

Lau Siew Mei, *The Dispeller of Worries*. Kuala Lumpur: Marshall Cavendish, 2009. 237 pp. ISBN 978-967-3035-23-6.

The reigning metaphysics in advanced industrialised societies has it that everything can be reduced to a template: a blueprint, a flow chart, a standard operating procedure. Such simplification aids the full-throttle productionist orientation of the lifeworld. As the demands of the market penetrate all areas of life, one gets the feeling that things which cannot be quantified literally don't exist. Notwithstanding their status as constitutive domains of the real, the necessary and the possible are reduced to the level of the actual. What Adorno calls identitarian thinking contaminates all existence. Art confronts and protests such reification, and in this connection Lau Siew Mei's fiction may be understood as an attempt to assert the truth-value of realities other than the actual, or to press the claim that another world is possible. Her work insists that the imagination is sacred even as the concept gets hijacked by business-speak (blue-sky thinking). A constant refrain is a turn away from the conventions of verisimilitude, because to accept the rules of what constitutes a faithful representation of the world is tantamount to accepting the status quo.

In Lau's first novel published in 2000, *Playing Madame Mao*, this unsettling of realist norms issues from the vertiginous meshing of storyline and setting. The book traces the experience of an actress, Chiang, whose husband, Tang, is embroiled in a nascent Singapore social justice movement. Imprisoned by authorities, Tang is forced to confess unspecified crimes on television. Later, he hangs himself in his room. This part of the novel is based loosely on the 1987 arrest and detention of a group of church workers and professionals by Singapore authorities, who accused them of instigating a Marxist plot to overthrow the government. The imbroglio is also staged in Gopal Baratham's 1991 novel, *A Candle or the Sun*, but unlike Baratham's book it isn't the centrepiece of *Playing Madame Mao*. Chiang shares the name of Mao's wife, Chiang Ching, and as the title suggests, Chiang plays Madame Mao in one of her productions: it is in fact her greatest performance, the one that makes her a star. Her character appears to switch between Chiang the actress and Chiang Ching the historical personage. A scene can operate in two contexts: modern-day Singapore and 1960s China (Singapore's paramount leader is called the Chairman). In addition, Lau alludes to Chinese folk beliefs, to a race of creatures hidden behind mirrors, oppressed by some mythical emperor, who will one day rise up in revolt. By playing around with reference and by blurring the ontological boundaries of characters, the novel fights the gravitational pull exerted by a culture that interpellates us as primarily spectators and consumers. Surely, it says, there is something more than that.

In Lau's latest book, *The Dispeller of Worries*, the rejection of linear modes is again a programmatic hallmark. Set largely in Malaysia, Singapore, and Australia, the novel tells the story of three individuals: Chui Hong, a part-time teacher, Naga Palani, her sensitive, estranged husband, and Rysiek, a Polish immigrant to Australia. What moves the story forward is the mystery surrounding the death of Chui Hong's beautiful elder sister, Min, when she was fifteen. Min's body is found halfway up a tree near the family home in Penang, Malaysia. Naga, who loved her, might be implicated in the killing. Another possible perpetrator is Brother Damien, a Catholic priest. The novel's resolution doesn't pull together entirely these divergent threads but that is deliberate: plot is not an overriding concern. What the frame story allows is the deployment of various Malay and Peranakan animist beliefs. As a young girl, Chui Hong's nanny, Ah Soh, had filled her head with them. In this way, the book conjures up a world of sprites, death-spells, shamans, and familiar spirits. Again, folkloric beliefs are used to invigorate a world enervated by obsession with the actual. The point is that these stories have the ability to "infect" the real. Ah Soh has webbed feet that allow her to climb walls. One of the most intriguing episodes of the novel is her sojourn in Singapore where she meets a "bamboo stick boy" who also climbs walls. He belongs to a race that spends its time perched on the bamboo poles used to hang out the wash in the high-rise flats of the city-state. Like the mirror people described in *Playing Madame Mao*, these bamboo people connote a parallel existence which occasionally "bleeds" into ours but which is always already there: they figure the radical transformation of society. And somehow Chui Hong also picks up this ability to scale walls. In a previous avatar it seems, Rysiek and her meet and have an affair in Brunei. They quarrel and split up. Rysiek, drunk at the time, thinks that he sees her fall off a balcony. She is actually climbing up a wall. By chance, Chui Hong and Rysiek meet again years later in Singapore, although the entire Bruneian interlude occurs at an odd tangent to the normal space-time continuum. Rysiek visits Chui Hong in Malaysia and meets Naga, who helps him attain a kind of insight into his life. As the novel ends, Naga joins a non-government organisation that seeks to extend minority rights. Chui Hong is pregnant with Rysiek's child but doesn't tell him. Rysiek returns to Poland to search for his estranged wife, Beata.

None of the protagonists have a regular income, so its refusal of plot, probability and the use of recursive narration help to unsettle, it might be said, the notion of progress, a bedrock belief of our times. In that sense, *The Dispeller of Worries* is an ambitious novel. Its execution is at times marred by solecisms but on the whole Lau does a valuable job examining what a lot of Singapore set or influenced fiction doesn't do, namely to pursue the emancipatory logic of a world that by suspending the laws of physics encourages us to contemplate suspending the law of capital. A biographical blurb on the back of the book states that Lau was born in Singapore in 1968 and migrated to Australia in 1994.

Another writer born in the city-state who settled in Australia is the poet Beoy Kim Cheng. A society so good at producing managers for Hewlett Packard and Hitachi for some reason doesn't keep hold of its writers – it is inhospitable to them. In this regard it would seem Lau's theme is timely and apposite.

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