

Han Suyin: The little voice of decolonizing Asia

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Rosalie Matilda Kwanghu Chou (September 12, 1916/17–November 2, 2012), better known by her pen name, Han Suyin, was born in Xinyang, in south-eastern Henan province, to a Chinese father and a Flemish mother. When she was five her family moved to Peking (modern-day Beijing), where she started formal schooling. Han studied in a local Chinese school before transferring to a Catholic school where she was educated in both French and English. At 14, she decided to pursue a career in medicine, and in 1933 she was admitted to Yenching University. Han soon left to study medicine at the Brussels Free University on the Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program but her dreams of becoming a doctor were interrupted by the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War, which forced her to drop out of college and return to China. She met her first husband, Tang Pao Huang, a Chinese nationalist military officer, on the return voyage and the two married in Wuhan in 1938. The couple moved to Chongqing, Sichuan province, the new capital of the nationalist government, and Han subsequently trained as a midwife and worked in a maternity hospital run by the US Christian mission in Chengdu. *Destination Chungking* (1942), her first published work, written with the assistance of an American missionary doctor, Marian Manly, recounts her experiences during this period.

In 1940, Han and her husband adopted a daughter, Tang Yungmei, and two years later moved to London when he was posted there as a military attaché. Han resumed her medical studies at the London School of Medicine for Women and the Royal Free Hospital where she qualified in 1948, at last fulfilling her childhood ambition, and later receiving an MBBS (Bachelor of Medicine, Bachelor of Surgery) degree. (She later fictionalized her experiences as a student in wartime London in the 1962 novella *Winter Love*.) Tang Pao Huang returned to China while Han was still studying in London and died in action in 1947 fighting communist forces in the Chinese Civil War. After qualifying and working in London for a year as a house surgeon at the Royal Free Hospital, Han became restless and resolved to return to Asia.

Han arrived in Hong Kong with Yungmei early in 1949 and took up a post as assistant doctor at the Queen Mary Hospital. In Hong Kong she met and fell in love with Ian Morrison, a married Australian war correspondent based in Singapore who was subsequently killed on assignment in Korea in 1950. Their tragic love affair, described in *My House Has Two Doors* as “a Hong Kong typhoon [which] carried all my resolutions before it and left me racked and changed” (Han 1982, 19), became the basis for her bestselling novel *A Many-Splendoured Thing* (1952), written soon after Morrison’s death. The commercial success of *A Many-Splendoured Thing* was bolstered by a Hollywood film adaptation of the novel, *Love is a Many-Splendoured Thing* (1955) starring Jennifer Jones and William Holden and directed by Henry King. Han disliked the film adaptation, but both novel and film made her an internationally recognized author: her life now diversified and alongside her medical career and her writing she began to take on the roles of essayist, public intellectual, and international commentator on Asian affairs.

In 1952, Han Suyin left Hong Kong for Malaya with her new husband, Leon Comber, a

British colonial police official. They settled in Johore and adopted a second daughter, Chew Hui-Im. In this productive 12-year period, Han was heavily involved in local social and educational causes and in Singapore she came to be a well-known, outspoken public figure. Internationally she became a singular voice in the non-aligned movement, a frequent, sympathetic visitor to China, and a promoter of cross-cultural anti-imperialist solidarity. The pro-Chinese journal *Eastern Horizon*, published from Hong Kong, gave her an international platform and a number of her articles were later republished in the collection *Tigers and Butterflies* (1990). Her engagement in local Malayan politics is apparent in her controversial, critical novel of the Emergency . . . and the Rain my Drink (1956), which the British High Commissioner, Gerald Templar, sought to have banned. Han Suyin published another five literary works during her stay in Malaya, including the full-length novels *The Mountain Is Young* (1958) and *The Four Faces* (1963), and two novellas compiled in *Two Loves: Cast but One Shadow & Winter Love* (1962). A significant feature of these works is their development of a complex autobiographical fictional mode that anticipated present-day forms of creative life-writing and autofiction.

Conscious of her position as a professional writer and physician, Han encouraged Asian women to take an active role in Malayan and Singaporean society. She also promoted education and joined the campaign for the establishment of Nanyang University (Nantah) in Singapore, the first university outside greater China to adopt Mandarin as its language of instruction when it opened its doors in 1956. Not only did Han Suyin's involvement in the college highlight a desire amongst diasporic Chinese communities to preserve their culture; it also showed that Han was ready to fight for her own ideas about cultural plurality and nationhood. She strongly believed that Chinese culture was a part of Malayan culture and Malaya could, therefore, benefit from the foundation of Nantah. Motivated by widespread support for the university, especially from Singapore's poorer communities, Han Suyin decided to volunteer her services to help run Nanyang University in its early years. She took on the unpaid role of college physician between 1956 and 1958 and later voluntarily taught a course on contemporary Asian literature from 1959 to 1961, work which was path-breaking because of its focus on regional literary cultures rather than the English canon. Han Suyin was an adept midwife at the birth of Nantah and fostered the institution through her personal support and later endowments.

Han became estranged from Comber and they divorced in 1958. She had met a South Indian colonel, Vincent Ratnaswamy, while in Nepal at the coronation of King Mahendrain 1956, and he would become her third husband. Han eventually left Singapore in 1964, after being criticized for giving a speech opposing Singapore's merger with the Federation of Malaya, Sarawak, and North Borneo to form the Federation of Malaysia. The merger took place on September 16, 1963 and marked an important transition in the history of the region but brought troubles for the Chinese community. These events led Han to shut her clinic and move to Hong Kong where she devoted her time to historical writing, publishing the first three volumes of a series combining autobiography and history: *The Crippled Tree* (1965), *A Mortal Flower* (1966), and *Birdless Summer* (1968) over three years. During the 1960s and 1970s, Han continued her support for anti-colonial Asian non-alignment through cultural dialogue and solidarity. She was a frequent visitor to China and became a skilful political biographer, publishing a laudatory two-volume biography of Mao, *The Morning Deluge: Mao Tsetung and the Chinese Revolution 1893–1945* (1972) and *Wind in the Tower: Mao Tsetung and the Chinese Revolution, 1949–1965* (1976), and later a biography of her

hero Zhou Enlai, *Eldest Son: Zhou Enlai and the Making of Modern China* (1994). Alongside commentaries such as *China in the Year 2001* (1967), these works consolidated her role as a mediator of China to the west and the west to China.

In 1971, she officially married Ratnaswamy and the pair later moved to Lausanne, Switzerland. Han Suyin remained active on the international front, working closely with and in China through the post-Cultural Revolution years to the economic reforms of 1978. In this period, she also completed her historical autobiography with the volumes *My House Has Two Doors* (1980) and *Wind in My Sleeve* (1992). After the end of the Cold War and the historical re-evaluation of the human cost of Maoism, her international profile suffered, but she remained committed to support a transhistorical China as her cultural homeland. She made one last trip back to China in 1997 to commemorate the handover of Hong Kong to China. Han remained in Lausanne until her death in 2012.

History, politics, and activism

In the opening article of our Special Issue on Han Suyin, “A dissenting voice: The politics of Han Suyin’s literary activities in late colonial and postcolonial Malaya and Singapore”, Han’s biographer Ina Zhang Xing Hong examines Han’s work as a public intellectual in Malaya and Singapore from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s and focuses on her literary activism. Drawing on new research, Zhang shows how Han was not only a creative writer at this time, but also at the centre of a nexus of other literary activities: notably, supporting and promoting local writing; creative and journalistic work on Asian themes and issues; working on translation activities; and from 1959 to 1961 teaching a path-breaking course on “non-aligned” African and Asian writing at Singapore’s newly formed Nanyang University (Nantah). Playing on Han’s pen name as a Little Voice (of China), Zhang shows how Han became a “dissenting” voice in the 1950s, questioning both the older cultural and political orders of the European colonial presence and aspects of a new national cultural politics of decolonization. In research that complements Chi Yuan Zhuang’s and Feng Cui’s articles on Han’s personal and international translation work, Zhang maps the often collaborative translation projects she undertook.

Chris Lee, in “Han Suyin and error: Decolonization, knowledge, and literary subjectivity”, tackles Han Suyin as a writer with deep concerns about world history, internationalism, and non-aligned global politics. Lee asks how Han negotiated the personal and the political in her work and focuses on the seeming unreliability or trickiness of social and geopolitical knowledge, especially in the context of the fierce ideological conflicts and polarized intelligence and propaganda fronts of the Cold War. Lee sees these issues as central to Han’s creative work and her self-adopted role as a defender of modern China and therefore, by extension, the government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the years of her Malaysian residency. For Lee, there is a constitutive tension between Han’s role as political informant and the subjectivism of her fiction, which is manifest in *A Many-Splendoured Thing* and . . . *and the Rain my Drink*. Writing at a time when colonial narratives of history were being challenged and remade across the postcolonial world, Han’s positioning is discussed in relation to Mao’s revolutionary understanding of “error”. Shirley Chew’s article develops the theme of history and textuality by addressing Han Suyin’s inventive and often genre-crossing textual self-making (and remaking) in *My House Has Two Doors* (1980), the fourth volume of her historical memoir, *China: Autobiography, History*. Chew reads

Han's writing in the light of its author's cosmopolitan "outlandishness" and in relation to her adopted or identified homeland of China, made new and strange in the process of revolution. She situates Han's developing autobiographical voice in relation to the key decolonization period of the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s and to Han's doubled heritage, and privileged understanding of the historical and cultural forces shaping Chinese communities. In Han's bravura performance of self-fashioning, Chew finds a sense of hesitancy or uncertainty:

an unease behind the assertiveness [...] the worrying sense that the 'truth' is something she does not – cannot – have access to, or has to struggle to obtain and then only at second hand, or to learn of only at some later date.

Language and translation

In Chi Yuan Zhuang's article, "Writer as translator: Cultural translation in Han Suyin's *A Many-Splendoured Thing*", Han's role as a multilingual international author, who spoke in three languages and wrote in two, is the subject of a detailed analysis that also covers creative linguistic and cultural translation strategies in her bestselling debut novel. Han, argues Zhuang, used her dual understanding of Chinese and European literary traditions to include elements of Chinese verse forms, poetry, literary works, and philosophy as intercultural, intertextual reference frames in her anglophone fiction. Reading Han's creative, linguistic, and cultural translation strategies in terms of post-colonial theories of translation, Zhuang suggests that *A Many-Splendoured Thing* involves a cultural translation from textual and non-textual sources; the analyses show how Han used her own translation of Chinese poets such as Yan Shu and Li Yu for cosmopolitan complexity and tonal depth. Han also employs a "foreignizing" strategy to reposition her creative writing in relation to its international readership.

In "Han Suyin's translation philosophies in the context of Mainland China since the 1950s", Feng Cui discusses Han as a multilingual author by analysing her shaping involvement in translation work in the PRC. Seeing translation as a neglected aspect of Han's public and creative work, Cui focuses on three broad phases: the first "Cold War" phase constituted a form of political and cultural interlocution in which Han publicized the PRC and wrote about contemporary Chinese leaders for western audiences. A second, overlapping phase, contemporaneous with the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), saw Han promote actual translation activities in China and support training programmes and competitions such as the Han Suyin Award for Young Translators. In a third phase, Han anticipated the current postmillennial Chinese policy of economic expansion and "going out" into the wider world by exporting Chinese culture as an aspect of the country's increased international standing and soft power. This aspect of Han's work, which has been "invisible" to readers outside China, argues Cui, is key to understanding her ambitions as a committed writer and intellectual.

The critical focus on language takes a more anglophone inflection in Fiona Lee's article, "Neutralizing English: Han Suyin and the language politics of Third World Literature". Reviewing the history of the rise of English as a global lingua franca during the Cold War, Lee emphasizes Han's important intermediary role as a writer who used English and the anglophone novel as a new "transparent medium" for representing the emergent political

landscape of non-aligned Southeast Asia. For Lee, Han's time in Malaya and her involvement in Malaya's and Singapore's intellectual life (also discussed by Ina Zhang Xing Hong) offers an important archive for understanding her role as a local mediator of English. Her political support for the non-alignment movement, self-fashioning as a fearless, cosmopolitan public intellectual, and connections with Nanyang University saw her intervene in heated debates and challenge what Rachel Leow (2016) has called the "isomorphism of race, language, and nation" (2) in decolonizing Malaya. For Han, English did not necessarily carry a neocolonial cultural burden, and could be remade by writers in a new neutral guise as an intra- and international political and cultural mediator.

Form, genre, and gender

Articles in this final section turn to considerations of form, genre, and gender in Han Suyin's fiction. In "Han Suyin's Cold War fictions: Life-writing, intimacy, and decolonization", Alex Tickell focuses on the representation of inter-ethnic intimacy in Han's *A Many-Splendoured Thing* and her third novel, set in Nepal, *The Mountain Is Young* (1958). He traces a trope of inter-ethnic intimacy which develops on, inhabits, and revises an influential contemporary mode of "Cold War Orientalism", theorized by Christina Klein, in which British and American writers and film-makers used themes of inter-ethnic love to imagine new bonds of affiliation and affective co-operation between west and east. For Han, the plot device of the inter-ethnic romance allows a different set of decolonial alternatives to emerge, in which non-aligned internationalism and ultimately a postcolonial reversal of the paternalism and objectifying sexual politics of the past can develop. Alongside the treatment of a politicized intimacy in Han's Cold War fiction, Tickell also shows that Han's affective internationalism allows her to critique new modes of neocolonial control and soft power in the politics of international aid and infrastructural development.

In Anne Wetherilt's article, Han's debut novel . . . *and the Rain my Drink* is compared with another contemporary work set in Emergency-era Malaya: *The Flying Fox* by Mary McMinnies. Wetherilt argues that these works show how Han was writing in, and to some extent tactically repurposing, a popular (highly commercial) "middlebrow" mode that combined "informancy" and political commentary with a generic incorporation of romance and women's "domestic interests and private anxieties". Far from being a wholly conservative genre, the middlebrow in Han's and McMinnies's writing has the capacity to express dissent and critique the prevailing pro-British narrative of successful counter-insurgency. In McMinnies's work, the idiom of dissent tends towards social satire, whereas Han's re-imagining of the genre allows her to include highly political forms of critique and to explore dialogism and generic hybridity. In both texts, argues Wetherilt, the middlebrow becomes a vehicle for a forensic examination of the discontents and complex multi-ethnic politics of decolonizing Malaya.

Grace V.S. Chin's article examines the fictional representation of subaltern and marginalized Malayan Chinese women in Han's 1956 novel of the Malayan Emergency. Revealing how this constituency was liminally placed between "two terrors" – the colonial police and the "people inside" (anti-colonial communist insurgents operating in the Malayan jungle) – Chin suggests that Han's fiction contests a colonial masculinist discursive binary by focusing on complex, fully realized characters such as the autobiographical "Dr Han" and the captured insurgent and informer Ah Mei. Chin argues

that “by straddling the boundary line that divides the Inside from Outside, Ah Mei’s gendered body symbolically constitutes the liminal in-between space that also defies and eludes colonial attempts at dominance and control”. Mapped across the colonial topography of outside and inside, controlled and insurgent space, Han’s nuanced representation of women develops as a challenge to the conventional othering and silencing of women in textual representations of empire.

In the final article, the author Aamer Hussein reflects on his personal friendship with Han Suyin, gauges her enduring legacy, and recalls Han’s final, forgotten novel *The Sun in Ambush*, published only in French in 1995 as *Le Soleil en Embuscade*. Hussein’s eloquent, moving account of Han’s writing life and influence and his writerly appreciation of her craft is a valedictory endpoint. As Hussein notes, Han was a writer in direct “corrective”, and what might now be called decolonial, dialogue with the established tropes of imperial and orientalist writing, who was fully reconciled to the fact that “what I say will annoy many people who prefer the more conventional myths brought back by writers on the Orient”. She was also an author of technical range and creative courage: a “novelist of ideas” who, from her unique cosmopolitan trilingual position, conducted “radical, and often dazzling linguistic experiments” and wrote in solidarity with other Asian and African authors of her time.

After Han Suyin left Singapore, Nantah, the Chinese-medium university she helped found, merged with the University of Singapore to form the National University of Singapore, later becoming Nanyang Technological University (NTU). In commemoration of Han’s lasting contributions to the development of contemporary Asian literature and Sino–Western cultural exchanges, the School of Humanities at NTU hosted “Literature, Culture and Translation: An International Symposium on Han Suyin” on July 11 and 12, 2019, organized by Dr Feng Cui, Professor K.K. Luke, and Associate Professor Yow Cheun Hoe, at which the articles in this Special Issue were first delivered. Han Suyin’s legacy lives on through her daughter Madame Chew Hui Im, who in 2013 helped set up the Han Suyin Scholarship Fund (in Translation Studies) that aims to develop translation endeavours in Singapore.

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