

DAYS OF YORE, DAYS OF CHANGE – AN INTERVIEW WITH MALAYSIAN AUTHOR CHUAH GUAT ENG

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About the Interviewer

Wai Chew Sim obtained his BA (Honours, first class) from the University of East Anglia, UK, and his PhD from the University of Warwick, UK. He has published several books on British-Asian/Postcolonial cultural production. He is currently working on a book comparing Singapore English- and Chinese-language fiction. His fiction has appeared in the *Straits Times* (Singapore), the *Silverfish* new writing series (Malaysia), and the journals/e-zines: *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writings*, *EnterText*, *Julie Mango*, *Asiatic*, and *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*. He has research interests in Postcolonial Literature and Theory with a special focus on Southeast Asian writing.

About the Interviewee

Chuah Guat Eng became one of the first Malaysian women writing in English to publish a novel when *Echoes of Silence* appeared in 1994. Her other works of fiction include a second novel, *Days of Change* (2010), and three collections of short stories: *Dream Stuff* (2014), *The Old House and Other Stories* (2008) and *Tales from the Baram River* (2001). Some of her short stories have been translated into Malay, Chinese, Spanish and Slovene. She read English literature at University of Malaya Kuala Lumpur in the 1960s and German literature at Ludwig-Maximilian University Munich in the early 1970s. She has a PhD from Universiti Kebangsaan (National University) Malaysia for her thesis, *From Conflict to Insight: A Zen-based Reading Procedure for the Analysis of Fiction* (2008), was Research Fellow at Universiti Putra Malaysia from 2011 to 2013, and is currently working on her third novel.

Author's Note

The following interview was conducted by email after an initial informal meeting with the author in Kuala Lumpur in May 2013. The replies were received in July 2013.

Wai Chew Sim (WCS): Let's start with your background. When were you born? What kind of upbringing did you have?

Chuah Guat Eng (CGE): I was born in 1943 in Rembau, a small town in Negeri Sembilan. My English-educated father was a minor government clerk, working first for the Malayan Railway and then for the Port Authority in Port Swettenham (now Port Klang). My mother, also English-educated and a schoolteacher, died when I was three, leaving my father with five children, the eldest 10 and the youngest hardly a year old. I was sent away to be looked after by my father's aunt, in a huge house where I was the only child. Two servants took turns to look after me, but I don't remember anyone talking much to me. When I went back to my own family a while later, my father's brother had moved in with his family so that my aunt could look after us. But some time before I started going to school, at the age of six, they moved out and my father remarried. My stepmother, a widow with two daughters of her own, was not kind to us, her stepchildren, whom she treated very much like unpaid servants. We weren't allowed to talk about our mother and we weren't allowed to get close to one another because when we did, we spoke in English, which she didn't understand. Moments of closeness with my father and my siblings were stolen moments. It's difficult for me even now to talk about these things because the experience was quite traumatic.

WCS: When did you first begin writing fiction? What made you embark on the enterprise?

CGE: It seems to me like I've been writing stories as soon as I learned to write. In my very first year in primary school, we had to write diary entries, and since my home life was rather miserable, all my entries were fictions – not just fictionalized reality, but fictions. I tried writing my first story when I was about 9 or 10, but didn't get very far. I got bored with it, I think, because I didn't understand the importance of plot. The first story I sold was about an aboriginal boy, told off the cuff in class when I was 12. Some years later I wrote it up as a short radio play, sent it to the Education section of Radio Malaya (as it was then) and was paid 30 Malayan dollars – a grand sum for a teenager in those days. The next story I sold was in the mid-1970s, when I was paid 200 Malaysian dollars by *Her World*, a women's magazine. Another story, written in the late 1970s or early 1980s was read on a story-telling program on the English service of Radio Malaysia.

I'd always known that I would write, and was always planning to save up enough so that I could take time off work to do it. What got me writing seriously and consistently was the Shell-NST English Short Story Writing Competition in 1992. That year, the competition was run in such a way that the shortlisted entries were published as and when they were received, that is, while the competition was still on. After reading the first few entries, I thought I would have a go. So I sat down to

write, giving myself a target of one short story per week. All the four stories I sent in were shortlisted and published. I didn't win any prizes, but I didn't care. What was important to me was that I had proven to myself that if I wanted to, I could make myself write one short story a week. In a way, I made use of the competition to conduct my own short story writing lab.

Somehow, that concentrated foray into literary writing got my creative juices churning, and the idea of a novel that I had been carting around in my head since the 1970s began to take shape and to haunt me. In 1994, I turned 50 and was allowed to take out part of my Employee Provident Fund savings. Able to live for a few months without having to do commercial work, I wrote and published *Echoes of Silence*.

WCS: Can you describe some of your formative experiences?

CGE: I assume you're referring to the experiences that made me become a writer and influence my writing. I think my less-than-happy childhood had a lot to do with it. Whereas my elder siblings would occasionally rebel, causing a great deal of upheaval which I could see made my father extremely unhappy and guilty about having chosen the wrong stepmother for us, I retreated into myself. I escaped into the worlds of books; fortunately, my father was an avid reader so there were lots of books at home. To turn my mind off unpleasant episodes, I worked on all kinds of puzzles – mechanical, logical, mathematical, and finally cryptic crossword puzzles – because to solve them one had to concentrate. I escaped into school, where most of my closest friends were non-Chinese. And then, of course, I escaped into the worlds created by my imagination; I wrote stories.

WCS: You spent a considerable portion of your working life in the corporate world, specializing, I understand, in marketing and communications. How was that like? Does the experience affect your creative outlook or practice?

CGE: I liked the work but not the petty politics and backstabbing that tend to come with corporate life. I've written about the darker side of corporate life in my short story, "The Power of Advertising," and won't go into it here. I was in full-time employment for only seven years, two of which were spent in Sarawak Shell Berhad. The rest of the time, I earned my living as a freelance consultant.

It has been said about the advertising business that it offers many opportunities to learn but no one has the time to teach; and I must say I learned a great deal about the discipline, art, and craft of writing. I learned the importance of meeting deadlines, the structuring of time, the pointlessness of waiting for inspiration, and the sheer doggedness of writing even when I didn't feel like writing. I learned how to write to draw my readers in, to engage them and hold their attention with the

charm of the human voice, to make every word count, to communicate and inform, and not to show off. I also learned the technical aspects of producing a book: reader-friendly fonts and spacing, page layouts, paper choices, different types of binding and so on. The technical aspects were particularly useful when I decided to self-publish because in 1994, local publishers were not interested in novels and foreign publishers wanted me to change my story (in other words, self-exoticize) in order to appeal to western readers.

WCS: One of the highlights of your first novel, *Echoes of Silence*, is its adroit use of the detective narrative form. Why did you choose this genre?

CGE: The main reason was that for many years – perhaps as part of my puzzle-solving passion – I was an avid reader of detective novels. I knew quite a bit about the genre, its structure, plot, and narrative devices; and I thought it might be fun to create and solve my own murder mystery.

WCS: Some readers may feel that Ai Lian, the protagonist of *Echoes of Silence*, is a kind of authorial mouthpiece. Is that an accurate description?

CGE: No, not at all. Ai Lian's character grew out of my need to understand the motivations of English-educated, non-Malay (specifically Chinese) Malaysians who chose to emigrate after the 1969 riots, but who returned during the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the Malaysian economy was doing well and there were opportunities for them to make money or promote their products and services in one way or another. Then they would claim not only to be Malaysian, and also to love Malaysia deeply. Yet at the same time, some of them had been and continued to be extremely critical of the country, often voicing their discontent in international media (e.g. academic journals). Generally their criticisms were aimed at the New Economic Policy, the National Language Policy, and the National Literature Policy, which they tended to view as evidence of Malay economic, political, and cultural hegemony.

Their actions struck me as being opportunistic and cynical. To try and understand this lack of commitment, I created a character called Lim Ai Lian more or less in their image, and let her loose in my fictional world. In the process of this exploration of a particular mindset, I deconstructed a number of myths that have colonized the minds of many Malaysians and ex-Malaysians, myths inherited from both colonial and post-colonial times, and of course, my own perceptions and prejudices about people like Ai Lian.

I should add: I was extremely conscious of keeping myself and my ancestral and family background out of Ai Lian's narrative, so much so that, before starting on the novel, I wrote a long-ish short story based on my childhood experiences and the stories told about various members of my extended, culturally assimilated

family, and then set it aside. I suppose it was an exercise in what Edmund Husserl might have called “bracketing.”

WCS: You have a wonderfully evocative setting in *Echoes of Silence*, a small town called Ulu Banir. Is it based on any particular place? How did the idea for it come about?

CGE: Ulu Banir is purely imaginary. I locate it somewhere in the north of Perak state because I wanted a place remote enough for it to be plausible that a rubber and oil palm plantation could still be partly owned and mainly run by a British family in the 1970s; but the geographical layout of the district is typical of just about any district in more or less rural Malaysia.

As I mention in the Author’s Note, there is a small town called Pekan Banir somewhere in the southern part of Perak state, where my father was station master sometime during the Japanese Occupation. From my elder brother’s accounts of their life there, it seemed to me like an island of simple, idyllic tranquility in a sea of war. But the presence of the war was always there. My father told of how he occasionally would find some jungle game meat outside the front door, left there by the resistance fighters in return for the government-issue stationery he had left out for them as his contribution to the Anti-Japanese resistance effort. Insignificant though his contribution may seem now, it wasn’t in those days. Theft, however minor, was punishable by incarceration and even torture (see my short story “Seventh Uncle” in *The Old House and Other Stories*), and paper was an item vital to the resistance fighters hiding in isolated pockets of the jungle.

As the name of my fictional representation of a typical Malaysian society, the name Ulu Banir was particularly meaningful to me because *banir* is the Malay word for “buttress root” and *ulu* means the “source” or upper reaches of a river. The name evokes for me an image of the banyan tree, which is held up not by a single, grounded root, but by multiple roots growing down from the branches. If one were to interpret this image as a symbol of Malaysia, then I suppose the name Ulu Banir may be regarded as an affirmation of the multi- and inter-ethnic origins and nature of the nation. It is, if you like, an indirect, authorial critique not only of the prevailing Malay-centric ideology of nation but also of Ai Lian’s unquestioning acceptance of that ideology, which is implicit in her sense of not belonging. You may have noticed that one of Ai Lian’s defining features is her English-educated, Anglophile ignorance of the country, its people, and its history.

WCS: Why do you use the title, *Echoes of Silence*?

CGE: The title came to me only after the first draft of the novel was completed, and after a whole weekend of contemplation, trying to answer the question, “Guat, what exactly is this novel about?” While writing the novel, my working title was “The

Second Mrs. Templeton,” which may give you an idea of what I started off to do – a murder mystery with a romance that by the way takes a critical look at Malaysians with a colonial mindset. But by the end of it, I knew that something rather different had emerged. After my weekend of brooding, I realized that a major theme running through the novel is the tendency in Malaysian society to misinform, disinform, or simply withhold information about matters of crucial importance. In the novel, different forms of silence and silencing – and their psychological and social impact – are made manifest in the depiction of human relationships, regulatory systems such as traditional customs and modern law and justice, and received knowledge such as family, communal and national histories. Since my article on the novel’s problematization of traditional, political, and legislated silences in relation to miscarriages of justice in Malaysia has been published, I shall not elaborate on it here (see references below).

WCS: What inspired you to write the story of Hafiz in your second novel, *Days of Change*? Were you concerned that, in telling his story, you might be accused of cultural and-or religious encroachment?

CGE: The main reason was that towards the end of *Echoes of Silence*, the murderer makes a confession in the presence of Hafiz, who was once a police officer and also a lawyer; and because the wrongdoer is not brought to justice, it places Hafiz in a difficult moral, legal, and religious dilemma, which I felt needed resolving. The other reason was that – and I don’t know whether it happens with other writers – I sort of fell in love with him. I was intrigued by this gentleman of few words who had somehow taken shape in my imagination and my fictional world, and I wanted to know more about him.

The issue of cultural and religious encroachment was a matter of great concern, because I was crossing all kinds of borders – gender, ethnicity, culture and religion, just to name a few. The crossings were particularly challenging because Hafiz was going to be a first-person narrator. At the same time, I felt that if Malaysian writers, especially those writing in English, do not take up such challenges, their writings would always be ethnocentric and limited by their communal horizons. I had to do a lot of research, mainly on Islam but also on life in a small kampung and how Malay men like Hafiz are likely to think and feel about all sorts of everyday things. This is one of the reasons why the novel took so long to conceive and write. I started on it in 1995, almost as soon as I had written *Echoes of Silence*, but did not finish it until 2010, when it finally got published.

WCS: You use an intriguing method to organize the material in *Days of Change*. Hafiz’s tale is set down in several notebooks, in what appears as diary-style entries. But the occasion for each entry is an oracle taken from the *I Ching* or Chinese

“Book of Changes,” a device that he uses to jog his memory as he tries to recover from memory loss. Why do you use this method?

CGE: It was quite by chance that, when I first started thinking about a sequel to *Echoes of Silence*, my eyes lighted on a popular translation of the *I Ching*, which my daughter had left behind and which had been sitting on the shelf unopened for I can't remember how many years. Intrigued by it, I began to play with its method of divination, using three coins. To my delight, I found that the passages triggered my imagination and suggested ideas for episodes for the incipient novel. I began a search for other translations of the *I Ching*, and was told by a Chinese scholar that the most authoritative is Richard Wilhelm's translation, with an Introduction by C. G. Jung. That became my source.

At about the same time, I received an email from someone I thought of as a particularly dear friend, accusing me of having gone round declaring that her autobiography was based on untruths. That took me aback because not only had I not said anything of the sort but also because I couldn't have said it, having known her only while we were at university. The incident made me aware of the fictionality of autobiographies; as I said to her in reply, she of all people should know that the very selection of episodes to write about constitutes an untruthful act, however unintended. That was how the idea of structuring the novel as a series of diary entries and therefore a proto-autobiography came about. That Hafiz should lose his memory and then have to use the *I Ching* to recover what he thinks of as real events, but in fact may not be, gives the narrative its metafictional aspect. The irony, which non-Muslim readers may miss, is that as a proper noun “Hafiz” means “the preserver” and as a common noun, it refers to someone who has the ability to memorize and recite the Quran from beginning to end.

Going back to your previous question about cultural encroachment, I was in two minds about whether to include the *I Ching* passages in the final published version. I finally decided to retain them as epigraphs to the chapters or “days,” for two reasons. First, their presence serves as a reminder of the similarities between the way we create literary fiction and the way we create purportedly fact-based autobiographies and histories. Secondly, as you may know, in Malaysia, the common perception of the Chinese is that they are so successful when compared to the other ethnic groups because they lack moral scruples. I hoped, by including the *I Ching* passages, to draw attention to the moral principles underlying traditional Chinese approaches to decision-making.

WCS: Several of your short stories describe encounters which trigger reminiscences, sometimes unwanted or suppressed.¹ Reflections and recollections are also important leitmotifs in your longer works. Do you attach any special significance to personal and-or collective memory?

CGE: In a sense, most fictional narratives are (or purport to be) reflections and recollections. However, my brief account of the emotional difficulties of my childhood would give you an idea of why unwanted and repressed memories are such an important part of my stories. Like Hafiz in *Days of Change*, I am lumbered with a highly retentive memory. I remember things that happened to me before my mother died, when I was a toddler. Like Hafiz, too, I sometimes wonder if the memories are based on reality or dreams (although I remember certain dreams I had as a child), or falsely conjured up by my imagination.

My study of Mahayana (Zen) theory of the mind, as well as the findings of modern-day psychologists and neuroscientists about false memory, has heightened my interest in memory and how it works. I am particularly interested in the relationship between language, fiction, and the formation of folk memory; for instance, the way stories of the origin of a community are constructed and handed down as historical facts, which then influence the way a whole community, or tribe, or nation looks at itself, conducts itself in crises, and plans for the future.

WCS: I understand you've started working on a third novel, and that it will tell the story of Anna Templeton, who is related to the narrators of your first two books. What is the third novel about? Do you have a title yet?

CGE: I can't tell you anything about it because I'm extremely conscious of the danger of talking a project out of existence. A novel in progress is like a baby in the womb. Expose it to the world before its time, and it will die. Besides, I don't know myself how it will turn out.

WCS: Did you envisage that you would write what amounts to a family saga when you set out on *Echoes of Silence*?

CGE: No, not when I first set out to write it. The idea began to develop when I realized that in the process of writing, the diamond necklace, which began simply as a piece of evidence in a murder mystery, had grown into something of a symbol. For the narrator, Ai Lian, it is first a "token of love," then "a touchstone of truth," and finally a "cornerstone of learning." Re-reading my first draft, I realized that somehow the necklace had become connected to the *Diamond Sutra*, the source of my epigraph, perhaps the result of my having read somewhere that the Buddha's teachings are called *sutra* (literally "silk") because they are likened to silken strings from which hang jewels of wisdom. The playful idea then came to me that in my fictional world of Ulu Banir, whoever happens to be in possession of the diamond necklace would be compelled to search for truth or enlightenment, and thus be the narrator of the next novel.

WCS: What do your readers say about your work? Can you share some of their responses or feedback? What is your favorite (and least favorite) response?

CGE: Generally, I've had very positive responses from readers. Reviewers have noted the "lucid" and "lyrical" prose, the "unputdownable" quality of the narration, and the "sensitivity" with which I portray characters of the various ethnicities. Ordinary readers have written to me to tell me how much they enjoy my stories, which evoke memories of their own experiences. Many have been inspired to tell me about their own families' skeletons in the cupboard after reading *Echoes of Silence*. British readers, especially those who have spent time in this part of the world during colonial times, appreciate the authenticity of my depiction of life among the colonials in *Echoes of Silence*. And, gratifyingly, many Malay-Muslim men and women, among them poets and novelists, have taken the trouble to tell me that I had managed to capture the "soul of the Malay" in my portrayals of Yusuf in *Echoes of Silence* and Hafiz in *Days of Change*.

My severest critics are those literary scholars who judge my writings by their predetermined theories and concepts of either the ideal or the real. One scholar felt I wasn't "Feminist" enough because the women in my short stories depend too much on men to help them assert themselves and get on in the world, forgetting that I am writing about the reality of the world outside the Ivory Tower of Academe. One scholar found fault with the absence of Malaysianisms in Puteh's use of English (in *Echoes of Silence*), ignoring the literary fact that Puteh's narrative is re-narrated to the reader by Ai Lian, the Anglophile, as well as the historical fact that Puteh is the English-educated daughter of a Chinese tin magnate in British Malaya and English speakers of that generation (including my parents and aunts) always speak "proper" English; they wouldn't know how to speak "Malaysian English" even if they tried. One scholarly reviewer of *Days of Change* questioned the realistic possibility of Hafiz, an amnesiac, being able to remember so much and in such great detail. I had to laugh when I read this remark because in the novel, I had Hafiz commenting on how one of the minor characters had assumed that amnesia means the loss not just of memories but indeed of the very faculty of remembering. I suspect the scholar missed the main point of the novel, which is that there is such a thing as "false memories," the existence of which has been proven by psychologists and neuroscientists. At the other extreme is the scholar who found *Days of Change* too realistic because he thought the novel ended with too many loose ends left untied!

WCS: Do the responses of readers and critics impact your subsequent work or decision making?

CGE: Not in the least. It's always nice to read complimentary reviews, and amusing to read uncomplimentary ones, but I write what my heart tells me, not what I think people will like or approve of. And I most definitely do not write fiction with the

aim of propounding or propagating questionable theories of empirical reality or literary “realism.”

WCS: You obtained a PhD in English in 2008, and you recently completed a postdoctoral fellowship at Universiti Putra Malaysia. Can you describe some of your critical-scholarly work? What are your research goals or agenda?

CGE: The title of my doctoral thesis is *From Conflict to Insight: A Zen-based Reading Procedure for the Analysis of Fiction*. Essentially, I have used Zen critiques of perception and language as reliable means of knowledge as a theoretical framework and borrowed three Zen insight-promoting analytical tools to develop a multiple-reading procedure that systematically forces the reader to analyze, deconstruct, and validate the perceptions formed during the reading of a fictional text. The goal is to release the text from the bondage of the reader’s interpretations based on preconceived theories and values, and allow the text to speak for itself.

The two-year postdoctoral fellowship enabled me to apply the Zen-based reading procedure in a research project aimed at developing a sociology-of-literature approach to the analysis of Malaysian novels in English. The broad aim of the project is to examine how social, political, institutional and traditional structures peculiar to ethnically diverse Malaysia find expression in the novels. The more specific aim is to gain insight into the philosophical underpinnings embedded in the novels’ narrative strategies. This aim marks a radical departure from the more usual critical practice of using theoretical frameworks derived from (predominantly western) discourses on postcolonialism, class, gender, literature and so on. A sampling of my studies of Malaysian novels in English include a study of the treatment of ancestral homelands, an updated and non-ethnocentric survey of the portrayal of Malay characters, an analysis of the depiction of moral universes in three crime novels, and the deployment of Indian theories and art of fiction by three novelists of non-Indian descent.

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“The Art of Fiction: Indian Diaspora’s Gift to Malaysian Fiction-writing Descendants of Other Diasporas.” *Diaspora Studies* 7.1 (2014): 18-27. [Interviewer’s note: this essay was under consideration at the time of the interview in July 2013. It has since been accepted and published.]

WCS: Some critics lament that English-language writing is considered “sectional” writing in Malaysia, as opposed to “national literature,” a term reserved for Malay-language writing. What are your views on this issue?

CGE: To be honest, I can’t see what all the fuss is about. In the broad scheme of things, all writings are always “sectional,” even so-called world best-sellers. And for me personally, the term “national literature” simply evokes thoughts of the kind of literature promoted in Hitler’s Germany, Stalin’s Russia, and Maoist China. However, if critics want to make an issue of the “national literature” policy, they should see it in its historical context.

The ruling was first announced in 1970 or 1971, when all over the world, the discourse on nation was dominated by the idea that a nation’s identity is defined by its language; and at the time of Independence in 1957 and the formation of Malaysia in 1963, it was agreed that Malay, the lingua franca of the region, would be the national language. The announcement and implementation of the literature policy so soon after the 1969 inter-ethnic riots undoubtedly contributed to the notion held by its critics that it is motivated by Malay ethnocentric chauvinism or hegemony. But it is in fact a language-centered policy, aimed at promoting a sense of national identity. Malay-language works by non-Malays are considered “national literature” and English-language works by Malays are considered “sectional literature.” And that’s the sum of it.

WCS: What are your views on the current political situation in Malaysia? Is there a need for further political or electoral reform?

CGE: In terms of political awareness and engagement, I think Malaysians have reached a new level of maturity. Never before has there been so much public discussion of what used to be considered “sensitive” or taboo subjects. Obviously there is a need for further political and electoral reform. More importantly, there has to be a mindset change. Above all, the feudalistic attitudes and tendencies among both politicians and the electorate must be rooted out.

WCS: What is the role of fiction in modern life? What does the writing life mean to you?

CGE: I suppose fiction will continue to play the role it has always played in human life: as a source of entertainment, escape, moral lessons, imaginative understanding of the inner life of people whose experiences are remote from our own, and fresh insights or new ways of looking at old problems.

As someone with little practical intelligence, writing is about the only thing I can do with some degree of competence and self-confidence. I tend to be skeptical of polemical and theoretical approaches to problems, and telling stories allows me to explore real-life problems by imagining what it's like to be the person or persons caught in the causes and effects of the problem. The compulsion to write is my reason for getting up in the morning and it helps me to structure my time. Since I don't write in order to become famous or to get rich, I don't worry about winning awards and selling lots of books. Writing means that, unlike my parents who were prevented – one by an early death and the other by my divide-and-rule stepmother – from giving me an insight into their inner lives, I am leaving something of my thoughts and dreams to my children and grandchildren, should they ever feel the desire to read my books.

WCS: What advice would you give aspiring writers or artists?

CGE: I have only one piece of advice. Write (or paint or sculpt or whatever). Don't talk about wanting to write, don't talk about writing, and don't talk about what you want to write about. Just write.

Notes

1. *The Old House and Other Stories*. Kuala Lumpur: Holograms, 2008.