

Writing Historical Fiction: A Dialogue with Suchen Christine Lim

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Suchen Christine Lim is perhaps Singapore's foremost historical novelist, and has written fiction with a variety of settings from nineteenth century Malaya and the Straits Settlements to contemporary Singapore. She is the author of *Rice Bowl* (1984), *Gift from the Gods* (1990), *Fistful of Colours* (1992), *A Bit of Earth* (2000), *Hua Song: Stories of the Chinese Diaspora* (2005), and *The Lies that Build a Marriage: Stories of the Unsung, Unsaid and Uncelebrated in Singapore* (2007). She has held several writing residencies, including University of Iowa, University of Western Australia, Moniack Mhor Writer's Centre, Scotland, Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines, and Toji Cultural Centre, South Korea.

The dialogue session was chaired by Philip Holden, co-sponsored by the Singapore Heritage Society, and held on Saturday, 6 June 2009, at the National Library, 100 Victoria Street, Singapore. The text printed below represents a series of answers prepared by Lim to questions provided in advance by Holden, and does not include a series of verbal asides during the talk, or the ensuing question-and-answer session. In her talk, Lim explores a variety of issues related to the presence of history in her literary works. These include the tension between historical accuracy and the demands of a literary narrative, the intersection – and frequent contradiction – between private experience and public history, and the place of women's stories in re-imagining the history of Singapore.

PH: Your first novel was *Rice Bowl*, published in 1984, exactly a quarter of a century ago. It's centred on student activism just after independence in the late 1960s, and its central character is a novitiate nun who eventually decides not to take orders, Marie Wang. Can you tell us a little about how you came to write the novel, and why you chose this period as a setting for a novel published in 1984?

¹ Philip Holden is Associate Professor of English at the National University of Singapore and was Vice President of the Singapore Heritage Society from 2003-2009.

SCL: Hindsight is a wonderful but sometimes self-deceiving gift. So beware. I will recall the events and answer the question as best as I can with the help of hindsight.

First and foremost, I had never wanted to be a writer. It never occurred to me that I wanted to or could write even though by the 1970s I had won prizes for my children's stories. *Rice Bowl* started one steaming afternoon when I was invigilating an A-Level exam in the school hall of Catholic Junior College. It was one of those 3-hour long exams. After walking up and down several times between rows of bent heads, I was tired and bored. I sat at my desk and started scribbling. I wrote for quite a while without being conscious of time passing. That was the beginning of my writing adventure. More awaited me when I returned to university to read for my English Honours. I was offered the use of a professor's office, thrown out of the professor's office, and scolded by the head of the Social Sciences department for writing in the professor's office. I was a mother of two children by then, and he scolded me like a child. I was so upset the whole night that the next day, with the help of a friend, I returned to the department to give him a piece of my mind. After that, I ended up writing the *something-I-didn't-know-would-morph-into-a-novel* in a storeroom of the Singapore University Press, under the stairs of Yusoff Ishak College.

As you can see, I did not consciously plan to write a novel or choose to set *Rice Bowl* in the late 1960s. It simply happened one afternoon in the exam hall of a college. But with hindsight, I will give a plausible explanation.

I grew up quickly in the 1960s in an independent nation with an uncertain future. I was in the first year of Pre-University when my classmates and I took part in the first National Day Parade. We performed the umbrella dance described in the opening chapter of *Rice Bowl*. My friends and I were passionate about being independent. Later, as young undergraduates, we wanted to participate in the making of Singapore. But the government did not trust young people at that time. We were the generation of undergraduates in the University of Singapore who were lectured at and often scolded by the government, who were fearful that some of us were under the influence of the Communists. That period made such a strong impression on me, I suppose, it seeped into the novel before I was fully aware of it. That's the only explanation I can think of. If I knew I was writing a novel, I would've suffered rigor mortis.

PH: I understand that you faced some difficulties in publishing the novel. What were they?

SCL: One publisher was worried about the political content; another wanted me to take out the sex scene in the Ser Mei section so that schools would adopt it. These two publishers had sent the novel to teacher-assessors to evaluate the

novel. At the risk of offending teachers in the audience, I say that teachers are not the best judges of a novel's artistic merit, especially a novel meant for the general public. Teachers tend to use criteria that are relevant within a school context to gauge whether a book should or should not be published. And this means no sex, no violence, no Singlish, no religion, race or politics but alas, *Rice Bowl* has all of these elements. Of course, the teacher-assessors judged it to be unworthy of publication. Fortunately for me and for Singapore literature, the third publisher, Times Books International, did not use teacher-assessors, and my novel was eventually published by Times.

PH: Your second novel, *Gift from the Gods*, published in 1990, has been described as your most autobiographical. What place does autobiography play in your writing? How do you transform autobiographical events into fiction?

SCL: All these years, I have kept silent when people said *Gift* was autobiographical. It's flattering, but unfortunately it's not. I began the novel to test my writing skills. After *Rice Bowl* was published, I continued to be plagued by doubts about my own writing and imagination. A part of me kept thinking: So you've published one novel. Big deal. One swallow does not make a summer. One novel does not make a writer. That was why I chose a subject totally different from *Rice Bowl*, and struggled with it for three years while I was studying for a diploma in applied linguistics. I experimented with writing in first person and third person, so you can say that *Gift* was my own training novel. Struggling with that novel taught me to write. I am self-taught. I haven't been to writing school. I don't have an MFA from a university. I had no writing mentor. I just wrote and wrote and had a good friend to read my work. But having said that, all writers do use their own experiences, feelings, and observations as raw materials – our fears, our prejudices, insights, past loves, friends, families etc – all become part of the raw materials that go into the making of a story. We are like potters mixing the clay for the pot we want to make. For example, I did spend a part of my childhood on a street with houses rented or owned by mistresses, mama-sans, dance hostesses, and prostitutes.

PH: In *Gift from the Gods* you use an unusual technique in which you juxtapose the story of Yenti's mother's life in Malaysia and Singapore with Yenti's own diary, written when she's an adult. Why did you do this?

SCL: As I said earlier, I was experimenting with first and third person points of view. Then as I wrote, I realised that Yenti in the first person and the diary format gave me a lot of leeway in providing a naturalistic commentary on Yoke Lin's life and character, and it created tension between mother and daughter, differences between generations, points of view, past and present and so on. It

also meant I could move back and forth between events and characters, and need not sustain them for too long. I, the novice author, could not do that. As a single parent, I was juggling many things in my life – studying for my post-graduate diploma while trying to write a novel, bring up a family, run a home, and maintain intense relationships with the few people I loved. And all the while, at the back of my head, a third novel was bubbling inside me waiting to be written. At the same time, I wasn't convinced I could write and was plagued by self-doubts all the time. It was an inner conflict I couldn't resolve or tell anyone. Outwardly, I was calm, although my body, my brain, my heart, and my imagination were never together in one place. They were in several places at any one time, especially when I had to attend official meetings at my workplace. It was a mad, mad phase in a life of the imagination. I hope this gives you an inkling of the conflict inside a woman writer's head when she writes, even though the end product is a cohesively constructed simple novel. *Gift* is simple compared to the others, but it took me into a world entirely different from *Rice Bowl*, and helped me to train myself to hear and write in different voices.

PH: *Fistful of Colours*, published in 1993, is perhaps the most ambitious of your novels in terms of the number of characters from different communities, and the range of historical stories contained in it. It centres on Suwen, an artist in Singapore in the late 1980s. I was particularly interested in Suwen's relationship with Mark Campbell, an expatriate teacher, and the fact that the novel finishes with Mark's thoughts. The relationship between Mark and Suwen becomes a means by which you can raise many issues: the colonial and new postcolonial relationship between Singapore and the UK, the issue of language choice and language use, and the power relations in cross-cultural interaction. At the same time, the novel resists giving definite answers to these questions in the way an essay or an academic paper might. Do you find tensions between wanting to address political or social issues in a novel and aesthetic questions such as plot or characterisation?

SCL: Oh dear, no. Such thoughts seldom enter the writer's head when he/she writes. At least not in mine. I am not a polemicist. I do not set out to address an issue. I let my characters take the lead. I am not sure if that makes sense. If a character in the story develops into one that would make a long speech, let's say about HIV or Lee Kuan Yew's authoritarian style of leadership then that character would say or do something that reflects his persona. I hope that makes sense. I write to discover. Writing is a journey of discovery for me. It's not implementing an already planned and plotted route.

PH: *Fistful of Colours*, like many of your novels, has strong women characters. Feminist scholars have talked about the notion of "herstory" – a rewriting of

history so that the marginalised voices of women are made more prominent. Is your writing feminist and does it constitute a kind of “herstory”?

SCL: Good grief, these are issues that critics decide or engage in. I do not bother with such things, at least not consciously. With due respect to the women who masterminded the foolish attempt to take control of *AWARE*, I have no ambition to be a feminist mentor. I am just Suchen and I write as I discover, one day at a time. Look at *A Bit Of Earth*. It has a male hero, and it’s full of strong male characters and strong woman characters. But I agree that both novels have elements of the women’s story, and the strong presence of the marginalised. *Fistful of Colours* is about marginalised men like the rickshaw coolies from whose ranks Ong Ah Buck rose, and marginalised women such as his oppressed wife and concubine. *A Bit of Earth* shows how the mining coolies were exploited and squeezed dry like Old Stick. And no critic has noticed this strong element of what Paulo Freire called “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” the title of his seminal book that discussed how those who had been oppressed became in turn oppressors themselves. Most critics had simplistically written about oppressed men and women as victims without also examining how their oppressive reality had transformed some of the “strong and successful” ones into oppressors. This is not unique to Asia. It’s a universal phenomenon.

PH: *A Bit of Earth*, published in 2001, begins with a very powerful – and gut-wrenching – scene in the Kinta valley in the nineteenth century. A Chinese woman is drowned in a pig-basket as punishment for alleged adultery. How did you come to write this scene – was it drawn from historical research, from a story told to you, or did it come from your imagination?

SCL: I’m glad you asked the question; this is very simple to answer. I grew up in the days when school textbooks were not written by committees in the Ministry of Education. My history textbook in secondary school had interesting stories especially in the footnotes, and one of them was about how one of the tin mining wars in Perak was started when the wife of the Cantonese Ghee Hin clan had an illicit love affair with a Hakka miner. That a Chinese woman in Malaya in the nineteenth century had dared to cross a forbidden boundary when she fell in love with a man from an enemy clan thrilled me as a young girl. I never forgot how her daring love started a war, which eventually was cited as one of the causes that led to the British colonisation of Perak. Tell me, which fifteen year old could forget such a history? That piece of memory remained with me to this day. So the opening scene of *A Bit Of Earth* was based on a footnote in a history book, a piece of historical fact that was deleted by later history textbook writers but remembered and reclaimed by the novelist who re-imagined and retold the woman’s lost story so that this daring woman would

escape from the curse of being “the no-name ghost,” a punishment that the men had tried to inflict on her as shown in my novel. Perhaps this is the “herstory” and marginalised you referred to earlier.

PH: *A Bit of Earth* is, of all your novels, the one set in the most remote period of the past, and presumably the one on which you did most research. How did you come to write the novel, and how did you go about doing research? At what point did you pull back and let imagination take over?

SCL: One afternoon, when I was still working in the Curriculum Institute in the university’s Bukit Timah campus, the image of a boy with a queue popped into my head for no rhyme or reason. For months, I puzzled over him until one day I decided to name him Wong Tuck Heng (after a Cantonese movie kungfu hero I had adored as a kid). The moment he was named, I could place him. He was a Cantonese, and since he had a queue, I knew he must be from the nineteenth century, and that was how it started. By chance and by choices that the writer made: Tuck Heng came into my head by chance, but I chose his name and his time and place in my imaginary universe.

How did I do research? I started to read around the subject of Chinese emigration to Malaya and the history of the Malay States, especially Perak. I visited the library often, especially after long naggy meetings chaired by MOE administrators who droned for hours on inconsequential things. During those times when I was unable to go to the library, I carried the novel inside my head and imagined fragments of dialogue and action while a fraction of me paid attention to the meeting. I also read Malay poetry and novels translated into English especially, Shannon Ahmad’s novels, and tapped into my childhood memories of kampong life in Malaya.

PH: *The Lies that Build a Marriage* is your latest collection of short stories. Its subtitle is “Stories of the Unsung, Unsaid and Uncelebrated in Singapore.” While the short stories are mostly contemporary in setting, do you think there are any continuities with your previous writing? How do you think you’ve developed or changed as a writer over the last quarter century?

SCL: These short stories continue to reflect my concern about giving voice to the voiceless, and art, life and memory, and that Singapore writing in English can cross several ethnic boundaries. Have I changed as a writer over the last quarter century? Well, what I think is not that important. What do you, the reader, think? You who have read all my works, have I changed?

PH: Your historical fiction has ranged widely in terms of historical period. In which of your works do you feel you most successfully evoked the sense of a particular time and place?

SCL: *A Bit of Earth* – the evocation of the time and place was completely based on memory and imagination and it has emerged as the most authentic to me. And in this, I am supported by eminent Malaysian poet, Wong Phui Nam, and critic, Prof. Quayum from the International Islamic University, where the book is being read in their M.A. Literature classes. Wong Phui Nam claims me as a Malaysian writer, the highest compliment from a Malaysian poet to a Singapore writer. He said: “*A Bit of Earth* is important both as a literary masterwork as well as a historical document telling in fictional terms the social history of Perak's Kinta Valley. It also has the virtue of being un-put-downable – a sure sign of a master storyteller, but over and above this, the novel affirms Suchen as one of the most important writers to have come out of Malaysia.”

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