

**Han Su Yin, *And the Rain My Drink* [1956]. Singapore: Monsoon Books, 2013. 312 pp. ISBN 13: 978-9810844851.**

It is easy to read Han Su Yin's *And the Rain My Drink* (1956) and play a kind of historical guessing game about who's who in the text given the fact that, as some have pointed out, hers is but a thinly-disguised work of fiction.<sup>1</sup> It is easy but perhaps not the most rewarding thing to do. The only novel in English to be written about the Malayan Emergency in the 1950s even as the crisis was unfolding, Han's work is a significant postcolonial text that deserves to be read, appreciated and studied for its literary elements. For me, the novel's significance lies in Han's choice of narrative technique to tell the story of the Emergency from the various perspectives of its gendered, multicultural and multiracial players, and her creation of a symbolic economy to convey the emotional complexity and political tensions of this interstitial moment between colonialism and political independence. The Malayan Emergency (1948-60) refers to the struggle by the Malayan National Liberation Army, the military arm of the Malayan Communist Party, for independence, following the end of World War II and the British return to its colonial possession of Malaya.<sup>2</sup> It was a guerrilla war fought in the jungles of present-day west Malaysia by fighters who had not long before that just been battling the Japanese, often alongside the British. The politics and main events of this period continue to fascinate, aided in no small measure by competing accounts of the time which have emerged to focus attention on the silences and gaps in the official version of events told by the former colonial power as well as the Malaysian and Singaporean postcolonial states.<sup>3</sup>

The wife of a Malayan Special Branch officer stationed in Johor state in the 1950s, "Han Su Yin" was the pen-name assumed by Dr. Elizabeth Comber, a China-born doctor of Chinese and Belgian parentage whose given name was Rosalie Mathilde Kuang Chen. Han's ability to speak several languages including Mandarin was a distinct advantage to her both as a doctor and as a writer. The specific combination of her background, profession and Leftist political views rendered her especially alert to language differences, gendered power relations, class conflict, and the multicultural situation in Malaya. In the course of her long life which spanned the better part of the twentieth century, Han proved a

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<sup>1</sup> In his Foreword to the novel, Han's former husband, Dr. Leon Comber notes how many characters in the book were based on actual persons who could easily identify themselves in there.

<sup>2</sup> Technically, the guerrilla war only officially ended in 1989 with the signing of the Haadyai Peace Agreement between the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) led by Chairman Abdullah CD and General Secretary Chin Peng, and the Thai and Malaysian governments.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Chin and Hack, *Dialogues with Chin Peng*; and Tan, Tan and Hong, *The May 13 Generation*.

prolific writer, publishing at least ten novels, numerous autobiographies and various historical studies on China. Of all her work, her 1952 novel, *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, is undoubtedly the most well-known as a result of it being made into a Hollywood movie and given a memorable theme song. Han passed away in Lausanne, Switzerland, in 2012.

The main plot of *And the Rain My Drink* centres on the discovery of the true identity of two Communist characters, Sen and Small Cloud, as well as the romance between them. As sentimental as the romance plot is, the idea of betrayal on this front underscores the novel's investment in larger questions about political and ideological affiliation that speak to the future prospects of the emerging postcolonial nation, whatever geographical form it was to assume. Small Cloud, also known as Ah Mei, is clearly meant to stand for Malaya in some fundamental way: her betrayal of her true love, Sen, the leader of the Communist guerrillas in the jungle or the "People Inside," serves ominously to raise doubts about the possibility of Malaya's re-invention into a nation from a colony and the ability of her people to adhere to any ideals apart from self-interest. In the novel, female characters styling their hair and getting a "permanent" are variously seen as frivolous and even treacherous for selling out to fashion and Western capitalist modernity. Thus Ah Mei's betrayal of Sen – her "rehabilitation" in the eyes of the colonial authorities – is rendered complete at the end when she meets the narrator who notes pointedly her newly-permed hair.

In the novel, the symbolism of the jungle as an unknown and impenetrable space inhabited by sinister Communists is deliberately undercut by Han's depiction of the rest of the Malayan social world as a kind of unforgiving and dangerous urban jungle as well. Han presents a satirical portrait of Malayan politicking and her view of the forces driving the movement to independence is ultimately a profoundly cynical one. At times, Han's prose – filled with detail and heavy-handed in its earnest verbosity – can appear rather overblown and torrid. There are also, inevitably perhaps, colonialist and exoticised touches evident for example in the depiction of the narrator's sense of alienation from her tropical environment, and her generalisations about sly, smiling Chinese and languorous Malays. Yet, fortunately, there is much else to recommend the novel including the way in which Han has managed to convey a sense of the multilingual diversity and complexity of the region as seen in these lines:

From ward to ward, up and down the stone stairs, the sinusoid of sound pursues me. Words, words, words, all adding up to this soft cacophony, this unending flat unquietness. Words in all the dialects and languages which are spoken in Malaya. Is not so much of what happens in this country a reciprocal confusion, rooted in ignorance of each other's language and customs, producing blindness, intolerant inhumanity? (43)

Han's ability to evoke so poetically the swirling presence and mix of different tongues is no mean feat; it is an achievement that, in my opinion, no Singaporean writer in English has hitherto come close to matching.

*And the Rain My Drink* is written in the first person, although most of the time the narrator assumes an omniscient and unmarked presence. The novel also contains other kinds of texts like the diary entries of a convicted Communist and a British intelligence report. In the parts of the novel which feature explicitly first-person narration, the observant, largely reticent narrator is a female Chinese doctor also called Su Yin. The same event, detail or mention of a character appears in the multiple narratives of the novel, inflected differently each time. The use of plural narratives and forms allows Han to dramatise the views and sentiments of different players in this historic drama including British colonial officers, Malay law enforcement officers, Chinese Communist fighters and Chinese villagers caught up against their will in the Emergency. A palpable atmosphere of mistrust and mutual suspicion is hence built up. Through her novel, Han also revises a male-focused historical narrative by illuminating the role of women in the Emergency as colluders and active agents equally committed to independence and national self-determination.<sup>4</sup> In the internment camp, captured female insurgents and ordinary village women look after each other and their children, constituting with their knowledge of folk wisdom, herbal remedies and traditions an alternative world which resists the totalising control of the British colonial masters.

The publication of a commemorative edition of the novel by Monsoon Books with a foreword and introduction by Han's former husband, Dr. Leon Comber, and academic Dr. Kirpal Singh respectively, is indeed something to be celebrated. The foreword and introduction give us more interesting insights into Han's life, the historical period and the conditions of the novel's publication and reception. One hopes the edition will succeed in drawing a new generation of readers to this remarkable novel.

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<sup>4</sup> See *Life as the River Flows: Women in the Malayan Anti-Colonial Struggle* for oral histories of female fighters in the Malayan Emergency.

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