

An interview with Chuah Guat Eng

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This interview was conducted via e-mail in October 2005. The interview examines the writer's sensibility, her process of writing and the shaping influences on her imagination. It also looks into her attitude to such important and sensitive political and cultural issues as the country's language policy, which accords Malay or Bahasa Malaysia, the language of the Malay majority, the status of national language; the New Economic Policy (NEP), which enshrines certain special privileges to the bumiputra (or aboriginal) population of the country; and the relegation of writings in English to the sub-category of "sectional literature" as compared to writings in Malay enjoying the privilege of "national literature." Moreover, the interview probes the writer's personal philosophy of life, her dominant interests in her writing, and her feelings about what the writer's relationship should be with religion, race and literary criticism generally.

MAQ: Let's begin with your background: When and where were you born?

CGE: I was born on December 1, 1943 in Rembau, Negeri Sembilan. But I didn't grow up there. My father was with the railways, and got transferred around quite a bit before we finally settled down in Port Swettenham (now Port Klang). The last move probably had to do with the fact that my brother, the eldest of the children, was then of an age to start school.

MAQ: What kind of upbringing did you have? Would you recollect some memories from childhood that you think have shaped your imagination and your personality?

CGE: Very unsettled childhood, but filled with love and indulgence. My mother died when I was three, and she was very ill before that. My aunts, her sisters, must have taken turns to look after us, the children, because I remember at least three different homes and sets of cousins – all in Kuala Lumpur. After she died, I was sent to live with my father's aunt in a huge house, also in Kuala Lumpur, where I was the only child. There were two amahs (maids) who woke me up in the morning, brushed my teeth, bathed me, combed my hair, dressed and buttoned me up, put a handkerchief in my pocket, fed me my meals – and then left me pretty much to amuse myself until it was bedtime. Sometimes my great-aunt took me out visiting with her. I remember sitting in a rickshaw with her, being driven about in a red car, walking with her and my uncles around the Bukit Bintang Amusement Park, where we watched Cantonese opera that gave me nightmares later. I remember being taken out to the garden one evening to look at a particularly beautiful rainbow, and another time to look at the moon. But I don't remember anyone talking to me much, or myself talking much. I remember many hours spent on my own gazing

into the worlds of Chinese paintings and carvings, imagining myself there. When I went home to my father and siblings, I had become extremely reticent and shy – and dreadfully incompetent. My elder siblings basically took over the role of the two servants. But now my world was filled with words and stories. I remember the elder of my two sisters reading to me the story of the mother goat and her seven kids and teaching me nursery rhymes and songs, my brother telling me a long rambling tale which he must have made up himself because the heroines had the same names as two of our cousins, and the other sister drawing pictures around which she made up stories. My father took me to the movies (I remember watching Ingrid Bergman in Joan of Arc). He also taught me the alphabet, which he said I had to learn before he would allow me to go to school (I can't have been much more than five). And lo and behold, somehow – I'm not sure how – one day I found myself reading one of the story books lying around. I still wasn't talking much (it's difficult when one is surrounded by talkative siblings) but I talked to myself. I remember one morning sitting all by myself after they had gone to school and suddenly thinking, "I'm thinking!" Looking back, I must have struck those around me as a weird child. These early years seem to have shaped my imagination and my personality to an astonishing degree. I'm still more comfortable dealing with ideas than with things and people. I also don't really understand what people mean when they say they are bored or lonely; I love being alone and I love having nothing to do but daydream. But I think the most important part of it all is the feeling my immediate and extended family gave me – and continue to give – that despite my practical incompetence, I am precious, brilliant in my own way, and unquestionably worthy of love; and that if other people can't see that, that's their problem, not mine. It gave me the licence – in later life – to walk away from bad situations without remorse and self-recrimination.

MAQ: When did you start writing? What motivated you to write your very first piece of work?

CGE: The first time I consciously made a decision to write a story was when I was ten; but it was never finished because I ran out of episodes and situations. I think I learned then the lesson of not having a plot. Perhaps I should start with the first piece that earned me some money – thirty Malayan dollars. This is not because money is a motivation, but because until stories are made public in one way or another, they don't really count, do they? It was a play for the school programme on Radio Malaya (as it was then), based on a story I'd made up on the spot and narrated to the class when I was eleven. Just after I finished Sixth Form I turned it into a radio play, sent it in, and got paid. The second time I was paid for a written piece was many years later, in the mid-seventies. I'd written a short story while I was working with Shell in Sarawak. When I returned to Kuala Lumpur, I gave it to Ayesha Harben, who was then editor of Her World. She used it and paid me RM200. Some years later I asked Faridah Merican to read another short piece I'd written. She liked it enough to read it over the radio on a special storytelling programme they had in those days, but I don't think I was paid anything for it. What got me thinking seriously about writing was the Short Story Writing Competition organised by the New Straits Times in 1992 (if I remember correctly), when I submitted five stories and four got published. I don't really know what motivates me to write. Stories come into my head almost ready-made and when I can no longer find excuses not to write them down, they get written.

MAQ: Did you ever consider writing in Chinese?

CGE: No.

MAQ: Why not?

CGE: I'm illiterate in Chinese. In fact I speak very little Chinese. The language environment at home when I was growing up was predominantly Anglophone. We only ever spoke in Chinese – a patois of Chinese, Malay, and English politely termed “Penang Hokkien” – to my stepmother who does not speak English. But since I didn't speak much at home, my knowledge of the language remained extremely limited.

MAQ: How old were you when Malaysia attained independence?

CGE: I was thirteen.

MAQ: Do you have any special memories from that period?

CGE: No memory of any specific event, only the memory of feeling that something momentous had happened and that somehow my father, who was a civil servant, would no longer have to write “Your obedient servant” above his signature. I don't know why I thought that. Independence probably didn't make a jot of difference to the style of my father's official correspondence, but somehow the connection was made. I had seen it on one of his letters when I was about ten or so, and had got indignant enough to tell him off for calling himself a servant. He explained to me, of course, that he was a servant of the government, but I don't think I ever bought the idea.

MAQ: What were race relations like in Malaysia before and immediately after independence?

CGE: I can't speak for the general, only for myself. In my experience there just wasn't a great deal of race-consciousness. My family lived in a community of government servants who in those days were pretty multiracial and all English-speaking. I went to an English-language mission school, and my closest friends were – and still are – four Malay girls, one of whom is a member of the Malay aristocracy and two of whom had Chinese mothers, an Indian girl whose mother was Chinese, and a Chinese girl. We were a pretty mixed bunch, but we didn't spend a great deal of time thinking about the differences. When I was in Sixth Form in the early '60s, I had a slight falling out with my sister, with whom I was rooming, and a Punjabi classmate thought nothing of inviting me to move in with her family, and I thought nothing of accepting. So I lived like a Punjabi girl (complete with Punjabi suit and shawl) for a while. Difference was something we lived with, so I with my Peranakan background was often more astonished by the similarities between myself and my Malay friends than by the differences.

MAQ: Did the riots of 13 May 1969 alter this relationship in any significant way?

CGE: 13 May 1969 did not alter my relationship with my friends in any significant way, except that it made us realise how extraordinary we were; and it actually drew us closer together. As for the rest of the country, I was away in Germany from early 1970 till late 1972, so I missed the general discourse taking place at the time the New Economic Policy (NEP) was first implemented. By the time I returned, the NEP was well in place. It didn't affect me much, because I was working in the private sector, most of the time in the employ of international companies. Nor did it affect me adversely when I decided to become a

freelance consultant. On the contrary, I don't think I could have survived as I have without the help of my many Malay friends and acquaintances, who were always around to offer me contracts and one-off jobs. So personally, I have benefited from the NEP. As a confirmed socialist and a student of history, I cannot disagree with the principles of the NEP. How it is abused by individuals and individual politicians is another matter, and that is something the democratic system and the rule of law are supposed to be able to address and redress. So my political concerns during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s had less to do with the NEP than with the partypolitical manoeuvrings leading to the repressive actions taken under the Internal Security Act during that period.

MAQ: How do you feel about the language policy in the country both as a citizen and a writer?

CGE: As a citizen, I believe with all my heart that we need a national language. I felt it most when I was in Germany, and had to go through the humiliation of having to admit that I can't speak my "mother tongue" (Chinese), that I am rather bad at my national language (Malay), and that the only language I can use with any degree of competence is the language of my former colonial masters (English). In my professional life the language policy did not affect me at all since I was working in the private sector, and in a way that is something to be regretful about. If I had joined the government service, my Malay would be much better than it is now. Even so, on a personal level, my limited knowledge of Malay, spoken, like my English, with a Malay accent, has made it possible for me to experience the warmth and generosity of Malays I meet in my daily life. For instance, when I was on holiday in Terengganu some years ago, I met a tourist information officer who noticed that I was in pain because of a bad shoulder. Without even thinking twice, I'm sure, she invited me to stay with her so that she could take me to a masseuse in her kampung. And I did, enjoying her and her mother's hospitality for the three or four days required for the therapy. As a writer, I can only write in the language I think in, which is English. Am I bothered by the fact that Malaysian literature in English is categorised as "sectional" and not "national" literature? Not a bit. These words are only labels. If my writing has to be labelled, the last label I want for it would be "national," because the word, used in connection with art and literature, brings images of art and literature of the Nazi period in Germany, the Stalin period in Russia, and the Mao Tse-tung period in China. Which artist or writer in his/her right mind would want that kind of stigma? The truth of the matter is that my writing will only be read by a section, and a very small section at that, of the general population. But that truth applies to all writings, in whatever language, anywhere in the world.

MAQ: Are your stories invented or discovered? Are they generally inspired by some idea, observation, or experience?

CGE: If by "discovered" you mean that someone told me a story, which I then put down in writing, then they are not discovered. I am incapable of writing other people's stories, because once I know a story's beginning, middle, and end, I can't see the point of writing it down. For me it is the inventing part of story-writing that is most crucial. Once I invent a situation or character, I am genuinely curious about what's going to happen next. Then all the ideas, observations and experiences, as well as other people's stories – which are stored away somewhere in my subconscious – come into play.

MAQ: Would you elaborate on the way you write? Do you maintain a routine, or do you wait for the moment of inspiration?

CGE: Before I began working on my doctoral dissertation, I maintained a routine. Not necessarily writing stories, but writing – to keep my hand in, so to speak – every morning for an hour or two. When inspired by the idea that I might have a story, the number of hours increases, because it's a toilsome business, writing stories. Inspiration comes in strange ways – usually in the form of words that later become the title or the first line of a story. The inspiration for "Two Pretty Men" came from a nursery rhyme with the same title I chanced upon on a Mother Goose website while surfing the Internet. The first line of "Almost the Worst Thing" was supplied by a participant in one of my writing groups, where the exercise in that particular session was to write unfinished sentences for the others to finish. That story came in a rush, and by the end of the first half hour I had written most of it. Of course its "finishing" (in both senses of the word) took a great deal longer.

MAQ: Someone once said that to claim the mantel, a writer ought to offer some new ideas about life and humanity. What new ideas do you bring to your writing?

CGE: I don't begin writing with the thought that I have some brilliant new insight into life and humanity that I must tell other people about. I'm usually more concerned with working out why a certain situation should present itself to me as a story that needs to be told. This often means exploring the possible circumstances, reasons, and motivations giving rise to the characters' words and actions. And since their words and actions arise from the reservoir of my own experiences and observations of the world around me, these explorations frequently give me an insight into why certain people (including myself) did such-and-such in my recent or distant past. In a sense my writing has a therapeutic effect; it helps me to find closure to episodes or periods in my life that have been particularly puzzling or painful. Whether the insights arrived at are judged to be original or significant is up to the reader or critic, who must, first of all, take cognisance of their presence in my stories.

MAQ: What should be the writer's relationship with religion, politics and literary criticism generally?

CGE: I'm not sure what you mean by "should." I believe that a writer's personal relationship with religion(s), politics, and literary theory (as opposed to criticism) will inevitably inform the way he/she writes. With some writers the relationship may take an imperative form, in that they feel that they should consciously take up a position on these issues and write from that position; they are then didactic, engaged, and perhaps even "formulaic" writers. With others the relationships may take a questioning or exploratory form. I personally prefer the second class of writers, because if they do the job well, they engage me in their questions and explorations. This means I can engage in a dialogue with them. As a reader, I'd much rather be involved in a dialogue than in a sermon.

MAQ: Who are the writers you admire most and why? Have these writers influenced your work in any way?

CGE: This is a difficult question to answer because there are so many writers I admire and who, I am sure, have influenced me in one way or another. But if I am to let my library be the judge – that is, in

terms of the number of books I own by one particular author – then it must be Yasunari Kawabata, Graham Greene, Thomas Mann, Arthur Schnitzler, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez (all men, I notice). I admire them all for the same reason I admire all the other authors not named – for their ability to tell stories in a straightforward way; that is, without drawing attention to how clever they are as writers. I think the most significant influence they've had on my work is their preference for translucent prose. More specifically, I am conscious of Kawabata's ability to imbue the smallest thing or action with symbolic value and doing it in such an understated way that I can re-read his stories many times and each time discover something new. I am conscious of Thomas Mann's giving to his narratives historical, traditional and mythical resonances so that one gets an insight into, not just Germany and its history, but Europe and its history. My interest in Arthur Schnitzler lies in his explorations of the psyche, and the way he says (or not-says) things that were in his time unsayable. And generally what one is conscious of and admires in another writer one tries to incorporate into one's own writing. As for local writers: Since working on my dissertation, which involves the analysis of selected Malaysian writers in English, I have come to admire Lloyd Fernando and Lee Kok Liang, especially with regard to the former's *Scorpion Orchid* (1976) and the latter's *Flowers in the Sky* (1981). These two texts are extremely problematic, and stylistically not the kind of writing I naturally gravitate towards. But the sheer necessity of scrutinising their discourses and discursive structures has opened my eyes to their intellectual rigour, their social-critical acuity, and their humanistic and humanitarian vision. Bearing in mind that their books were published at a time when the threat of imprisonment under the Internal Security Act (ISA) was part of everyday reality, I admire them for their political conviction in writing at all. Most of all, I admire them for their creativity and writing skill, which enabled them to write about what they did at the time they did – and get away with it. They testify to what writers committed to their vocation have always known: there is no "favourable climate" for writing; there is only the writer's conviction, willingness and ability to rise to the challenge of unfavourable times.

MAQ: Could you discuss what some of the dominant interests or themes in your writings are?

CGE: When I reflect on the stories I have written, I suppose the dominant theme has revolved around the issues arising from the interrelationship between truth, lies and silences: whether it is ever possible to know the truth about oneself and others; whether it is necessary to tell lies; whether the recourse to silence when truths cannot be told constitutes a lie because it has the effect of a lie; and the impact of this conundrum on the psyches of both those who tell and those who are told lies or not told truths.

MAQ: How long did it take you to write your first novel, *Echoes of Silence*? How did you go about writing it? Was it more challenging for you to accomplish the task being a woman?

CGE: The novel had been stewing in my brain since I was a student in Germany in the early 1970s, and I toyed around with ideas on and off for years. Concentrated thinking, i.e. actually thinking of it in terms of plot and character etc began in 1990, about four years before I wrote a single word. When I sat down to write, however, the novel practically wrote itself, so it took me about three months to get the first draft out, and another four months to revise and edit. I was, of course, writing feverishly and for long hours at a time, hardly stopping to eat and getting – needing – very little sleep. I can't tell you whether my being a woman made the task "more challenging." More challenging than what? Than if I were a man? Can't

answer that, not ever having been a man. Than cooking, or ironing, or scrubbing the kitchen floor? Definitely not. Those tasks are really challenging for me. Compared with them, writing is a breeze. In fact writing is about the only thing I can do without feeling that I ought to rest in bed for a week first, in order to prepare myself for the ordeal.

MAQ: What is your view of the present state of women in Malaysia?

CGE: I think that on the whole, women in Malaysia have very little to complain about. Of course, things could be better. But things can always be better. The important thing is that in Malaysia there are existing laws, institutions, and infrastructure that enable women to make things better for themselves. It's really all up to the women now.

MAQ: Do you think the circumstances of women have changed since independence?

CGE: Definitely. Mind you, I don't come from a traditional family where it was the rule to keep women at home chained to the kitchen sink. My mother before she died was a schoolteacher, as were most of her sisters. But the most they could be were primary schoolteachers. When I left school the only options open for girls from middle-class families were teaching, nursing and secretarial or clerical work. Women doctors were rare, and women engineers and lawyers were unheard of. What more need I say?

MAQ: Literature certainly doesn't enjoy the kind of popularity in Malaysia as it does in some of the other countries. What are the possible reasons behind this?

CGE: I'm not sure that literature doesn't enjoy the kind of popularity it does in some other countries. There must be a reason for the continued existence and growth of bookshops selling English, Malay and Chinese literature books. Maybe literature in English, and particularly local literature in English, doesn't, but we are talking of a very small market potential. Even in this small segment, I'm amazed at the number of young lawyers and engineers who choose not to work in the fields they are trained for, and instead take the less rewarding path of becoming dramatists, journalists, poets, and short story writers. Nevertheless it is true that literary matters do not figure much in conversations over dinner and coffee. I believe this has to do with the decision made in the 1980s to turn the country into a commercial enterprise (Malaysia Incorporated). Art, history and literature then fell to the bottom of the list of educational priorities. Maybe they came to be seen as unnecessary evils; unnecessary because they don't contribute to the national effort of making money, and evils because such subjects turn obedient citizens into questioning individuals. This must be the reason, because even today, if I am not mistaken, philosophy is not offered as a course in any local university. Yet we want to be recognised by the world as a "developed" country by the year 2020! So, if the lack of interest in literature in this country is real and not merely apparent, it is a reflection of the intellectual horizons of those we vote into power, which of course is in turn a reflection of the intellectual horizons of the people who vote them into power. And so it goes on.

MAQ: What measures could be taken to improve the image/ circumstance of literature in the country?

CGE: I don't think much can be done unless and until there is a sudden realisation that it is not the number of people who own cellphones and personal computers that make a nation developed, but the number of people who can hold their own in the international community of the intelligent, the intellectual, and the cultured. Can we make that moment of realisation happen? Maybe, but it will take political will. And if there is political will, the first thing that has to be done is to stop all this squabbling over languages and whether a literature is "national" or "sectional," and start translating all the literature available in Malaysia into all the languages spoken, written, and read in Malaysia. Maybe after that is done, we can take a leaf out of the Malaysia Incorporated book: declare a Malaysian Literature Incorporated; treat literature as a preferred commodity with export potential; make the production, marketing and consumption of literature profitable, and then market it as an aspect of the tourist industry.

MAQ: What are you working on now? When can we expect your new work to come out?

CGE: I am currently working on a doctoral thesis, and it's taking up all my time and nervous energy. Until it is done and submitted, I can't really think about anything else. But I know my creative self is suffering, because recently I've been having dreams in which I have to protect an infant or occasionally a little girl from threatening situations; and I think – I know – that that child is me.