

The Meanings of Malacca: Identity and Exile in the Writings of Ee Tiang Hong, Shirley Lim and Simone Lazaroo

Dennis Haskell¹
University of Western Australia

Abstract

Malacca, through five centuries an important trading port, was conquered by the Portuguese, the Dutch, the British and the Japanese in turn, so that while it is part of contemporary Malaysia it has maintained a sense of distinctive identity, the home of Baba-Nonya culture. The poet Ee Tiang Hong, the novelist Simone Lazaroo, and Shirley Geok-lin Lim, both poet and novelist, all have their roots there but each left, at different ages and for different reasons. They are of slightly different generations and have different personal histories, but each has been drawn back to Malacca in their writings, as if this was necessary to make sense of themselves and their own view of the world. Ee claims Malacca as “a state of mind” which enabled him to “draw strength from many cultural springs.” For Lim her Malaccan self has remained “a fugitive presence,” not so much “a town but... a familiar spirit.” In Lazaroo’s *The World Waiting to be Made*, Malacca is a site of myth and mysterious supernatural power.

For all three, Malacca is to some degree chthonic, traditional, bearing markers of another time. In a post-modern, fast-paced, high tech world what resonances can these ways of conceiving life have across borders? This paper explores the meanings of Malacca in the three writers’ poems and novels to see what is common and what is different about the Malacca they present, and to what extent it has continuing importance, for them and for us.

¹ Dennis Haskell is the author or editor of 16 books, including poetry, literary and social criticism, and literary scholarship. His four previous books of poetry include a Selected Poems published in the UK, titled *Samuel Johnson in Marrickville*. He has given readings of his poetry in many countries, including England, Germany, India, Ireland, Italy, Singapore, and the USA. He is Co-editor of the Australian literary magazine *Westerly*, and Professor of English at The University of Western Australia.

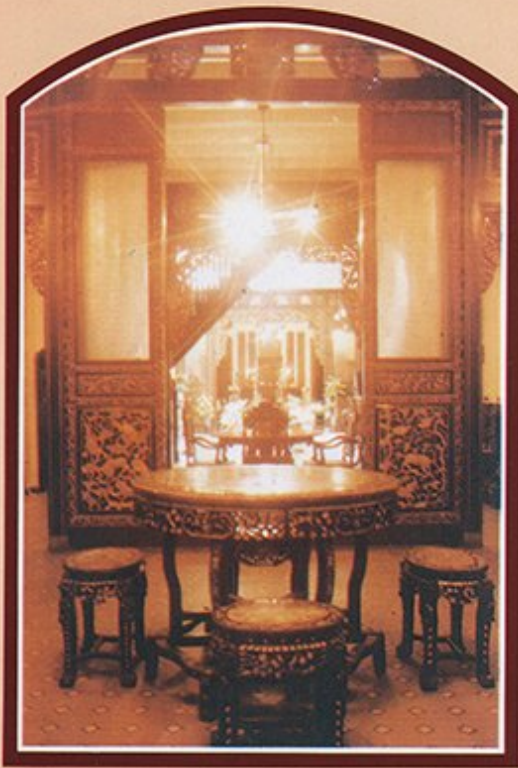
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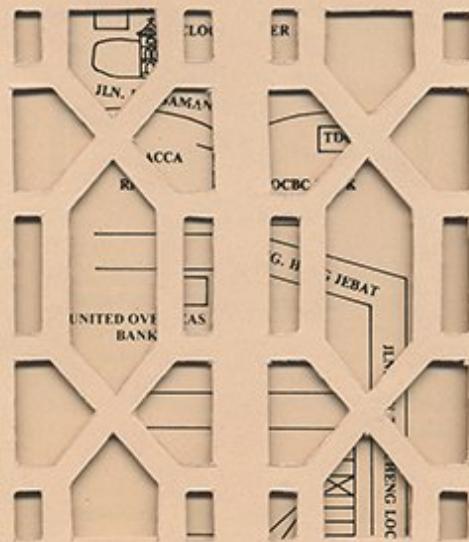
This is, perhaps unusually in literary studies, a paper about place. We are all used to the concept of place – after all, we always have to be in one – but a place is usually the subject of history or geography. Malacca has a particularly interesting history: located on the south-western tip of Malaysia, it is politically and geographically part of the Malaysian nation, but it generally maintains a sense of itself as having a distinct cultural identity. This is a result of its history, which long precedes that of any nation-state, not just that fairly new arrival, Malaysia. Malacca, it is said, was founded by an Indian prince from Sumatra in the year 1400 (Robert Tan Sin Nyen 3), and was a strong trading port until the advent of the aeroplane. From the very early 1400s, Chinese, Siamese, Indian, Arabian and European traders came; the Chinese having given protection to the Malaccan Sultanate. These traders brought not only goods but also Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. After a Portuguese trade mission was repudiated, the Portuguese attacked and conquered Malacca in 1511, and remained in power until the Dutch took over in 1641. In 1795 the British drove out the Dutch and occupied Malacca until returning it to the Dutch six years later. However, in 1824, these two European colonial powers exchanged Malacca and Bencoolen in Sumatra, and in 1826 Malacca became a Straits Settlement of the English East India Company. Apart from three years from 1942-1945, when the Japanese occupied the whole of Malaya, the British ruled until Independence in 1957, when Malacca became part of Malaysia. These are the broad geographical and historical facts; they explain why a distinctive cultural mix and a sense of local identity grew up in Malacca, but they don't convey the feel of that culture or that identity.

That culture is known as “Peranakan” (meaning native-born) or “Straits-born Chinese,” with the men known as “Babas” and the women “Nyonyas.” They are principally descended from male Chinese traders who married Malay women, but commerce and shifts of power created an overlay of cultures that involved many influences. The most common language is a Malay sprinkled with Chinese (Baba Malay), but the long presence of the British meant that many Peranakans were educated in English. Peranakan culture is most readily apparent in architecture, food, furniture, clothing and Nyonya ware artefacts. The images go some way towards characterising Malacca beyond the facts of history and geography. Yi-Fu Tuan is a social geographer who differentiates between the concepts of “space” and “place,” and argues that humans need both. In his terms, the abbreviated history and geography I have offered present Malacca as a space; the images convey, I

ARTIFACTS OF THE HERITAGE:



The house can be described as **'Chinese Baroque'** or **'Chinese Palladian'**. Architecture is Neo-Classical European, characterised by Greco-Roman columns. Floral and pictorial motifs grace parts of the front of the house whilst the interior is adorned with intricately carved fittings finished in gold leaf.



These colourful silk embroidered lanterns are known as **'Keong Tengs'**. They are used to lead the Bride and Groom during the wedding.



This community of unique heritage even had their ceramic wares specially commissioned from China. Generally known as **Nyonya Wares**, they are mainly polychromed, predominantly of the 19th century. Like their houses the Nyonya ware is characterised by a baroque exuberance of decorative motifs and colourful famille rose enamels.



Furniture are of mixed variety. The Chinese furniture are mainly blackwood and in-laid with mother-of-pearl. Locally made furniture have very strong Victorian and Dutch influences. The sideboards and cupboards, mainly of hardwoods, are also carved with floral and pictorial motifs.



The gold and silver basket of flowers, part of the wedding bed decoration is also one of the weapons of the Eight Immortals. The decorative pieces of Straits-Chinese silver are mainly of repousse or filigree work.



This staircase of hardwood construction and intricately carved, even on the under side is finished with gold leaf gildings. It is believed to be the only in Malacca, if not the country.



Different types of slippers worn by the women. The 'Kasut Manek' i.e. Beaded Shoes using rocaille beads and the embroidered slippers of silver and coloured threads with an embossed effect.



The blue and white wares to the Baba and Nyonya community at one time were only used during times of mourning and ancestral worship. Principal ingredient used in the manufacture of blue and white is Kaolin or China clay and the blue comes from the greyish cobalt pigment. These wares generally only need one firing. The wares are mainly from the kilns of Kiangsi province.

hope, some sense of place. “‘Space’ is more abstract than ‘place.’ What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (Yi-Fu Tuan 6). In Tuan’s theory, space becomes place by means of experience, which is a mixture of objective and subjective knowledge, and of knowledge gained through both thought and feeling. Experience involves conceptualisation of a place drawing on sense data, and he identifies three principal types of conceptualisation, “with large areas of overlap... the mythical, the pragmatic, and the abstract or theoretical” (17). It is the first and the third, “the mythical” and “the abstract or theoretical,” that literature deals with.

Tuan also writes that “Intelligence is manifest in different types of achievement. One is the ability to recognize and feel deeply about the particular” (18). This is an ability that literature taps into strongly and that we might expect to be most prominent in literary evocation of a place, Malacca or any other. However, the particular makes sense only through reference to the abstract or theoretical, although we may be so familiar with the concepts the abstract or theoretical generate that we don’t notice them. Tuan notes that “Nearly all learning is at the subconscious level” (200). Moreover, the relationship between literature and the particular and the abstract has a history in English aesthetics that we tend to forget. For example, Shakespeare’s sonnet “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” (11), perhaps the most famous poem in English, has a temperate rhythm and a fine balance but compared to modern poetry it is remarkably general and verges on the abstract. In the eighteenth century Dr. Johnson, intent on speaking to humankind “from China to Peru” (51), declared that since “Nature and Passion... are always the same” (627), the poet’s task is “to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances” (628). It was the Romantics who showed us the value of the particular, that readers who had never been there might nevertheless identify with a particular sycamore tree above a particular abbey, and that “the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears” (Wordsworth 191).² That we tend to be wedded to the particular shows to what extent – Victorianism, Modernism and Post-Modernism notwithstanding – we are still the children, or the great-great grandchildren of the Romantics. However, to characterise an individual place we need both the particular, which in literature tends towards the mythical, and the abstract.

This point is highly relevant to the poems of Ee Tiang Hong (1933-1990), perhaps Malacca’s best-known literary son, because he is a spare, largely abstract writer, even when presenting what he called “my eternal city” (“Melaka,” *Nearing a Horizon* 18). A seventh generation Baba, his sense of personal identity was tied to Malacca, long after he had moved to Kuala Lumpur and then was “exiled” (“Comment,” *Nearing a Horizon* 13) – this is his own description – from it. Ee,

² The sycamore tree appears in Wordsworth’s poem “Tintern Abbey.”

who migrated to Australia in 1975, described his as a “hopeless case” (*Nearing a Horizon* 13). Driven out by the bumiputra policies introduced at Independence in 1957 and strengthened after the 1969 race riots in Kuala Lumpur, because he was Baba and not Malay and he wrote in English, Ee remained, as Yeats wished for his daughter, “rooted in one dear perpetual place” (Yeats, “A Prayer for My Daughter” 213), crucially aware of “the land of my forebears stretching back several generations” (Ee, *Literature and Liberation* 37). Ee believed that “the fullest development of the self begins with the knowledge of self not in splendid isolation – which is a mean philosophy, really – but in social interaction” (*Literature and Liberation* 21), so his representations of Malacca are marked, as he said, by “Anguish, a profound sense of regret, loss” (“For My Sister, Pearl Ee Siong Gek,” *Nearing a Horizon* 6), and I would say by a sense of betrayal. One of his declared purposes in writing was “to allay / the rancour, slowly heal, forgive” (Singh 78) but I am not sure he ever reached the point of forgiveness.

Thus, Ee’s Malacca in all his mature poetry is a lost place. It is most fully evoked in two long poems in *Tranquerah*, “Heeren Street” (51) and “Tranquerah Road” (59). Building on earlier, shorter versions in *Myths for a Wilderness* (1, 4), each poem is made up of sections and the poems follow each other in the book, just as Tranquerah Road was a continuation of Heeren Street in old Malacca. The poems begin in nostalgia – “Gharry and palanquin are silent / the narrow street describes / decades of ash and earth” – marking a “golden peninsula” where “The Babas paved / a legend on the landscape.” Now it is a place with an “arrogance of swelling traffic,” where the gutters reek of “cockroach, rat and faeces” (and a little of T.S. Eliot). The Sikh watchmen on their “*charpoy jaga*” are “fast asleep.” Ee is concerned with individual and national identity, and with a contemporary “confusion of identity.” He is a genuine multiculturalist; the poems include Peranakan furniture, Chinese scrolls and altars, the Lord’s Prayer, Japanese national songs, Malay proverbs and a dedication to traditional values of dignity, graciousness and hospitality. Streets and roads often symbolise journeys but for Ee they stand for a “golden dream” of history, continuities and traditions that have been betrayed. “Endurance is a hallmark of the stone” but “One by one the *baba baba peranakan* / the *bibik bibik* / moved out to other places” that were “beyond the swoop of edict.”

Geok-lin Lim (born 1944), better known by her nickname, Shirley (after Shirley Temple), also lived at times on Heeren Street, in her grandfather’s house. Younger than Ee, a woman, and becoming a US citizen after going there for postgraduate study, she has written of Malacca in poems, short fiction, novels and a brilliant memoir, *Among the White Moonfaces*. In Ee’s work, she believes, “Malacca, finally, becomes less a place than a trope for all he has been robbed of” (Shirley’s email to the author); this is a feeling she has never shared, having chosen migration from a town of “ground-down realities” (*Among the White Moonfaces* 92) which

she found parochial, a place “where everybody knew everybody’s actions” (*Among the White Moonfaces* 36) – and in Tuan’s terms a site with too much “place” and not enough “space.” In adulthood she has returned to Malacca, in person and in writing, but without Ee’s sense of anguish. For Lim, a return to Malacca is a return to a former life and former self; Malacca has been for her “a fugitive presence,” not so much “a town... but a familiar spirit” (*Among the White Moonfaces* 10). She is less of a public writer than Ee,³ and a more sensory one; it is tempting to think that these attributes are allied to gender. Lim returns to the same issues again and again, in poems, short stories, novels and memoir: the extraordinary details of her family life and upbringing in Malacca. The only daughter, amongst numerous brothers, of a Nyonya woman and a Malaccan Chinese father, she lived at first in her grandfather’s house, “overflowing with my brothers and cousins” (*Among the White Moonfaces* 10), before moving to their own shophouse on Kampong Pantai. Her father’s “imagination was possessed by Western images” (*Among the White Moonfaces* 21), especially from Hollywood films, and she was educated in English at a convent school. The family was evicted from the shophouse when her father went bankrupt, and returned to the grandfather’s house but he was no longer there. Her grandfather’s funeral was a grand, “civic occasion as much as... a private grief” (*Among the White Moonfaces* 19), with a procession through the town in which all his grandchildren took part. This experience, she reports, “imprinted on me the sense of Malacca as my home, a sense that I have never been able to recover anywhere else in the world” (*Among the White Moonfaces* 20). Her father’s bankruptcy ushered in two years of hunger and malnutrition, when “we ate like rats” (“Ballad of the Father,” *What the Fortune Teller Didn’t Say* 17). Her father had always been occasionally violent, but the greatest shock of her life occurred when her mother abandoned the family and moved to Singapore: “Mother became a huge silence” (*Among the White Moonfaces* 52). Paradoxically, this provided a degree of freedom, as she and her brothers ran wild through the streets and seashore. “At eight I became an animal,” she writes in one poem (“The Gift,” *What the Fortune Teller Didn’t Say* 31). Her first and third uncles smoked away her grandfather’s fortune through opium pipes, the “smell of roasting opium” in the house, “intense, like a combination of coffee grounds, burned soy sauce and singed hair” (*Among the White Moonfaces* 50). The family then lived in a “shack” (*Among the White Moonfaces* 50) until their fortunes improved, when a further trauma was provided by their father bringing home as partner the “barely literate” (*Among the White Moonfaces* 59) Hokkien-speaking seventeen-year-old daughter of the family’s former maid. Lim was then ten. It was education and academic ability that saved her, eventually taking her out of the family, Malacca and

³ In her essay “Tongue and Root: Language in Exile,” Lim writes, “As for me, I have for a long time seen myself as nothing but an individual. This self image of ‘an individual’ is at the bottom of a descent from nation and community” (*Monsoon History* 168).

Malaysia, physically at least; her writings show that her imagination has remained anchored there.

In a poem from her first book, *Crossing the Peninsula*, titled “Visiting Malacca,” she describes her grandfather’s house where “Black wooden stairs still stand / And wind like arms of slender women,” and writes:

I dream of the old house.
The dreams leak slowly like sap
Welling from a wound: I am losing
Ability to make myself at home. (93)

The poem is her way of making this last stanza more dramatic than true.

Born in Singapore, in 1961 but leaving it for Australia at a very young age, Simone Lazaroo’s experience is different to that of both Ee and Lim, but her Portuguese family name is a sign of her family’s origins in Malacca. Her first and third novels, *The World Waiting to be Made* and *The Travel Writer* present substantial depictions of Malacca, contrasting it starkly with Perth and London respectively. Because of space restrictions I will here concentrate on *The World Waiting to be Made*. The title refers to the new world of Australia to which the central character migrates with her family as a young child, as Lazaroo herself did, but also to the world or place in which the self might feel comfortable. Much in the book is autobiographical. As an Asian migrant the unnamed central character struggles to develop a proud sense of identity in a Perth and a Western Australia stained by the residue of the White Australia Policy. Towards the end of the novel she travels to Malacca via Singapore, in search of answers to her questions about herself and to meet her Uncle Linus, who has a reputation as a bomoh, “a Malay medicine man” (18). The Malacca she visits has grown beyond the town known by Ee and Lim, but has not lost its colour. It has an “antiquated and ornate town centre... where tall curlicued shop-houses nestled irregularly along narrow curlicued streets with the intricacy of coloured pieces of glass in a kaleidoscope” (238). With her Aunt Tilly in a small car ““Obviously bought by my small-arsed Chinese husband,”” she weaves “through teeming thoroughfares, past Muslim mosques, Buddhist temples and a solitary Catholic church,” past a murrelled wall topped by barbed wire behind which the screams of prisoners “tortured by the Japanese” were once heard (238). Lazaroo provides the most brilliant and detailed descriptions of Malacca because she sees it as an outsider, for whom the durian smells, the sarong kebaya dresses and the A’ Famosa ruined fort denote exotic difference. However, it is in her Uncle Linus’ bare house – “no pictures, no shelves, or tables holding knick-knacks. No souvenirs” (252) – that she learns to accept her “in-between” identity, not just in-between Eurasian, but “*in-between* being Eurasian and Australian” (258). She arrives in Malacca, her bags bulging “with all the indiscriminate shopping I’d done while in Singapore” (230). She

travels “towards Uncle Linus... struggling with the unmanageability of the various selves I’d purchased” (230), and learns the triviality of materialism and the importance of identity felt from within rather than imposed from without. She learns from Uncle Linus’ silences as much from his words. He is “like a relic from a time and place none of us had any experience of” (260) but he seems to belong in an older version of Malacca.

All three authors maintain a mix of identification with and separation from Malacca, for they recognise a Malacca that is external and public, physically there, and a Malacca that is internal and personal. Their relationship with it is hermeneutical; the real Malacca exists in their interaction with it, and the Malacca they value is gone. Their Malacca is an intimate place and a mythic one, because it emerges from a rendering of lived experience, offering a different type of knowledge to science, geography, history or anthropology. Yi-Fu Tuan notes that “Life is lived” whereas “Thinking creates difference” (146). Generally, this is true; language is a force for separation, and this might seem especially true for Malaysians who write in English. John McLaren notes that “As the new nations became integrated in a global economy, so English emerged as the major international language and consequently the language of power” (11-12). Thus he argues that “Its use alienates elites from their fellows and their past, and so empties their culture of anything other than material values” (12). However, both Ee and Lim found English to be their “natural” language, and use it to express a past Malacca, outside a post-modern, fast-paced, high tech world of material values. For Lazaroo, too, Malacca represents a kind of stillness. Lim wrote that “English is my calling” (*Monsoon History* 171) but “To be constant to my Malaysian identity, I must continue in the United States to be a stranger in a strange land” (*Monsoon History* 173) while Ee declared, “I think in English I feel in English...” (Singh 75). English, for all three writers, has the characteristics of both place and space, constancy and possibility; it certainly has the durability that their Malacca could not maintain. Tuan writes, “If time is conceived as a flow or movement then place is pause” (198), and for all three writers, although they know that Malacca has changed, their Malacca is a pause, a “still point of the turning world” (Eliot 9), that provides them with a firm sense of identity through the value and meaning of its culture.

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