably close to home. In *A Bit of Earth*, the possibility of "herstory" rather than "history" is addressed in the vignette of a woman killed by her community in Bandung for alleged adultery with a man from a rival Hakka clan. In addition, Lim's vignette of Tuck Heng's second wife leading a contingent of women in protest before City Hall is a powerful image of female empowerment and solidarity that implicitly challenges us to find and recover if possible similar examples from the past.

As these two new editions of Lim's novels show so well, Lim's writing continues to be strikingly relevant to ongoing debates about Singapore's past, and its future as a nation and global city, given its ability to constantly provoke, move, inspire, and excite.

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