

Han Suyin

Between Two Worlds

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Introduction

Han Suyin's writing is based on two things: The interior conflict she experienced as a Eurasian, a conflict which continued until her meeting with Ian Morrison in Hong Kong at the age of 32, and China. Han Suyin's successes and failures, dreams and sins, grew out of and evolved around China.

Han Suyin was born Chou Kuang Hu in 1917, in a town along the Lunhai Railway. She was the third child of Chou Yentung, a Chinese railway engineer, and Marguerite Denis, a Belgian woman. Her birth followed close upon the death of the second son, Hailan (Sea Orchid), who was refused attendance by a French doctor because of his Asian heritage. Marguerite, shaken by the loss of Hailan, refused even to look at her daughter for a whole week. Later, she would tell Han Suyin how upset she had been by her daughter's birth, and how she never forgave Han Suyin for having taken Hailan's place. ⁽¹⁾

There is a photograph of the family in 1928 when Han Suyin was 11 years old. Marian, the youngest child, sits between her parents. Han Suyin stands besides her father, Tiza [Hsuelan (Snow Orchid); Suchen in *A Many-Splendoured Thing*] beside her mother, Tzechun (Son of Spring), the first son stands behind the group, a tall boy and the most European-looking of the four children. Tiza, the beautiful younger sister, has the plump, round cheeks of her father, while Han Suyin's thin, triangular face is obviously inherited from her mother. The strong physical resemblance between mother and daughter may have displeased

Marguerite, if indeed she did not love Han Suyin as much as she loved Tiza.⁽²⁾ No hint of discord shows in the photograph, however. It is a portrait of a happy, modern, middle-class family, a beautiful family of Chinese-European descent.

It was a while before Han Suyin would write about her family, however. Her first novel, *Destination Chungking*, was a product of the enthusiasm of Marian Manly, a missionary doctor who collaborated in the writing.⁽³⁾ Her second work, *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, was as fortuitous as the first.⁽⁴⁾ In fact, Han Suyin had no consciousness of herself as a writer, even after the publication of her second book. It was not until many years later that she decided to write the saga of her father, her mother, and China during the most turbulent period in its modern history. The story of the Chous, including Han Suyin herself, was inseparable from the history of China and its contact with the West.

Although Han Suyin's experience of being raised in a multicultural environment was unusual and extraordinary in a sense, it was not unlike the experience of other Asians of her time. Contact with the West was and is just as laden with pain for full-blooded Asians as for Han Suyin. The people of modern Asia are all brought up between two worlds, split and two-layered. We are intellectual Eurasians. Our attitude toward the West is ambiguous: we admire it for its technological prowess while we resent it for its chauvinism. In that sense, Han Suyin's experience of being torn between East and West symbolizes that of Asia although in a more personal and acute form.

This paper discusses two contexts in which Han Suyin found herself poised between East and West: in her family, and in Hong Kong, between 1949 and 1950. It describes her struggle to exist between the two worlds and the process by which she came to accept herself as a whole person.

I. A Family Portrait

(1) The Parents

In Han Suyin's earliest conscious recollection of her mother, she is sitting crouched over a table. "I could still hear the rustle of the sheets she stirred," Han Suyin wrote. Marguerite Denis was a persistent letter writer, sending reams of correspondence from China to her parents in Europe. Marguerite's family had trunkful of letters covering the whole of her life in China, from 1913 until her father died in 1940. But Tzechun, who was back in Europe in 1938, took possession of the trunk and burned its contents, except for one scrap. ⁽⁵⁾

Contrary to Marguerite, who was always voicing her feelings and trials, Han Suyin's father, Chou Yentung, was a silent man. Marguerite called him Le Muet, the Dump One. As a child Han Suyin felt suffocated by her father's silence. She wrote, "This enormous silence of his was my chief torment when I yearned to love him, and he was ungettable, in muteness shrouded, preserved from us, his all-too-vigorous, savage, alien offspring."

In 1955, however, Yentung broke his silence to write the story of his life. It was his third autobiographical account. The first two, composed between 1951 and 1954, were the simple chronologies required of everyone employed by the Communist government. The third account, more detailed and personal, was written for himself. "As one looks back after a long and terrible ascent at the slopes left behind... so much I look at myself, whole, in the clear light of spring that has come," Yentung wrote.

In addition, Han Suyin also discovered that this silent man had written voluminous letters to his brother back in Szechuan, in which he recorded all that he withheld from his children. ⁽⁶⁾ These letters provided some of the material for Han suyin's first autobiographical story, *The Crippled Tree*.

Yentung was from Chendu, Szechuan. The Chou family elders were proponents of the "new learning", and decided it would be in the family's best interest to send its young abroad. So in 1904, Yentung was sent to Belgium to study science. ⁽⁷⁾

At the time, Szechuan was embroiled in anti-missionary uprisings, and Yentung's grandfather, the head of a big Hakka family, wrote shrewdly, "If your son becomes a Christian, kill him, for he will desecrate." When Yentung left Szechuan, his mother made him swear that he would never become converted to the Christian religion. But nine years later he brought home a Catholic wife, and all his children became Catholics. ⁽⁸⁾

Before his journey to Europe Yentung was a faceless member of the Chou clan, constrained by his classical education. Yet Han Suyin suspected that for all the conventional sorrow her father displayed at his family, he was happy and excited at heart. ⁽⁹⁾ Yentung was to use his freedom, and pay for the exercise of it, all his life.

Of his first encounter with his wife, Yentung wrote, "I met her at the cheese market at Ixelles on a morning... There stood Marguerite, looking at the holes in a Gruyere. I looked at her, and I was in love." Thus began the complex love affair of lifetime. It is amazing that this provincial young man who was supposedly bound by Confucian ethics proved capable of such ardent love.

"Marguerite broke the fences within which my emotions paced staidly the run of conventional poetry, of expected sensation. From that time I was to learn the whole world anew, beginning that morning with smell.

From that day the smell of Europe and the smell of Europeans was good to me. Untill then, all other peoples, other than Chinese, stank: milk smelt bad, Europeans smelt of milk and mutton...

It was a late spring, May in the Europe of 1905, bestarred with May blossom, riotous with roses, when I met Marguerite. I had

already become aware of a new vitality, of a longing to pace for hours in the never-ending dusk. Now I saw colours emerge out of the uniform greyness which until then was Europe to me, a range of nuances for which there were no names. That day I walked for hours, and the sun, stretching its finger-point delineation of each stone, produced green mirages as moving as the variegations of jade..."⁽¹⁰⁾

In 1908 Marguerite eloped with Yentung and conceived her first child. The couple got married in June in 1908, and Tzechum, the eldest son was born in October.⁽¹¹⁾ The three of them returned to China in 1913, and Yentung got a job on the Lunhai Railway. Six more children were born along the railway, but only two of them survived.

"Dear Papa, dear Mama,

Today I shall not have time to write you a very long letter, because the bandits were here last night, and the cook has been decapitated. His head is in the garden, so I have shut the window. The little one is crying with prickly heat, but I cannot get any talcum powder so please send me two dozen tins, it is easy to get in England. I have had to give up my corsets too, and you would not recognize me, I drag myself in slippers all day long."

So begins the only letter of Marguerite's that escaped the flames, dated March 17th, but with no year. Han Suyin guessed it was written in 1917 or 1918 because it addressed to Marguerite's parents, then war refugees in England. This whining baby was Han Suyin, perhaps. The letter continues.

"... I cannot stand their laughter any more. They laugh when I cry, they laugh when people are executed, they are not human. I am coming back ... I shall force him to let me leave today, I do not wish to be killed too.

Now they have come for the head, at last, with drummers who are the village rascals beating in front. The widow comes behind lamenting loudly, but I know she does not feel anything because she does not weep; and when she sees me, she stops, stares, puts her

hand to her mouth not to laugh. They are not human, I tell you dear Papa and Mama, and will not stay. As soon as the war is over I shall be back."

"Enough, it is enough. My God, I cannot stand any more. I pack, and I go." This was a formula Marguerite would repeat many times through the years she was in China. And yet she went on living there until 1949.⁽¹²⁾ Marguerite was unable to tear herself away. Nor was leaving a feasible option: in the heat of first passion, Marguerite had given up her Belgian passport and adopted Chinese nationality, telling everybody that she wanted to be a Chinese.⁽¹³⁾

Although Han Suyin wanted to write about her parents' encounter from Marguerite's side as well, she dared not ask her mother for the story directly because of the irreconcilable enmity between them. So Han Suyin's account had to be built upon memories from her childhood and conversations with relatives in Belgium. The following is a part of that narrative:

"I thought he was an Asiatic prince, you see, and that is how it all began, in glory and splendour, a thunder that outthundered my family ... and never will I go back to beg from them, to have them tell me: 'I told you so.' .

I thought he was an Asiatic prince, although now I do not know why I should have thought so. Perhaps reading all those novels. There were many of them, and I read them all. I had nothing to do."⁽¹⁴⁾

Han Suyin described Marguerite as a dour, tragic woman, whose tragedy originated in her own stubbornness and stupidity.⁽¹⁵⁾ Marguerite certainly never did things by halves, and she ignored the set social code among races in Peking, making friends or enemies, according to fancy.⁽¹⁶⁾ Sadly, however, she did not belong no matter what she did. She never learned Chinese properly and she clung to a Western life-style: French school for the children and a long summer vacation at Peitaiho, where the visitors were nearly all Europeans. Yet Marguerite

had to finance all this on her husband's Chinese salary. The family was almost always in financial difficulties.

As a sensitive young girl, Han Suyin also resented her mother's worldliness. Marguerite hoped that her daughters would marry Americans, for instance, remarking, "An American ... you will be at ease then ... Americans are all wealthy." ⁽¹⁷⁾

Marguerite crushed Tzechun's aspiration to learn Chinese and be Chinese. Han Suyin describes a scene on which Marguerite told her son, "Chinese?" she exclaimed, "You will never have a future if you are Chinese... Don't be stupid like your father and go on the railways. There is no future on the railways. You don't need to tell people that you are Chinese; You know English, you've spent four years in England ..."

When Han Suyin protested "We are half-caste ... Eurasians. That's what we are. But I want to be Chinese, like you, like papa," it angered her mother. "... Look at yourself! You will never be Chinese, and let me tell you why: The Chinese will not have you! Never! never! They won't accept you. They will call you 'yang kueitse,' devil from over the ocean, as they call me ..." Han Suyin retorted screaming, "... I hate you. Why don't you go back, why don't you go away where you came from, and leave us in peace ..." ⁽¹⁸⁾

That scene is only one example of the discord between Han Suyin and Marguerite, a discord that was never resolved. In fact, Han Suyin was ashamed of her mother. To her Chinese point of view, every gesture, every move, every word of her mother was wrong, excruciatingly wrong. ⁽¹⁹⁾

Marguerite's flight from China came suddenly. At the end of 1948, in frantic fear of the Communist takeover, Marguerite and Tiza hastily packed up their belongings, flung them into their suitcases, and left their home in Peking. Yentung was left behind, immobilized in bed by a stroke. ⁽²⁰⁾

An account of Marguerite and Tiza's departure from China appears

in *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, although lingering animosity toward her mother kept Han Suyin from mentioning Marguerite by name. The true story was revealed 30 years later in *My House Has Two Doors*: Marguerite was in the bedroom hovering over Tiza's baby, but did not come out. Han Suyin wrote that Marguerite knew she could deal her daughter an underhand blow with a mere cough and a smoothing of the baby's bedclothes.

A Many-Splendoured Thing contains a scene in which Tiza leaves Hong Kong for America in the company of a grinning Cantonese amah who is holding Tiza's baby. It was not an amah, however, it was Marguerite. Han Suyin persistently eliminated her mother from every scene in the book. ^(2 1)

Marguerite died in 1968 and she was buried in a cemetery in Arizona. Despite the Chinese custom of having relatives engrave a message on the tombstone of the deceased, Marguerite's marker bears no words from Han Suyin, even though she paid for the grave. Obstinate Marguerite refused to forgive her eldest daughter, even in death. ^(2 2)

(2) The Brother, Tzechun (George)

Of all the Chou children, Tzechun was the most deeply wounded by his position between East and West. He was the only child to be born in Belgium. Although his parents brought him to China with them, they soon sent him back to his grandparents for safety. It was a few years after the collapse of the Ching Dynasty and the country was still in chaos. When Tzechun returned to China in 1924, he was 16. With the enthusiasm and naivety of a young man, Tzechun was determined to learn Chinese and be Chinese. He came to China innocently, believing himself Chinese, only to discover that he was irrevocably foreign.

Having been brought up in Europe, Tzechun found China horrifying. All around him were beggars, misery, filth, hopelessness, strikes, warlords, and above all, dying. For a while he tried to keep his

picturesque images of Peking alive by taking photographs of old walls and mountains, but eventually he was forced to take refuge in the small world of Eurasians. Yet even this proved unfamiliar territory. He was ignorant of the hierarchy of race in China. As a Eurasian, Tzechun could work for a European firm and secure a higher salary than if he had been all-Chinese. Yet he was caught in the middle: above the Chinese but under the Europeans. Becoming Chinese, on the other hand, seemed to mean becoming one of the faceless crowd he saw around him, bowed with perpetual hunger and misery, or becoming a poor student marching in the streets demanding release from exploitation, only to be shot in the end.

It did not take long for this gifted yet naive young man to change. Not only did he give up the idea of becoming Chinese but he began to revile and hate the Chinese: how stupid, how ignoble and how lazy they were! One day he even beat a rickshaw man with his walking stick for no reason.

Tzechun worked for a European firm for a few years, then went back to Europe to study at the Sorbonne University. His growing estrangement from his mother made leaving easier. Yet he could not sever himself completely from China. Later he came back with his Belgian wife to teach at a Jesuit College in Tientsin as a full professor. But his horizons had narrowed. He and his wife had their own small universe, shut in against all comers. Outside their door they envisioned terrors and evils: his own mother and the Chinese among whom they lived. Tzechun told Han Suyin, then 17 and a college student, that he was going to change his Chinese name to a European name for the sake of the baby that was coming. Yet Han Suyin wrote that in spite of the narrow, restricted life he led, the years between 1932 and 1938 when he lived in Tientsin with his wife were the happiest he ever had. He clung to the memory of that time for the rest of his life.

The most heart-wrenching passage in Han Suyin's family saga

describes her meeting with Tzenchun at the cafe at Montparnasses Station in Paris. It was 1958, during a cold early summer. Han Suyin was already a best-selling author. Tzechun was an 'olding man, very myopic, with a crew-cut and shabby clothes.' He told his sister that he had burned all their mother's letters. "You understand, I never dreamed you would need them, one day ...," he said. They had always loved each other in spite of everyone and everything, but Han Suyin could never understand the closed life he had chosen. His failure was a puzzle to her. ⁽²³⁾

In *The Crippled Tree* Han Suyin merely wrote that she felt irritation and compassion toward her brother. ⁽²⁴⁾ But when she wrote about that encounter again in 1980 in *My House Has Two Doors*, she spoke more frankly about her brother's ruined life. Tzechun, wrote Han Suyin, had sacrificed everything - his career as well as chance for further study - because of his wife's insanity. He brought up his two sons and adopted daughter and insisted he was happy. Han Suyin wrote about her parting from Tzechun after the three days they spent together as follows:

"And sitting there, in the soiled, greasy air of the hotel cafe, I know we would be leaving each other, we were rapidly getting so far apart, receding from each other even as we promised to keep in touch, even though he said, 'I have loved you so much, sister.' I gave him all my royalties from the first French edition of *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, I do not remember how much it was, and we spent two more days together, and I was fighting against a bone-melting compassion; for he sucked my hard-gained strength from me, and I had to discard pity and go on with tough bones." ⁽²⁵⁾

Tzechun said, "We understand each other," but in 1958 he did not know what his sister was capable of. ⁽²⁶⁾

(3) The Sister, Suchen (Tiza)

From childhood through adolescence Han Suyin had the pain of

being told repeatedly that she was ugly. It was many years before she realized that her ugliness was only in the eye of Marguerite, her mother. At the same time that Marguerite that called Han Suyin ugly, she called Tiza pretty, beautiful and good. Even Yentung felt that his first daughter was shallow and highly temperamental, always changing her mind, but that his second daughter was much like a Chinese woman - quiet and subdued, affectionate and devoted.⁽²⁷⁾ Han Suyin was jealous of Tiza's looks and Marguerite's doting attention. Tiza made her life miserable.

Right after she arrived in Hong Kong from London to work as a physician, Han Suyin received letters from Tiza, incoherent but obviously demanding help. Tiza had escaped Peking but could only go as far as Chungking, Szechuan, where she sought refuge with her third uncle. In order to get to Hong Kong, Tiza and her baby desperately needed Han Suyin's guarantee. Han Suyin returned to Chungking for a short while to help out.

It was September 1949, a month before the Communist takeover. Whereas in Hong Kong Han Suyin had seen a flood of refugees, in Chungking she saw people staying on and waiting, for unswerving destiny to perform its task. Despite the rampant vice and corruption, people were not leaving. The third uncle, a successful Szechuan business man, quietly told Han Suyin that Szechuan was "talking," meaning that negotiations were in process for the peaceful takeover of the province by the Communists. The uncle's family would lose all they owned, yet they would not leave the country. China was the only world they knew. Han Suyin described her uncle and aunt seeing her off for Hong Kong with "I shall always remember Uncle and Aunt standing there, smiling a little sadly, making no gesture, just looking at me with gently sad eyes ... They were trees, deep-rooted, not to be torn away," even in the cataclysm. They belonged to China.

Tiza, however, did not belong. Until then oddly enough, Han Suyin

had failed to understand that America, which was the goal of so many refugees in Hong Kong, was also the goal for her sister. Tiza was vulnerable and un-Chinese, although in a non-European fashion. As she pondered what made a person belong or not belong to China, Han Suyin described a symbolic difference between Tiza and herself.

“And this strong, terribly alive China was to her unreal and faraway... When I saw with a passionate lift of the heart the ecstasy of the monotonous river, she saw how muddy it was, how inconveniently wide. When I knew the sullen waiting, the silent corner lounging, of all the people around me, waiting for Destiny, and not a word spoken, she saw only the danger and the dirt.”

Han Suyin reflected that to be Chinese, a person must be capable of accepting both sorrowful and joyful experiences on the equal terms. The nervous giggling and laughter that Marguerite had hated so much, Han Suyin saw as form of psychological protection that helped the Chinese maintain mental equilibrium. In a dirty restaurant, a Chinese person, she wrote, would be able to go into a trance over the beautiful calligraphy on the wall and forget the filth and rats on the floor. ⁽²⁸⁾

II. Hong Kong

Han Suyin is much cited in relation to China's repossession of Hong Kong in 1997. In fact no other phrase describes Hong Kong's status better than Han Suyin's oft-quoted ⁽²⁹⁾ “borrowed place - borrowed time.” Although the phrase is best known in the article “Hongkong's Ten Year Miracle,” ⁽³⁰⁾ in which Han Suyin discoursed eloquently on Hong Kong's survival, resilience and destiny, the expression first appeared in *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, published in 1952.

“Humphery [a successful British business man in Hong Kong] knows that no clock can be put back. For the last few months he has stopped wishing for the good old days. He must adapt or perish. He will

adapt ...

The sea - wet rock [Hong Kong], he knows, live on borrowed time ...”⁽³¹⁾ *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, was initially acclaimed as love story. Certainly, Han Suyin's love affair with Ian Morrison (Mark Elliot in the story), a *Times* correspondent, in the cosmopolitan surrounding of Hong Kong made for a piercingly beautiful story. However, the book's greatest appeal now, 40 years after publication, lies in Han Suyin's remarkable insight and foresight regarding the fate of Hong Kong. Although the romantic power of the love story has faded, the people of the city remain ever more vivid and lively to contemporary readers.

Short of food and water, lacking coal, oil and natural resources, Hong Kong's only resource was its people, as Han Suyin was well aware. With a writer's keen eye she observed the many different people who came to Hong Kong at the time of the Nationalist-Communist struggle in China, and wove them into the background of the love story. She devoted many pages to the description of indigenous Chinese, Chinese from Shanghai, and areas from further north, Western businessmen, missionaries, correspondents, and Eurasians like herself, the fusion of East and West. Her accounts and her individual-oriented method of analysis became a resource for later writers on Hong Kong.

In January of 1949 when Han Suyin moved from London to Hong Kong with her daughter Yunmei to work as a physician at the University of Hong Kong, the city had already begun its metamorphosis into a Manhattan of the East.⁽³²⁾ Han Suyin's own metamorphosis was to begin as well. In this urban fusion of East and West, she was able to choose what to do and where to stand. One could even say that the world-renowned writer "Han Suyin" was conceived in and born out of the medical doctor Chou Kuang Hu in Hong Kong.

Han Suyin wrote about Hong Kong in two books: *A Many-Splendoured Thing* in 1952 and *My House Has Two Doors* in 1980. The title of the latter reflects the dualism characteristic of Hong Kong, a

characteristic that made Han Suyin's metaphysical changes possible. As a Eurasian she felt comfortable in Hong Kong, a house with two doors: one for her Chinese identity and the other for her European identity: one opening into China and the other to the outside world.

In 1949 when she first arrived, Hong Kong was awash with missionaries and businessmen who had made the exodus from China. The number of people had grown two and a half times since 1948 and more refugees were arriving every day by train, ship, or on foot across the border from China. That year the total population leapt to a record of two million.⁽³³⁾ Han Suyin marveled at the "close proximity of squalor and wealth, misery and ostentation," remarking with irony that "here at last, within sight, sound and smell of each other, rich man and poor man live, intimate neighbors and brother refugees."⁽³⁴⁾

For the first four months Han Suyin stayed at a church guest house until she moved to the University Hospital as a live-in resident. The guest house was full of missionaries fled from China. Although she was not a missionary she stayed there as a favor and a concession to the medical service which employed her. Han Suyin wrote about the irony of her obscure status: "... my salary is paid at the local Chinese rate since I am Chinese, but I'm living at the guest house on European (or nearly European) standard."

This kind of treatment was not new to her. She had learned about the subtle, well-ordered differences in status and pay among races and even among Eurasians during the two years she had been a secretary at Rockefeller Center in Peking.

In Hong Kong, Han Suyin met more missionaries from China than she had ever known existed.⁽³⁵⁾ Among them was Marian Manly, the missionary doctor who gave Han Suyin midwife training in Chengdu during the war and discover Han Suyin's talent for writing. Although Han Suyin did not mention Marian in *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, she introduced two types of missionaries:

“The first, those that had not been long in China, were still under the spell of their narrow denominational fanaticism. They carried with them a sulphurous aroma of hell fire and damnation to the heathen. They were spiritually intolerant and physically bigoted. They were inclined to gloat over the possibilities of martyrdom and to emphasize the persecutorial element in the pressure against them. But they were few. The larger group was eminently likeable. They had been converted and mellowed to humanity, tolerance and a sense of humour. They had, quietly and without much difficulty, jettisoned the belief in the infallibility of their own salvation, together with the more wrathful aspects of the Deity they professed to love. They were far more interested in the social and practical aspects of Christianity. They were humanists, sociologists, and for them religion became the building of hospitals and schools, the creation of Christian Associations, and picking up abandoned waifs. But they were the ones who were the most hurt, because they had loved their work, and they had been selfless in their devotion to it. ‘What is going to happen to our Christian communities? Many of our Christians seem to have gone over to the new regime, some have not. Will these be persecuted? What is going to happen to our churches, our schools, our hospitals?’ They wanted to help China, and they found that their motives were suspected, and their efforts towards conciliation and understanding misunderstood. They were no longer wanted. China was throwing them out.”

Marian, of course, belonged to the latter group. Ever since childhood, Han Suyin had thought of missionaries as ‘superior persons’ in the Confucian sense. In Hong Kong in 1949, she found to her relief that missionaries of both types were just ordinary people. They were not endowed with any more wisdom, knowledge, or virtue than anyone else, although they were well-meaning, earnest, and hard working. They had been thrown out of China, and they were bewildered, confused, and indignant. ⁽³⁶⁾

Han Suyin's feelings toward missionaries in *A Many-Splendoured Thing* were ambivalent. She readily admitted that they had contributed to the creation of a New China by wearing down the Chinese tradition, awakening social conscience, and building universities and hospitals. Although the Chinese had cast them out as instruments of foreign aggression, it was the missionaries who were largely responsible for social reforms in pre-revolutionary China. Having been educated at a Christian university, Han Suyin herself was no doubt a product of missionary efforts.

Thus, Han Suyin was somewhat sympathetic to the plight of the expelled missionaries, writing in 1950 that she was not ashamed of casting them out --- perhaps it was time they went --- but she was ashamed of the way in which it was done - the political twist ascribed to all missionary intentions, the spite and the hatred and the enforced humiliation.⁽³⁷⁾ On the other hand, Han Suyin showed her resentment toward missionaries by describing their blatant struggle between Christian charity and European bigotry in the overcrowded church guest house.⁽³⁸⁾

As mentioned above, Marian Manly did not appear in *A Many-Splendoured Thing*. Han Suyin did not write of the meeting with her old teacher in Hong Kong until 30 years later in *My House Has Two Doors*.⁽³⁹⁾ It was not a happy reunion. In Chengdu in 1939, Marian had been a vivacious, active, independent, congenial woman who was running a midwifery school with her sister. The two sisters and their parents had worked all their lives in China. There were many such families.⁽⁴⁰⁾

The Marian, in *My House Has Two Doors*, however, was depicted as a hurt and helpless person who wept a great deal. "Marian looked upon the liberation of China with anger, and with frustration, since it had all happened outside. Western missionary effort, and dedicated missionaries like her found themselves suddenly aimless, unwanted,"⁽⁴¹⁾ Han Suyin concluded in an aloof and somewhat unsympathetic tone. Obviously, Han

Suyin was already far ahead of her ex-mentor. She was a qualified physician herself, with a better grasp of China and its people.

The missionary presence in China did have undesirable political overtones. The traders and the missionaries had come together to Asia. To Asian intellectuals, especially Chinese, it seemed that imperialism and cultural exploitation, preaching and robbery, walked in hand in hand. Furthermore, missionaries, particularly Americans, believed in creating an educated Christian Chinese elite which would stand up to "dangerous" currents in China.

Yet Han Suyin's resentment toward missionaries was grounded not only in political considerations but also in the inner struggle she had experienced since childhood over unanswered illogicalities of the catechism.⁽⁴²⁾ As a child, Han Suyin had not yet developed a conscious sense of belonging to China. For the adult Han Suyin, however, that sense of Chinese identity replaced Christianity as her religion.⁽⁴³⁾ In Hong Kong, Han Suyin explained her reason for leaving the church to a Eurasian classmate from the French convent school she had attended in Peking: "I had wanted to be all Chinese, not a counterfeit semi-European, one of the gay, generous people who lived on the brink of the small European circles of Shanghai or Peking, in that curious half-world of concessions and colour bars, a world now dead, like the missions and the superiority of the whites, and many other things."⁽⁴⁴⁾

Another conspicuous refugee group in Hong Kong was the Shanghainese, whose population grew with the intensification of the civil war in China. Even in 1946 the lounges of the Gloucester, Hong Kong and other hotels were crowded at tea time with refugee businessmen from Shanghai.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Tom Wu, to whom Han Suyin attributed the phrase "borrowed place - borrowed time," was one of those refugees. Han Suyin described him as a gourmet but also something of a poet. Ten years after the end of the civil war, Han Suyin was back in Hong Kong to celebrate the Chinese

New Year, gazing at the lights of Hong Kong from the ferry with her friends. That was when Tom Wu described the city as “Prosperous but precarious, energetic on borrowed time in a borrowed place, that is Hong Kong.” Han Suyin went on to write:

“For Hong Kong is dividend-paying, vested parabox, living by the very things which make others die, give up, or move away. Its perilous geography, a perpetual true brinkmanship with little hope of defense, does not allow the cold hand of panic to interfere with busting poetic reality of survival and success. Squeezed between giant antagonists crunching huge bones of contention, Hong Kong has achieved within its own narrow territory a co-existence which is baffling, infuriating, incomprehensible, and works splendidly - on borrowed time in a borrowed place.”⁽⁴⁶⁾

This baffling co-existence was achieved through the refugees who came to Hong Kong for asylum but eventually stayed to create the city. The decision to remain in the colony was not an easy one to make. Han Suyin analyzed the refugee’s state of mind: “Each man, despite his air of belonging, a transient, claiming as his origin a village back in South China, refusing to belong to the Colony, maintaining his status of passer-by even when he works here all his life, even when his children are borne here, sometimes even when he is born here. This is the most permanent fact about the Colony: with few exceptions, those who come regard themselves as on the way to somewhere else.”⁽⁴⁷⁾

Her analysis was backed by the testimony of Tom Wu, who said, “Ten years have passed like a floating dream, and we are still here. The first year we said we could not stand this stuffy provincial little Hong Kong for more than six months, possibly nine, yet here we are, still carrying on.”⁽⁴⁸⁾

Han Suyin was a transient herself, although one moving against the current. She was thinking of going back to China at the end of 1949 when her job in Hong Kong came to an end, and the dust settled in

China. ⁽⁴⁹⁾

Han Suyin's life, however, did not turn out as she had planned. Her calculations were upset by an Australian foreign correspondent named Ian Morrison. George Morrison, Ian's father, had also been a newspaper man, whose dispatches from China had earned him great fame. He had gone on walkabouts and authored a book, *An Australian in China*, that described one journey he took in 1894. Of this ultimate Victorian Han Suyin wrote, "George Morrison had paced the Chinese earth as if it an unkempt property of his, treated all natures with a contempt fortified by his unflinching belief in a Divine Purpose (though he was virulently antimissionary)".

George's son, Ian, did not have his father's rigid sense of "natural order," and he was unsure of the white man's role in Asia. Unlike most foreign correspondents in Hong Kong, Ian's world was not simply divided into the 'Reds' who represented Evil, and Western democracy which stood for Good. ⁽⁵⁰⁾

Ian was also ambivalent about his own role in China. He had been born there, and like many other foreigners, he found it difficult to tear himself away. But he was also well aware that Anglo-Saxons still harbored the illusion that China was a wonderland of hidden wealth and subtle wisdom.

Han Suyin revealed the many facets of her complex identity to Ian. She told him repeatedly that she was Eurasian, yet at the same time she said she was Chinese. ⁽⁵¹⁾ She spoke of how she even felt disregarded as a person. The English of the colonies made being Eurasian seem shameful and inferior, Han Suyin said. To the English, Eurasians seemed highly strung or emotionally unstable, probably because they were seen to have dual characteristics between two worlds. ⁽⁵²⁾

Like many Eurasians, Han Suyin had been embittered by the discrimination she had faced. She had absorbed and digested insults of all kinds developed a cynical strength over the years. ⁽⁵³⁾ But Ian saw

only richness in her. Ian loved the way she was - someone with a dual perspective, belonging to two worlds, possessing many different personalities. ⁽⁵⁴⁾ For Ian, Han Suyin was genuinely exceptional. With Ian's support, Han Suyin came to conclude that being Eurasian was not a fact of birth but a state of mind, a mind-set created by false values, prejudice, ignorance, and the evils of colonials. ⁽⁵⁵⁾ Gradually, she began to feel more positive about herself, and eventually she told herself she did not care how others saw her.

Then, on August 12, 1950, Ian was killed while covering on the Korean war. Han Suyin decided not to return to China. Instead, she stayed in Hong Kong to write a book about Ian and herself, and China. Hong Kong was the only place she could write. She began her work in September of 1950.

Conclusion

Han Suyin had the courage to denounce the general contempt for Eurasians, an almost foolish courage which she inherited from her mother along with physical toughness and stubbornness. ⁽⁵⁶⁾

The bad memories lived on, however. Han Suyin devoted four pages of *My House Has Two Doors* to a 1962 meeting in Peking with her classmate Nien Cheng, the woman who would later author *Life and Death in Shanghai*. A brilliant student, Nien had made life miserable for the alienated Eurasian student at Yenching University. Han Suyin wrote that Nien had snubbed her "repeatedly, thoroughly." Even after graduation, Nien and her husband completely ignored Han Suyin when they met on the streets of the wartime capital, Chungking. Han Suyin was so humiliated and hurt that the memories came back to her vividly, even when she was over 60 years old. ⁽⁵⁷⁾

In the series of books she wrote on China and the history of her family before and after the Chinese Revolution, Han Suyin blends her

own life story, a story which was shaped by her Eurasian identity and her obsession with China. For Han Suyin, China was the center of the world and of life. When she finally chose to live outside of China, her obsession took the form of writing about the country. Her acquisition of a British Hong Kong passport in 1952 enabled her to cross the border back and forth between Hong Kong and China,⁽⁵⁸⁾ while the fame she won after the publication of *A Many-Splendoured Thing* brought her into contact with an international audience. Han Suyin's dual identity made her views on China especially appealing and convincing. In the early 1960s Han Suyin devoted herself completely to the service of China. She abandoned the practice of medicine, her childhood longing, and sacrificed the 'popularity and success' that came with writing love stories, using her time and energy to build bridges of understanding between China and the rest of the world.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Unfortunately, she was not always appreciated. She was criticized for having secured a free, safe place for herself outside China and escaping the suffering that most Chinese writers had to endure during the years of the Cultural Revolution.

Han Suyin's role as an interpreter of China came to an end when China adopted an open-door policy in the early 1980s. However, during the 30 years she was active as an advocate of the Chinese cause, she broadened her horizons, growing out of her original ambiguous and tenuous existence between the two worlds to develop a firmer, all-embracing sense of self.⁽⁶⁰⁾

Notes

- (1) Han, Suyin, *The Crippled Tree* (St. Albans: Panther Books, Ltd., 1973), pp.303-305.
- (2) Matsubara, Masako, Interpretation of Mao's China to the Western World - Han Suyin and Jung Chang -, *Journal of International Liberal Arts* No. 3. Chiba Keiai Junior College, 1993, p.48.
- (3) Ibid., p.45.

- (4) Han, Suyin, *A Many-Splendoured Thing* (St. Albans: Panther Books Ltd., 1975), pp.331-332.
- (5) Han, Suyin, *The Crippled Tree*, op. cit., pp.14-15.
- (6) Ibid., pp.58-60.
- (7) Ibid., pp.111-112.
- (8) Ibid., p.64.
- (9) Ibid., p.142.
- (10) Ibid., pp.182-183.
- (11) Ibid., pp.197-200.
- (12) Ibid., pp.11-14.
- (13) Ibid., p.204.
- (14) Ibid., p.186.
- (15) Han, Suyin, *Birdless Summer* (London: Panther Books Ltd., 1972), p.15.
- (16) Han, Suyin, *A Mortal Flower* (St.Albans: Panther Books Ltd., 1975), p.20.
- (17) Han, Suyin, *Birdless Summer*, op. cit. p.15.
- (18) Han, Suyin, *The Crippled Tree*, op. cit., pp.402-403.
- (19) Matsubara, Masako, op. cit., p.64.
- (20) Han, Suyin, *My House Has Two Doors*, (London: Triad Grafton, 1982), p. 25.
Han, Suyin, *The Crippled Tree*, op. cit., p.55.
Han Suyin first learned of her father's illness in Hong Kong through a letter from her sister Tiza in Chungking. Tiza wrote in the postscript, "Papa was ill when we left, but he's all right now. I think he had some sort of stroke," which infuriated Han Suyin.
- (21) Han, Suyin, *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, op. cit., pp.26-28.
Han, Suyin, *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, op. cit., p.221.
- (22) Han, Suyin, *Birdless Summer*, op. cit., p.15.
- (23) Han, Suyin, *A Mortal Flower*, op. cit., p.22. pp.278-279.
Han, Suyin, *The Crippled Tree*, op. cit., pp. 14-15 & pp. 339-420.
- (24) Han, Suyin, *The Crippled Tree*, op. cit., p.15.
- (25) Han, Suyin, *My House Has Two Doors*, op. cit., pp.116-117.
- (26) Han, Suyin, *The Crippled Tree*, op. cit., p.15.

- (27) Han, Suyin, *A Mortal Flower*, op. cit., p.38.
- (28) Han, Suyin, *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, op. cit., pp.98-133.
- (29) Wilson, Dick, *Hong Kong! Hong Kong!* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, Ltd., 1990).
Hughes, Richard, *Hong Kong, Borrowed Place - Borrowed Time* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968). Han Suyin is noted, with respect and affection, in The Acknowledgement.
- Nakajima, Mineo, *Hong Kong, Utsuriyuku Toshikokka* (Tokyo: Jijitsushinsha, 1985).
- (30) *Life International*, December 14, 1959, pp.94-110
- (31) Han, Suyin, *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, op. cit., p.293.
- (32) Han, Suyin, *My House Has Two Doors*, op. cit., p.13.
- (33) Hurlimann, Martin, *Hong Kong* (New York: The Viking Press, 1962), p.88.
- (34) Han, Suyin, *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, op. cit., p.27.
- (35) Ibid., pp.18-19.
- (36) Ibid., pp.20-21.
- (37) Ibid., pp.267-268.
- (38) Ibid., pp.17-18.
- (39) Han, Suyin, *My House Has Two Doors*, op. cit., pp.54-56.
- (40) Han, Suyin, *Birdless Summer*, op. cit., pp.139-140 & 146-150.
- (41) Han, Suyin, *My House Has Two Doors*, pp.54-56.
- (42) Han, Suyin, *A Mortal Flower*, op. cit., p.26.
- (43) Ibid., p.131.
Han, Suyin, *My House Has Two Doors*, op. cit., p.37.
- (44) Han, Suyin, *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, op. cit., p.64.
- (45) Wong, Siu-lu, *Emigrant Entrepreneurs - Shanghai Industrialists in Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1988.), p.16.
- (46) *Life International*, op. cit., pp.97-98.
- (47) Han, Suyin, *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, op. cit., p.28.
- (48) *Life International*, op. cit., p.96.
- (49) Han, Suyin, *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, op. cit., p.47.

- (50) Han, Suyin, *My House Has Two Doors*, op. cit., pp.30-31.
- (51) Han, Suyin, *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, p.12 & p.87.
- (52) Ibid., p.178 & 292.
Ingrams, Harold, *Hong Kong*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1952),
p.254.
- (53) Han, Suyin, *My House Has Two Doors*, op. cit., p.461.
- (54) Han, Suyin, *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, op. cit., p.87.
- (55) Ibid., p.230.
- (56) Han, Suyin, *Birdless Summer*, op. cit., p.15.
- (57) Han, Suyin, *My House Has Two Doors*, op. cit., p.459-463.
- (58) Matsubara, Masako, op. cit., p.44.
- (59) Han, Suyin, *Phoenix Harvest* (London: Triad Grafton, 1986), p.316.
- (60) Ibid., pp.313-318.