

## History is a (Marital) Nightmare: Chinese and British Feminisms in Josephine Chia's *My Mother-In-Law's Son*

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**Josephine Chia, *My Mother-In-Law's Son*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2013. 459 pp. ISBN 978 981 07 7998 6.**

Josephine Chia's author website features a section labelled *My Peranakan Heritage*, which explains her race, language and her clothing: the *kebaya* and *sarong*. Chia, who was born in colonial Singapore and migrated to England in 1985, gives detailed overviews of her Peranakan heritage by stressing the differences between Peranakan Chinese and immigrant overseas Chinese, those 20<sup>th</sup> century migrants "who adhered to their own customs without assimilating local culture" ("Josephine Chia"). The section names Peranakans "an endangered species," because "so many marr[ied] traditional Chinese who have little understanding or sympathy for its uniqueness and richness." Yet just a click away, on her home page, Chia expresses her "love-affair" with the English language, and credits it for allowing her to leave her "attap-thatched hut village or *kampung*." English, she expresses, is "the magic wand which swept away my limitations" ("Josephine Chia").

Chia's words strike me, make me a bit weary, as they cling to a narrative that sees overseas Chinese (Huaren) as diasporic guests. In this narrative, such migrants seem genuinely disinterested in other cultural mores besides their own, even those of the women they marry. Rather, these wives are merely meant to conform to the traditional Chinese patriarchy instituted through the family. One might say that this narrative is determined by political leanings against the People's Republic of China and the current visible labour migrations from the PRC to Singapore. Yet this attitude permeates Chia's 1992 novel, *My Mother-In-Law's Son*, where overseas Chinese appear patriarchal, while English mores and even their sexual behaviour act as a means of introducing Asian women to the freedom of Western feminism. Choy Yan, the novel's eponymous mother-in-law, considers the novel's Peranakan main character, Swee Gek, "a pariah,

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someone who had adulterated the Chinese bloodline” (45). Indeed, much of the novel’s plot seems devoted to contrasting the Peranakan heritage from overseas Chinese, and like a coming-of-age story or *bildungsroman*, Swee Gek eventually emerges from her oppression to start an “empowering” love affair with an Englishman, and then to open her own Peranakan restaurant (417).

### History as Tradition

The multiple perspectives within *My Mother-In-Law’s Son* restage the history of Chinese migration as a conflict between Chinese traditional culture and the otherwise more progressive (or Western) Malayan Peninsula. The agitator Teng Xin Nan uses “Chinese culture clubs” to foment unrest; the clueless Kum Chong, raised as the Chinese eldest son, believes so much in his own importance that he quixotically allows himself to be the figurehead of a terrorist cell; and his mother, Choy Yan, tries to lock her granddaughter in a closet and suggests binding her feet, believing fully in the wisdom of that idea now settled like a fog on the horizon from which they came – Chinese tradition. Yet the novel does not traffic in stereotypes so much as forefront the issues surrounding Chinese migration in the 1950s, when Chinese in Malaya were under suspicion for being communist radicals. Chia’s novel strives to expose the governmental prejudice towards overseas Chinese, as their language and traditions were systematically deprecated by national institutions, and a traditional notion of Chinese identity emerged to resist it.

As a historical novel, *My Mother-In-Law’s Son* has to be admired for tackling such a complex era, and at times it rivals the historical detail of novels like Fernando’s *Scorpion Orchid* and *Green is the Colour* (1976, 1993), Vyvane Loh’s *Breaking the Tongue* (2004), Tash Aw’s *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005) and Tan Twan Eng’s *The Gift of Rain* (2007). Unlike these novels, which focus on Japanese colonisation (Loh, Eng, Aw) and the 1969 riots (Fernando), Chia’s novel illuminates the myriad and outwardly political agitations of The Malayan Emergency (1948-60), when Commonwealth forces battled the Malayan Communist Party. Often obscured by national narratives, The Emergency was a series of guerrilla wars, protests and insurgencies that resulted in laws (like the Internal Security Act) that restricted individual freedoms and paved the way for limited democracies in both Malaysia and Singapore (Chua 89). Chia’s novel captures the discontent and poverty after the Japanese Occupation, burdened by the recent memory of British abandonment.

Since the period of The Malayan Emergency is often overshadowed by Japanese colonisation and the racial riots of the 1960s, it makes for complex fiction material. Chia’s details and environments are absorbing, yet the book’s narrative suffers from moments of dry historical explanation. While this can be jarring at times, Chia’s simple prose and absorbing plot engages the reader in a time period that is otherwise unknown to Western audiences, and brings to light

atrocities like Sook Ching, where Japanese forces massacred Chinese and Malay men, and the complex networks of spies that emerged across Asia with Chairman Mao's defeat of the Kuomintang in 1950. Such transnational histories warrant long explanations, since the events are so often suffocated by nationalist state narratives.

Chia's determination to parse through the period's complexities is admirable, yet the book's narrative style feels most burdened by Swee Gek's voice, which unlike the other characters', comes from diary entries that seem historically distanced from the events. Perhaps it is the novel's devotion to representing 1950s Singapore as patriarchal that can make the text feel unrealistic or at least unfair in its depictions of overseas Chinese. The villainy of its characters creates ruptures that break the historical narrative altogether, such as the many moments when Swee Gek reflects on her own trials as a woman of her time, and she describes "many women like me who stayed even when their husbands were abusive" (18). She adds: "This sort of helplessness might change in the future for women, but for us now, in 1949, it was our fate" (18). Lines like this tend to stop the narrative's rhythmic pull, and make the main character seem unrealistically prescient, though she cannot be speaking from the distant future, as she writes that times "might" change. If we assume that the diary was written in the present day, then we also have to ignore the multiple times when Swee Gek's entries are reacting to the very events she describes, as when Kum Chong steals the diary, and she is forced out of his house. While the experimental style yields insight into the time period, it also strains credulity, breaking the novel's realistic spell.

### **History as Patriarchy**

The difficulty of accepting the historical narrative also affects other aspects of the texts, and perhaps has greatest impact on the mother-in-law's defense of Chinese patriarchy. This hits the reader on the novel's first page, when she screams at Swee Gek, "girls waste rice. After all that, they will belong to their husbands' families when they marry!" (9). This line reflects the narrative's difficulty in attempting to inform the Anglophone reader of Chinese traditions (like women taking on the husband's family) while also reproducing Western stereotypes of Chinese as embedded in a patriarchal tradition that can only be changed through Western influence (colonisation or Communism). Indeed, the novel rarely shies away from reproducing this narrative, as when Swee Gek dreams of "Asian women... mak[ing] their own choices" (20). "But," she reminds us, "this was 1949" (20).

While the novel condemns Chinese patriarchy, it also ends up reproducing dominant neoliberal ideologies that lend themselves towards uncritical acceptance of contemporary patriarchal attitudes. Even Swee Gek, whose Western education (through a convent) has made her more aware of

patriarchal oppression, reserves her most flattering reflections for her deceased father-in-law, whom “everyone affectionately called Grandpa Wong” (9). Grandpa Wong fulfils the neoliberal dream of arriving in Singapore with nothing; through hard work and ingenuity, he started his own finance company and found he “had a knack for trading” (61). As Wong’s old friend, Sia Peng Hoe, reflects, “After each tiring day, Mun Heng and I would share our dreams... of buying our own houses and marrying. It’s the dream which kept us going – all those very long years” (60). Indeed, admiration for Grandpa Wong remains one of the only shared notions that reappears in almost every narrative voice. Even Teng Xin Nan, the communist agitator, comes to admire how Wong “took good care of his employees” (61). The novel’s admiration of Wong – the novel’s literal patriarch – often slips into a Singapore “roots” story that implicitly praises Singapore’s neoliberal and affluent future, which novels like Philip Jeyaretnam’s *Raffles Place Ragtime* (1988) and Gopol Baratham’s *A Candle or the Sun* (1992) had, by 1992, exposed as governmental ideology.

Despite its flaws, Chia’s historical narration is best when we are outside of Swee Gek’s diary and into a more recognisable third-person intimate narrative. When the communist agitator, Teng Xin Nan, successfully turns a student protest into a violent riot, Chia’s narration foregrounds the moment’s feelings of chaos and fear:

The school fences were trampled to the ground. Parents tried to scramble to safety with their children. Many were apprehended. It was such a melee that the police could no longer tell who was who. Heavy, wooden truncheons came down on heads. Blood spilled, the Chinese-school white uniform became spattered with red... ‘Chau ah!’ ‘Chau ah!’ The cry to flee was heard mostly in Hokkien and Teochew and a mix of other Chinese dialects. (439)

Chia’s sensuous descriptions reflect her devotion to her historical period and avoid the biased political narratives that merely mark one side as fanatics. Despite the distance the reader might feel from the actual event, her depictions of communist agitators and mansions converted to brothels make a frighteningly complex historical moment easier to grasp.

### **History as Sexual Inhibition**

Perhaps the most distancing moments in the novel are ironically during moments of intimacy, when love-making leaves Swee Gek vulnerable to menacing confrontations with her husband. When he places his hand on her knee, she reflects, “Perhaps if we were in another generation, another era, he might have whispered sweet love in my ears” (154). Such lines make this issue of sexual stiffness seem characteristic of all overseas Chinese in the time period, rather than a problem rooted in the context of Kum Chong’s upbringing and

his diasporic fidelity to his supposedly traditional values. Indeed, such moments of sexual inhibition seem limited in imagining characters as little more than the political and cultural ideologies of the time period that they align with. Kum Chong seems totally taken in by notions of feminine purity. When he has sex with prostitutes he imagines his wife “experiment[ing] with new positions” that she “would never, in all her innocence, consider” (65). Indeed, the reader may find it difficult to accept that even a Chinese man under the influence of patriarchal ideas would be so restricted to his cultural norms, as if the multitude of Chinese heroines, goddesses and figures, from Cheng e to Fa Mulan, all depict a single vision of Chinese femininity.

The sexual tension in the novel, as in many novels of the West and East, conveys little favour towards “traditional” Asian men. Indeed, the influence of Chinese patriarchy upon Kum Chong seems most totalising when he tries to understand his wife’s sexual desires. The novel opens in a post-coital anticlimax between Swee Gek and Kum Chong, who orgasms with “a quick grunt... no prolonged cry of passion or love” (9). Their sex causes her to feel “defiled” and “invaded,” leading her to masturbate in the shower as she longs for “unfulfilled desire” (16). Similarly, Kum Chong feels certain “that he pleased her,” but finds so little pleasure in his wife that he seeks “the professionals” (39). When Swee Gek asks him why he could not last longer during sex, he reflects that “he never understood that, her need. As far as he was concerned, he had done what a man should do” (365). Rather than consider any realistic depictions of femininity outside the bounds of a supposed Chinese traditional patriarchy, Kum Chong’s desires only manifest upon his wife through abuse, when he rapes her so intensely that she passes out (88).

As one might expect, the novel’s depictions of sexual inhibition and abuse within Chinese patriarchy is often posed against Western notions of sexual liberation. This vision of white colonial feminism emerges in Daniel, a married man who arrives in Singapore to help open a convenience store. On their first night together, Daniel teaches Swee Gek “that true love-making was not about a physical release. It was not about *taking* but about *partaking* between two people” (347). Despite her unsophisticated English and the “disapproving looks” that make Swee Gek “keenly aware of [their] racial difference” (366), their “true love-making” convinces her that “he and I were meant to be” (347).

### History as Feminist Critique

The novel’s romance takes the political struggles between overseas Chinese and British whites into a more intimate realm, and expresses the brewing anxiety between them through sexual insecurities. Indeed, the only physical violence in the novel between whites and Chinese occurs when the “tall and statuesque” Chinese cabaret dancer, Lucy, is approached by a group of English sailors (197). Kum Chung, who has already “secure[d] her services,” starts an altercation,

leading to racist remarks and an all-out brawl (201). While moments like this expose how masculinity is shaped by competing for women's bodies, the book itself seems resolved that British Western feminism, brought forth through Western men like Daniel, is already the favoured victor.

While the novel's oscillation between the "free West" and the "patriarchal East" is problematic to say the least, it also allows for a close-up of the feminist dimensions of Communist ideology during Mao's victory in China by linking the transmission of Communism to the novel's sexual logic. This manifests most clearly through the desire to rid Chinese tradition of patriarchy, which emerges as an ideal value of revolutionary rhetoric. The communist agitator, Teng Xin Nan, commits himself to the Communists in order to avenge the patriarchal oppression dealt upon his mother, a servant in a rich household. After being raped and made an outcast, Teng's mother succumbs to tuberculosis, leaving Teng with the final words: "When all people are equal, then there can be true happiness" (233). Teng's loyalty to the party is most often focused on the liberation of women from bourgeois Chinese tradition. Yet as the novel progresses, Chia represents this determination as a mere means to achieving communist interests. As the communist agitator, codename Gege, tells Teng Xin Nan, "Women have no equal status in this country. We want to use them to vent their anger... I expect you'll be remembered as the Great Agitator in Singapore's history" (217). Later, women's liberation seems used merely as an excuse to give Teng a cheap masculinising thrill. He reflects that the excitement of spying was "what he lived for... not being a farmer or some worker with a staid job, the usual family routines. He could not bear to live in mediocrity" (444).

If communist feminism seems insincere or embedded within a communism run by revolutionary males, then the European (read: Universal) form of feminism provides an opportune alternative. Indeed, Swee Gek's education by nuns at the Town Convent offers little reflection on Catholic dogma and religious patriarchy, but rather makes Swee Gek more independent and, as her mother-in-law says, "full of opinions" (20). Upon her retreat from her husband and mother-in-law, Swee Gek seeks out her former classmate, Cecilia, an "elegant business women" who "had that enviable, tawny complexion which came from mixed ancestry, her grandmother being English, her grandfather a brown Eurasian" (225). Cecilia represents a romanticised vision of Chinese women living under the house of the British. She describes herself as "truly happy" with "a loving husband" and owning her own business (226). Marvelling at how Cecilia can "even give men orders" (337), Swek Gee begins to understand that she too "need not be constricted by her gender" (281). Encouraged by Cecilia's example to seek out her own British counterpart, Swee Gek meets Daniel and immediately the comparisons with her lacklustre

Chinese husband abound: “To be with Daniel was to feel joyous energy vibrating; to be with Chong was darkness, fear and violence” (295).

As Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan point out in *Scattered Hegemonies*, feminism cannot merely be represented as a single Western movement of “global sisterhood” meant to resist a universal form of patriarchy. Doing so leaves feminist projects “prone to reproducing the universalizing gestures of dominant Western cultures” (17). Rather, feminist strategies “must be open to rethinking and self-reflexivity as an ongoing process” (18). Unfortunately, in Chia’s novel the response to a particularly reified version of Chinese patriarchy is to reproduce the universal feminist subject, made available through a “love-affair” with English. Possibilities for diverse coalitions of feminism are defeated as amoral or merely uneducated. The novel thus speaks in the voice of the victors: the communists inevitably lose Malaya, while universal feminism would eventually win out – at least, so it seemed in 1992, when the book was first published. But in the twenty-two years that have passed since the original publication of *My Mother-In-Law’s Son*, this moral narrative has become even more tenuous. Communist feminism has reemerged as a viable anti-colonial feminism, while more intense prejudice against migrant Chinese has become all too common in places like Hong Kong, Taiwan and Singapore. The battle for feminist alignment reiterates in a seemingly infinite process.

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