

In Conversation with Suchen Christine Lim

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Suchen Christine Lim was born in Perak, Malaysia and moved to Singapore in her teens in 1963. Educated in the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, she grew up on both sides of the Causeway, which separates Singapore from Malaysia. Later, she studied in the National University of Singapore, and taught in Singapore schools. In 2003, she resigned from her job as a curriculum specialist in the Ministry of Education to write full time.

The recipient of a Fulbright grant in 1996, she is also a Fellow of the International Writers' Program, University of Iowa, and its former International Writer-in-Residence. She was Moniack Mhor's writer-in-residence, Scotland in 2005, and has returned to the UK several times as an Arvon Tutor to conduct writing workshops and read at the Edinburgh Book Festival. A Visiting Fellow in Creative Writing, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore in 2011, Suchen has also held writing residencies in the Philippines, Myanmar, South Korea, Australia and the United Kingdom. She was the recipient of the South East Asia Write Award in 2012.

Her first novel, *Rice Bowl*, was published in 1984. Her second novel, *Gift from the Gods* (1990), was nominated for a National Book Development Council

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award in 1992. In the same year, Lim won the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize for her third novel, *Fistful of Colours* (1992). *A Bit of Earth* (2000) and *The Lies That Build A Marriage*, a short-story collection, were nominated for the Singapore Literature Prize in 2004 and 2007 respectively. *The Amah: Portrait in Black and White*, a play co-authored with Ophelia Ooi also won a Merit Prize. She has also published many children's picture books, which have been adapted by the Singapore Ministry of Education for kindergartens and primary schools.

Her new novel, *The River's Song*, was launched in Singapore Writer's Festival 2013.

In this conversation with Uma Jayaraman, Suchen Lim speaks of how the meteoric rise of modern Singapore over the past five decades impacted the lives of both big and small people on the red dot.

What prompted you to write about old Singapore?

“Old Singapore?” I don't think I have written about old Singapore in this novel. Besides being a story of love and betrayal, *The River's Song* is a story of emerging modern Singapore. Next year, 2015, Singapore will turn 50 as a nation. 50 years is hardly old in the history of nation building. From a historical perspective, Singapore is a young nation but an old island.

As an island, Singapore has a much older mythical history based on a 14th century legend about a Sumatran prince who saw a beast that looked like a lion whereupon he promptly named the island “Singapura.” The name “Singapore” is based on these two Sanskrit words, “simha” which means lion, and “pura” which means city.

Modern Singapore began in 1819 when it became a British colony until 1959 when it became a self-governing state within the British Empire. It was only in 1965 that Singapore became a full-fledged sovereign state.

In *The River's Song* the story of the two young lovers, Ping and Weng, begins in the 1960s, a period in which a newly independent and insecure government squashed every single protest with a sledgehammer. So I would say that on one level, *The River's Song* is about the emergence of a new Singapore from the 1960s to the present day when Ping returns from the United States to a thriving modern cosmopolitan city with a skyline dominated by Marina Bay Sands, a casino and the towering offices of international banks.

Yes, this is probably true. But it is also true that in this intertwining of myth and history, the story seems to be more about Yoke Lan, “mother-aunt-guardian” figure to Ping. She occupies centrestage in Ping's re-memorisation of her past. The presence of Yoke Lan through these fifty years that the narrative covers creates an imaginary line between past (old) and present (new). What is Yoke Lan's place in your narrative?

Well, I've never thought about the characters in my novels in an analytical way. When I was writing *The River's Song*, Yoke Lan was an abusive parent as well as an abused child. She was the ferocious authority whom Ping had to fight against in order to free and re-define herself. Readers and critics may have different views about Yoke Lan's role in the novel and that's wonderful. The author welcomes different readings of the novel which will enrich our understanding of *The River's Song*.

The novel opens in 1960s and moves back and forth to cover a narrative of five decades. Why did you choose this complex narrative structure?

It was not a conscious choice. In the beginning, in the first few drafts, I tried to write the story of Ping and Weng in a linear chronological fashion but it didn't work. It was very frustrating. Draft after draft came to a dead end. I couldn't go on. I was stuck. It wasn't writer's block. It was as if my characters did not want to go where I, the writer, wanted to go. In the end, I simply willy-nilly but bravely followed and wrote what I saw and heard. At first the parts did not cohere into a narrative. The pieces were all over the place. I was tearing my hair. I took a break and went on holiday. Then I returned, refreshed and started anew. By the ninth or tenth draft, things started to flow. It was magical. This magical moment of creation is what spurs writers to sit and write for hours. It's our high, and it's addictive.

Is the novel about homecoming?

More than that, the novel is about love, trust and betrayal, and how easy it is to succumb to our fears, and betray all that we hold dear when our survival is at stake. However, I'm sure other readers will notice other themes and issues.

I am interested in how betrayal exists at different levels and to different effects. In this sense, is Ping's homecoming a brave attempt to conquer her fears?

Yes and no. On one level, Ping the daughter longs for reconciliation with her estranged mother, Yoke Lan, but she is also dogged by the memories of her past as an unwanted child. Her mother's sudden invitation and insistence that Ping should return to Singapore for her birthday caused Ping great anxiety, especially when she detected a soft plea in her mother's voice. The conflict of memory, guilt and the need for a mother's love haunted Ping, Weng and Yoke Lan. On another level, the novel celebrates how the artist and his/her music triumphs over adversity, poverty, betrayal, imprisonment and authoritarian control.

There is a lament in the novel about the remembered loss of a way of life. What is the intended effect of the recalling/ erasure of memory?

Loss like change is a fact of life, and the life of a city, especially an Asian city, is often about rapid change, loss and renewal. The pace, speed and manner of change, and how change is brought about will always be the major factors that lead to conflict and confrontation between those in power and the powerless. In *The River's Song* the people who lived and worked along the Singapore River had no say in how the river would be developed. They were at the mercy of the moneyed class like the Chang family, and the government authorities.

Could you say a bit about Chang Soo Beng, the odd one out in the family of high achievers? What does his suicide signify?

I must confess that I didn't plan for Soo Beng's suicide to signify anything. However now that the novel is published, I can look back and say, well, life is not a fairytale. In fairytales, the stepchild triumphs over adversity. In Chang Soo Beng's case, the stepson becomes a failure in the family.

Despite talking about the erasure of a way of life, the novel steers clear of a nostalgic re-memorisation of it. Is this a conscious attempt on your part?

No, I'm afraid not. The characters lead in the development of the narrative.

Choice of music instruments is a material marker of social class and ethnicity in old Singapore depicted in the novel. Is this a larger metaphor for something else that the novel is trying to convey?

In the Singapore of the 1960s, the English educated dominated government and public discourse. The English language was in ascendency. Unlike today, mainstream public discourse and thinking in the 1960s and 70s tended to regard the Chinese language, arts and culture as secondary, with some public figures labelling Singapore as "a cultural desert" as though the arts of the non-English speaking population such as Chinese music, orchestras and operas, or Malay bangsawan did not count as culture. In *The River's Song*, I've tried to show that even a poor carpenter like Uncle Chong Suk was a talented musician, a passionate pipa player who was prevented by poverty from pursuing his art. Part of the story of modern Singapore is that Weng, Chong Suk's son, was able to pursue his passion and became a master flautist in the Singapore Chinese Orchestra instead of being a carpenter like his father.

The younger generation is portrayed in two different ways in the novel. The young taxi driver who is unaware of a meaningful past and Liz's boys who are awed by Kan Jieh's stories of the past. What is the novel's take on the relevance of the past to the present?

The 50 short years of Singapore's rise as a modern city holds many lessons about memory and loss, about the struggles of the individual citizen in the grip of authoritarian rule and power, and the compromises made for the sake of the rice bowl, for the sake of law and order, progress and prosperity. Looking back, the individual has a choice – to celebrate the new or to mourn the loss of the old way of life. Doing both is what gives the novel its creative tension.

Yoke Lan wants society to respect her and she attains it only by renouncing the material world of money and status. Her withdrawal from society (if I may term it so) is contrasted to Ping's embracing of this world in the final pages of the novel when she is able to overcome her sense of claustrophobia of staying in an apartment and she feels that she has finally come home. Where does contentment lie? In letting life slip by or in embracing the changing world?

Oh dear, this is a tough question. I wouldn't say that Yoke Lan withdrew from society when she became a Buddhist lay leader. She had discovered that a meaningful life and respect did not necessarily depend on having money and status. As for Ping, her love story, her relationship with Weng and Singapore remains unfinished like a crab emerging from the river at low tide to re-discover a changed environment.

What is the significance of the novel's title, and what prompted you to write the book? How is the novel an advance on your previous work?

Water like wind has a music of its own if we care to listen. Rivers are full of sounds and songs as they flow from the hills to the cities. In the traditional Chinese stories I grew up with, peasants and poets sang on the river and told the river their secrets and sorrows. The Singapore River is both the recipient of thousands of Singaporeans' sorrows and the setting of our joy and celebrations. *The River's Song* is my way of honouring an earlier generation of Singaporeans who were forced by the government to give up their homes and way of life on the river so that we, the generation that follows, can enjoy the fruits of their sacrifice.

On a lighter note, it is also Prof. Philip Holden from NUS who nudged me to look at the Singapore River's history one day while we were having tea. So I went to the National Archives to look up the interviews with boatmen who used to work on the bumboats on the river. These officially recorded interviews conducted in the Hokkien and Teochew Chinese dialects, which I could understand to some extent, were generally factual, formal and polite. But then,

my writer's imagination took over and I heard what the uneducated boatmen did not say to the educated official interviewer. I heard their protest, unspoken pain and sorrow over the loss of their homes and way of life.

As to your other question – How is the novel an advance on your previous work? I will leave the reader to decide whether *The River's Song* is an advance or not. All I can say is that *The River's Song* explores the theme of love and betrayal, and how music tells us the things, which we can't express in words. Weng, the master flautist, shows that even if we cannot protest in words in a dictatorial environment, we can still play our music and songs. Also, I wanted to write a novel that celebrates the Chinese music I grew up with as a child. *The River's Song* is not about national identity, which some academics seem to be fixated on whenever they critiqued a Singapore novel.