

**Margaret McDaniels Leong, *The Ice Ball Man and Other Poems*. Ed. Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Angelia Poon. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011. 109 pp. ISBN 978-981-08-8884-8.**

Margaret McDaniels Leong's *The Ice Ball Man and Other Poems*, edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Angelia Poon, brings to life images from a bygone Malaya and is refreshingly free of political commentary on the Singaporean-Malayan separation, the Second World War or the national language debate. Since most of Leong's poems, according to Lim, were written during the 1950s, during her 14-year tenure in Singapore ("Introduction" 11), then a part of Malaya, Leong could easily bypass topics on separation or languages, but she clearly chooses not to resurrect many haunting memories of World War II.

A significant number of Malaysian literary texts focus on such topics. Novels with a World War II focus include Tash Aw's *The Harmony Silk Factory*, Paul Leslie Smith's *Rainforest Tears: A Borneo Story* and Seck Chim Chong's *Once Upon a Time in Malaya*. U.S. American Agnes Newton Keith also shares her own World War II experiences as a prisoner in her non-fiction piece, *Three Came Home*. Although Newton Keith kept a diary during her imprisonment and published her nonfiction work shortly thereafter, Aw, Chong and Smith write from a twenty-first century fictional perspective, choosing the war as the backdrop for their narrative plots. As a result, the reader of twentieth- or twenty-first Southeast Asian literature has little choice but to view Malaya/Malaysia and/ or Singapore through the lens of brutal beatings by the Japanese, war strategies to conserve products on Borneo and the waning of British colonialism.

Other writers such as Lloyd Fernando debate the language issue (see *Cultures in Conflict: Essays on Literature and the English Language in South East Asia*, for example). Lim, who left Malaysia shortly after the race riots of 1969, too, shares her reflections on coming of age during such a time (see *Joss and Gold*, a novel, and *Crossing the Peninsula and Other Poems*, a collection of poems, for example). Such authors, in the words of contemporary scholar, Peter K.W. Tan, of the National University of Singapore, insist that "English, together with other languages, is a Malaysian language" (48).

In contrast, Leong's poems, accompanied by Susanna Goho-Quek's vibrant watercolours of coral fish, monkeys and Malayan children, foreground Malayan festivals and traditions. Leong's readers linger at an Indian bunya shop and admire Chinese lanterns during the Moon Festival.

As Lim notes, Leong's poems cater largely to children, as she wrote a number of her poems when her own children were young. Her son, Daniel, was six when she moved to Malaya in 1949 ("Introduction" 15, 11). Leong, despite

her Chinese-sounding name, was an American living overseas, as Lim learned by surprise (“Introduction” 10), and her heritage and parental role may shed light on her reasons for choosing an apolitical approach. Or perhaps the wounds of the war were too fresh; Leong, who lived in Columbia, Missouri shortly before the release of *The Ice Ball Man and Other Poems*, may have wished to allow the healing process to commence, especially for a younger generation she may have desired to protect from the war’s clutches.

Despite Lim’s indication in the introduction that Leong focuses on children’s poetry, *The Ice Ball Man and Other Poems*, however, omits a number of Leong’s adult poems, which Lim herself references in “A Problematic of Identity: Margaret Leong in Singapore.” Such excluded poems include “Batu Caves” and “Casuarina in Johore” (“A Problematic of Identity” 143).

As a result, Leong’s works in *The Ice Ball Man and Other Poems* are soothing, refreshing. They are presented as if by a determined parent on an announced holiday. In one poem, “The Prow of a Ship,” Leong writes, “The sea looks fine/ From the prow of a ship/ That goes through water/ With a gentle dip” (*The Ice Ball Man* 72). She later adds, “And the land looks new/ When seen from afar,/ When a ship comes in...” (*The Ice Ball Man* 72). Although Leong does not mention specifically which shoreline or sea about which she writes (e.g. by Penang or Singapore), this poem remains clear of references to places like Changi, where the British and Malaysians desperately armed their battery guns in 1941 only to be overpowered by the Japanese.<sup>1</sup> Changi, also the site of the massacre of numerous Chinese, was located near POW camps. And yet the poem heralds white waves and notes, “O the land looks bright” (*The Ice Ball Man* 72).

In other works, Leong retreats even further from the sea and land, away from populace, into the jungle. This process again carries the reader back to a pre-war time. Although Leong resided primarily in Singapore, her husband, David, hailed from Penang, and he may have had his own memories of a pre-industrialised Malaya, rare today except perhaps on Borneo or in remote areas of peninsular Malaysia. Scenes from the jungle appeal to children, yes, but also to today’s reader who may long for forests untarnished and animals uninhibited. In one scene, Leong shares the activities of “The Ginger Monkey” who “looks just like a bird;/ He squawks like a parrot/ And grins like an elf” (*The Ice Ball Man* 58). And, yet, the monkey may age: he becomes “old and cranky” and “has a bitter tongue/ Though he’s just as tricky/ As he was when he was young” (*The Ice Ball Man* 58).

Leong also writes about nutmeg trees, Highland children, tigers, mousedeer, a “Little island girl” and monsoons (*The Ice Ball Man* 49). Her

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Karl Hack and Kevin Blackburn, “Changi Historical Area,” 14 November 2011. <<http://habitatnews.nus.edu.sg/heritage/changi/war/hackblackburn.html>>.

scenes are vivid and shiny, and bring the reader home to a nostalgic era. She states in “Little Island Girl,” “Show me where sunbirds/ Have built their nests.../ Show me the islands where trade winds meet” (*The Ice Ball Man* 49).

Despite her bucolic descriptions, Leong does not fail to introduce images of fishing life or night-time festivals and scenes. In “Stilt Houses,” she describes such houses that “Rest partly on sand/ And partly on sea” (*The Ice Ball Man* 35). The reader also watches “Menders of Nets” “In an attap shed.../ Work[ing] with skill” (*The Ice Ball Man* 88). And Leong describes the scenes around these hard workers:

skies turn dark  
With indigo blue,  
And from out of the jungle  
The white cockatoo

And the whirring bats  
And the black nightjars  
Fly through the night  
All cluttered with stars. (*The Ice Ball Man* 89)

Leong’s references to festivals educate today’s reader on Malayan customs, many of which continue till today. As Lim notes, Leong’s diplomatic portrayal of such events, not to mention her self-immersion in things Malay, Chinese and Indian, “separate herself from the male university writers and prefigure some of the tendencies in later Malaysian-Singapore writings” (“A Problematic Identity” 143). In other words, Leong cannot be classified as a colonialist or even a voyeur who positions oneself as an outsider investigating or critiquing a culture. Lim systematically sets Leong apart from writers such as Anthony Burgess, whom she calls expatriates as opposed to sojourners (“A Problematic Identity” 140).

Instead, Leong tells her readers about tick-tock men and the ice ball man, images rarely seen outside of Asia. If one wanted mee, one listened for the tick-tock men in the afternoon – “they come in the heat,/ And they come in the rain,” down the narrator’s “lane” (*The Ice Ball Man* 27). The ice ball man beckons to children, rather than parents, serving “Red ones, brown ones,/ Pink ones, blue...” (*The Ice Ball Man* 74).

These colourful images of children enjoying ice balls or adults listening for hawkers, accompanied by Goho-Quek’s watercolours, again lead the elder reader down memory lane, while drawing in individuals, perhaps teachers and their pupils, as editor Poon suggests, who have yet to feast their eyes on the sights and sounds of Malaysia, then or now.

## Works Cited

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