

OF BRIDGE CONSTRUCTION:  
A CRITICAL STUDY OF HAN SUYIN'S  
HISTORICAL AND AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS

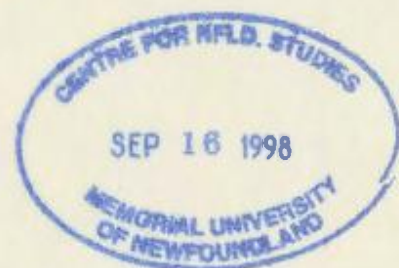
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A CRITICAL STUDY OF HAN SUYIN'S HISTORICAL AND  
AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS**

by

**XUDING WANG**

A dissertation submitted to  
the School of Graduate Studies  
in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English  
Memorial University of Newfoundland

June, 1996

St. John's

Newfoundland



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misunderstandings between China and the West. Chapter Four discusses the cultural, social, political and historical causes that have shaped the multiple selves of Han Suyin, who claims to build "bridges which many people will cross from one civilization and culture and mode of thinking to another" (CT 653). Chapter Five is the Conclusion.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The completion of this dissertation was made possible only with the help of many; this in turn means my debts of gratitude are countless. My deepest gratitude is to my supervisor, Dr. Peter Ayers. The time and energy he spent in reading both Han Suyin's many books and my writing, checking structure and style as well as substance, is beyond measure. It was Dr. Ayers' invaluable help and friendly encouragement that enabled me to finish it. My deep gratitude is also to my wife, Guiying Zhang, who gave up an excellent career in China and worked ten hours a day and almost seven days a week here in the last three years in order to help me with my studies. I am also grateful to Dr. Phyliss Artiss who spent much time working with me on my writing, especially my style of writing. Without her help in spotting repetitions, this dissertation would be very much longer. Dr. Gordon Jones deserves my special thanks. His friendly and personal touch in helping me to find Dr. Ayers as my supervisor who agreed to take on extra burden to work with me is an important factor for the completion of this dissertation. I also want to thank both the School of Graduate Studies and the Department of English for their fellowships and Graduate Assistantships which provided the material support needed in writing it. I also want to thank my two lovely daughters Fei and Yamei who often cheered me up with high spirit, especially when I was frustrated in writing. It is their love that inspired me to keep writing till its completion. Finally I want to dedicate this dissertation to my parents, who have never been to school themselves but worked very hard to give me and my siblings a good education in their whole lives.



**FOR MY PARENTS**

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- AT-----Asia Today, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1969).
- BS-----Birdless Summer, 1st. American ed. (New York: Putnam, 1968).
- CY-----China in the Year 2001, 1st American ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1967).
- CT-----The Crippled Tree, 1st. American ed. (New York: Putnam, 1965).
- DC-----Destination Chungking (London: Jonathan Cape, 1942).
- ES-----Eldest Son: Zhou Enlai and the Making of Modern China (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994).
- FF-----The Four Faces, 1st. American Ed. (New York: Putnam, 1963.)
- MST----A Many-Splendored Thing, 1st American ed. (Boston: Little Brown, 1952).
- MD-----The Morning Deluge: Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Revolution 1893-1953, 1st. American ed. (Boston: Little Brown, 1972).
- MF-----A Mortal Flower, 1st. American ed. (New York: Putnam, 1967).
- HTD---My House Has Two Doors, 1st. American ed. (New York: Putnam, 1980).
- TB-----Tigers and Butterflies, ed. Aamer Hussein (London: Earthscan, 1990).
- TMC---Till Morning Comes (New York: Bantam, 1982).
- WS-----Wind in My Sleeve (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992).
- WT-----Wind in the Tower: Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Revolution 1949-1975, 1st. American ed. (Boston: Little Brown, 1976).



# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **Introduction**

### **I**

Han Suyin is perhaps one of the most prominent, most controversial, but in an academic context least examined writers to explore the relationship between China and the West in the second half of this century.<sup>1</sup> Born to a Chinese father and a Belgian mother in China in 1917, she spent all her childhood there until she was nineteen. She was educated in China, Belgium and England, involved in several love affairs and married three times, first to a Chinese army officer, then to an English Assistant Superintendent of the Malayan Special Branch, and finally to an Indian colonel. Han Suyin is a Chinese patriot, a British citizen and a Swiss resident whose mother and two sisters became citizens of the United States and whose brother became a French citizen after the Chinese Communists took power in 1949.

She was a medical doctor, first in Hong Kong, then in Malaysia, from 1949 to 1961, and at the same time gradually established herself as a professional writer. Her life has been lived on the boundaries of many worlds, personally, professionally, politically, and culturally; not surprisingly her writing is equally concerned with exploring the margins, the intersections, the boundaries of human experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Han Suyin has herself remarked: "As to research on my writing, it has not been done in an academic manner for several reasons." According to her the main reason is political. (Han Suyin, personal correspondence, March 2, 1996.)

When China was completely isolated from the outside world from 1949 to 1970, she became the most significant, in her own words, "bridge builder" between China and the outside world; as Howard Gotlieb, the director of the Special Collections, Boston University's Mugar Memorial Library, where her manuscripts, journals, notebooks, and correspondence are being collected, says, "But what is remarkable about her is that for so many years she really was the open window to China. The fact that she was allowed to travel back and forth when China was closed to all others, and that she could take in Occidental ideas for discussion was extraordinary. And she's an extraordinarily intelligent woman."<sup>2</sup> The late Nobel Peace Laureate Bertrand Russell once said, "During the many hours I spent reading Han Suyin's books, I learnt more about China in an hour than I did in a whole year spent in that country."<sup>3</sup>

As a successful writer, Han Suyin is not only a popular novelist and polemicist but also a historian, economist, political commentator and educator. Many of her novels, autobiographical volumes, and non-fictional books have been highly acclaimed and some have been translated into as many as 17 languages. Yet the significance of Han Suyin's contribution to cultural exchanges between China and the outside world, especially the West, has not been systematically and properly addressed.

Writing on and of the margins, perhaps not surprisingly she herself has been

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<sup>2</sup> Diane Casselberry Manuel, "A Fiery Chinese Patriot," The Christian Science Monitor, 30 June 1982, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Bertrand Russell, "Daughter of China," The Observer (21 November 1965): 27.

marginalised, at least in one fundamental sense. As an interpreter of the East she has been dismissed, generally contemptuously, as an apologist or propagandist for whatever regime holds power in China.<sup>4</sup> Such collective rejection, implicit or explicit, seems an astonishingly inadequate response to a writer who has occupied so significant a place in one context or another in the public consciousness. It is based on very narrow, and in many respects inadequate, conceptions of what she is doing.

The need for a larger reassessment of Han Suyin's works seems in this context clear. The means of answering it are in part provided by recent developments of critical theory, most notably those related to post-colonialism, and in a very different but not altogether unrelated direction, to the recovery of women's voices and women's lives in the feminist study of women's autobiographical writing.<sup>5</sup>

In all her books Han Suyin's treatment of East-West relations can be divided into three major parts. First she "decolonizes" China, at least metaphorically, by exposing the role of the West and of Japan in the oppression of the Chinese people, often through the agency of the old feudal Chinese order itself, with the inevitable loss of cultural and national identity that follows such a process. In this process she explores the Chinese

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<sup>4</sup> See for example Simon Leys's article "The Double Vision of Han Suyin: On the Character of a Trimmer," Encounter 55, no. 5 (November 1980): 79-84; and John Scott's "Mao Is a Many Splendoured Thing," New Statesman 84 (24 November 1972): 779-780.

<sup>5</sup> Helen Buss brings the two together in her article "The Autobiographies of Han Suyin: A Female Postcolonial Subjectivity," Canadian Review of American Studies 23, no. 1 (Fall 1992): 107-126.

struggle to restore lost cultural and national dignity through the recreation of both her family history and her self.

Secondly, Han Suyin reflects the Chinese history through her parents' family sagas, which stand for two very different cultures: her father's Chinese culture and her mother's Western one. She forms a very interesting comparison between the two as well as a sharp contrast at the same time, and the exchanges and the conflicts between the two cultures is an important focus throughout Han's autobiographical and fictional volumes. The sagas of both her father's and her mother's families are also used by Han Suyin, the writer, to define herself even as she writes them.

Writing her own version of China and her family, that is, she simultaneously writes herself, both in the fictional self-portraits of the novels and in her extensive autobiographical writing proper. Such a process is not without risk; as the China that Han Suyin is writing changes, so does the Han Suyin writing both China and herself. Therefore, it is not surprising that her self-portraits are not one-dimensional, drawn in black and white, but rather multi-dimensional, colorful, complex and often contradictory ones at the edges or on the margins of adjoining worlds. Her presentation of herself naturally invites both interesting and controversial commentary. One of the aims of this dissertation is to focus both on the ways in which Han Suyin recreates her often inconsistent multiple selves, and the controversy which has always surrounded such recreation.

The framework of the dissertation will follow the three main lines suggested

above. Following the Introduction in Chapter One, Chapter Two will examine Han Suyin's recreation of the history of modern China since the Opium War (1840-42), in the light of its confrontations and conflicts with the West. Special attention will be given to her position in response to such confrontations. Chapter Three will explore her remaking of the family history of both her father and her mother as social and cultural microcosms in which she defines herself. Chapter Four will study and analyze in a historical context the self-definition of her multi-dimensional self in her writing. In other words I will examine, and attempt to answer the following questions: How does Han Suyin's history of modern China reflect the reality of the relationship between China and the West? How and why does she recreate her father's family history into a microcosm of Chinese society and its conflicts with the West in cultural terms from the late nineteenth century to the twentieth? Are the reactions of critics in the West towards her presentation of China and the West, her exploration of the cultural exchange between East and West, and her self-definition and self-recreation in her writing justified? Why does Han Suyin devote her life to the Chinese people, to the defence of China and to explaining it to the West? What positive values does she put forward in her attacks on colonialism and imperialism? Why is she inconsistent in discussing some of the political movements in China and some of the Chinese leaders? Chapter Five is the conclusion.

Since all her books are on a basic level concerned with the question of East/West relations, the task of this study is both to examine the significance of Han Suyin's treatment of the relationship between China and the West in historical, cultural, political



and economic terms and to analyze the impact of such relationship on her parents' families and on herself. In other words this dissertation will closely study Han Suyin's recreations of both the history of modern China and the history of her parents' families, and explore Han Suyin's complex self-definition framed by both histories. Since it is crucial to understand Han Suyin's writing in the light of the histories both of modern China and her parents' families, the focus of this dissertation will be on the inter-relations among the history of modern China as macrocosm, the history of her parents' families as microcosm and her multi-selves as a result of them.

Among the specialists on China, Han Suyin perhaps understands the feelings of the Chinese best because of her own experience in China, and her own emotional involvement with the Chinese people. As a Eurasian girl, she witnessed the poverty, disease, oppression and racism and also deeply suffered from some of them in the early twentieth century. As a young patriot, she heard and experienced the cruelty and disasters of the invasion of China by Japan and the injustice forced on China by the Western powers. And as a wife of a brutal and abusive husband who was an officer in the Guomindang army, she gradually came to understand the threat posed both by the deep-rooted feudalism and hopeless corruption in the Nationalist government.

These extraordinary experiences have made her devote her life to the Chinese not only because genealogically and emotionally she is connected to China but also because morally and humanistically she feels obligated to fight for justice, equality and truth for the Chinese. They have laid the foundation of her moral commitment and spiritual

dedication to the cause of the poor and common people, especially the common Chinese. They have also nourished her intellectual understanding of the relations between East and West and prompted her to introduce China to the West in her own unique way rather than to follow the trend of the media on China in both China and the West. In all of this, her concern seems less money and fame, suggested by some critics, or the ideological prejudices proposed by others, but the simpler issues of how China can be better understood by the rest of the world, especially the Western world, how China has become strong, and therefore equal to the other nations in the world, and how the Chinese people have been freed from poverty, racism and oppression.

Before I explore Han Suyin's treatment of the important historical events in her writing, three things should be clarified: (1) The theoretical framework of this dissertation will be grounded on the critical theory of Orientalism by Edward Said which reflects East-West relations in all Han Suyin's books; on the postcolonial theories represented by Homi Bhabha, Bill Ashcroft, Helen Tiffin, Diana Brydon, *et. al.* which mirror the identities of the many voices of the "others" and the exploration of the many "margins" in Han Suyin's life and works;<sup>6</sup> on the autobiographical theories and criticism by Helen Buss, Bella Brodski, Philippe Lejeune, James Olney, *et. al.* which

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<sup>6</sup> Although the presentation of China in Han Suyin's books has little direct connection with that of the old British Empire, the postcolonial experience shared by such writers as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Bharati Mukherjee, Frantz Fanon and Salman Rushdie is clearly relevant. The term "post-colonial" is of course itself exceedingly slippery, and the subject of much discussion. Here it is used in the general sense of "counter-discursive" as defined by Helen Tiffin in "Post-Colonial Literature and Counter-Discourse," in Kunapipi 9, no. 3 (1987): 17-34.

illuminate Han's autobiographical volumes and the fictionalized autobiographical aspects in many of her books. (2) The structure of this study will follow the major events of the modern history of China as Han Suyin explores them in her major works. Han Suyin's multiple volumes of autobiography, moving from 1886 to 1992, do not themselves of course follow a strict chronological sequence. Rather she weaves her own family history and personal experiences with various threads of Chinese history, far back to the seventeenth century. Her narrative keeps moving back and forth like a shuttle in a loom. But for clarity this study attempts to follow as closely as possible the chronology of the history of modern China from 1840. Yet at the same time wherever it is necessary chronology will serve the subject matter. Almost all the historical events that will be reviewed in this study are based on her discussion of them. Moreover, since Han Suyin's historiography is often challenged or condemned by Western critics, this study will attempt to place her account in the context of professional historians in order to examine the validity of her historical views. (3) The perspective is that of a Chinese student, in Michael Harris' word, an "insider," who has either experienced or been an eyewitness to a significant part of the contemporary history recreated by Han Suyin.

## II

As it is presented by Said, Orientalism is a complex critical theory; the name itself defines the phenomenon of the unequal relations between East and West and it has been established in many fields, including linguistics, literature, religion, anthropology,

ethnology, history, science and technology. It first developed as knowledge gradually accumulated from travel books, scholarly researches or academic studies; such knowledge then "transformed itself ... into being administrative, economic and even military."<sup>7</sup> The unequal relations established by Orientalism explain the many ways that Orientals are defined and represented as inferior and therefore incapable of representing themselves. Hence springs the Orientalists' belief that they must represent the Orientals, who are by definition incapable of representing themselves in cultural and political matters.<sup>8</sup>

Orientalism thus becomes a form of Western cultural and political domination or "hegemony" over the East; its imperialistic implications in both theory and practice, especially since the late eighteenth century, have been very evident. In such a context any resistance to Western hegemony is considered as a hostile threat or a serious danger to civilization because the Orientals or the "others" are irrational, barbarous, revengeful and treacherous, or in one word, uncivilized. Said clearly shows that Orientalism which either denies or fails to recognize the reality of "human experience" of the East should be corrected and its cultural and political hegemony over the "others" should be challenged.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Edward W. Said, Orientalism (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 210.

<sup>8</sup> See Orientalism, p.283.

<sup>9</sup> Edward W. Said's Culture and Imperialism (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993) is a sequel to Orientalism. It develops the theory of Orientalism mainly in the novel, especially the novel during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and also examines contemporary American imperialism in the world today.

Throughout her works, Han Suyin challenges both the theory and practice of Western racial, cultural and political domination which Said calls Orientalism. On the bases both of her personal experience and her study of the history of modern China, she effectively exposes the nature of Western cultural, economic, and political hegemony over East Asia, and especially over China, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She offers a critique of Western racial and cultural prejudice and injustice either by revealing them directly or by exposing them through ironical anecdote. Like Said, she criticizes the Orientalist's claim that Asians are irrational and incompetent, and therefore incapable of organizing themselves in the modern world;<sup>10</sup> and she also rejects the view that the civilized West, with its sophisticated skills of administration and advanced science and technology, should organize the Asians.

The larger purpose of her criticism, however, is positive, to explain to the West that although the Chinese are a proud and historically self-conscious people who do not easily forget past wrongs, insults and humiliations, they are not a vengeful people incapable of forgiving the wrongs done to them in the past; therefore, they are not a threat to the world if they become powerful. On the contrary they will make great contributions to world peace and human civilization. China, Han Suyin concludes, will never be the "aggressive," "militant," "menacing," and "demonic" nation portrayed in the past by many Western politicians and Orientalists.

Like E. H. Carr, I view history as a huge ocean; historical "facts" are fish in that

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<sup>10</sup> Han Suyin criticizes this Orientalist idea in CY, 1, 3-4.



ocean and historians are those who dip into different areas according to their circumstances and preferences.<sup>11</sup> The different circumstances and preferences account for the critic's or historian's "standpoints" as C. P. Fitzgerald defines the phenomenon:

In any interpretation of a revolutionary movement much depends on the *standpoint* [stress mine] of the observer; the Christian, the Socialist, the Conservative will all lay different emphasis even if all agree on facts.<sup>12</sup>

Han Suyin's personal sense of what she really is in her interpretation of the history of modern China is in large part defined by her "socialism." Her "socialism" is shaped above all else by the passionate enthusiasm for the larger cause she has embraced, that of the independence and prosperity of the Chinese people themselves, who have striven so long to be masters of their own destiny. At different stages of her life such enthusiasm takes very different forms, many of which seem incompatible or inconsistent if considered without regard to the circumstances that generated them; behind them all, however, lies the same compelling and unwavering commitment to that people and history of which she feels herself so intensely a part. Thus, after starting as an enthusiast of Jiang Jieshi<sup>13</sup> (Chiang Kaishek), she remained a staunch supporter of the Chinese government (except for the last decade, especially since the student movement in 1989)

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<sup>11</sup> E. H. Carr, What Is History? (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 26.

<sup>12</sup> C. P. Fitzgerald, The Birth of Communist China, 8th Printing (Harmondsworth & Middlesex: Penguin, 1976), 1.

<sup>13</sup> All the Chinese proper names in this study will be in *pinyin*, the standard form of Chinese proper names, except those in quotations. Yet to avoid confusion, old spelling of some proper names will be provided when necessary. All will follow the Chinese style of name-order, namely the family name comes first and the given name(s) follow.

because she believed that the Chinese Communist government best represented the Chinese people in a historical perspective. To her it was the Communists who thoroughly broke the yoke of imperialist aggression and exploitation, shattered the shackles of the feudal system and released the Chinese people from the incompetence and servility of their own rulers for the first time in the history of modern China. In this respect, her "socialism" is defined by national patriotism rather than communist ideology.

Like Edward Said, whose personal investment in his study of Orientalism derives from his "awareness of being an 'Oriental' as a child growing up in two British colonies" (Palestine and Egypt) and whose "deep early awareness has persisted ... to inventory the traces upon [him],"<sup>14</sup> Han Suyin's personal investment in her books also derives from her awareness of being a Chinese girl growing up in an invaded, divided, oppressed, exploited, poor and weak China. Although all her formal education has been Western, much like that of Said,<sup>15</sup> her early but intense awareness of being Chinese has shaped all of her subsequent life.

Although she was born and raised partly with the Western heritage of her Belgian mother, and although later the West offered her a good education and a very comfortable life, and although she was banned from China for many years, frequently criticized and

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<sup>14</sup> Said, Orientalism, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Except for 18 months in a Chinese Catholic school part-time when she was a girl, Han Suyin was educated first in a Catholic school run by European missionaries in Beijing from about 1923 to 1930, then in Yanjing University run by Americans in Beijing from 1933 to 1935, then in the University of Brussels in Belgium from 1935 to 1938 and finally in the University of London in 1948.

still viewed from some quarters with suspicion in China, Han Suyin still morally and politically (though she herself might object to this word) identifies herself with China.<sup>16</sup> She believes that her choice is the choice of "truth,"<sup>17</sup> over falsehood, and is independent of material self-interest. It is possible, however, that her truth is perhaps others' falsehood, for in social science in general and historical studies in particular the so-called "truth" of a social or historical event may have different dimensions for different scholars or historians. Paul A. Cohen puts it this way:

All of us are to an extent prisoners of our environments, trapped in one or another set of parochial concerns. And the truth we retrieve is inevitably qualified by the intellectual and emotional preoccupations each of us, through our vocabulary and concepts, brings to bear on the study of the past.<sup>18</sup>

Han Suyin is no exception in her study of the past of China, her family and herself. Her strong protest against the West's treatment of China in the past and her argument that it was the West that forced China into communism are defined by the nature of her Chinese patriotism. I will examine Han Suyin's "truth" without ignoring,

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<sup>16</sup> The reasons that Han Suyin favours China in a moral and political sense are very complex. However her childhood experiences of inequality, injustice and discrimination against the Chinese, against Eurasians like herself, her sufferings, especially at the hands of her "traditional," but hypocritical and brutal, husband, her disgust at the corruption of the Guomindang government and the influences of Zhou Enlai, Kung Peng, her third Uncle and other patriotic Chinese friends, are all important reasons why she favours China and they will be the main focus of study in Chapter Four.

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, CT, 17, 146; MF, 48, 350.

<sup>18</sup> Paul A. Cohen, Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 198.

in Cohen's words, her "intellectual and emotional preoccupations." In other words I will try hard to be true to her writing, to be true to the reader and to be true to myself. But I will not pretend that my study of her will be absolutely objective because there is no such thing as absolute objectivity in such a context. Something I have learned from Simon Leys' books and John Fraser's The Chinese: Portrait of a People is their deliberate frankness about being not objective because of their involvement with a certain type of Chinese culture and people.<sup>19</sup> Like them I will try to be as frank and honest as possible, but unlike them I also attempt to be as impartial, if not objective, as I can; however, such matters are to a certain extent beyond my control since as Paul Cohen notes, "Although we have rules of evidence to keep us honest, a large subjective element necessarily enters into all historical scholarship."<sup>20</sup> In this sense part of the "subjective element" in me is my Chineseness which, as I well understand, carries a certain risk, for it may be easily considered as an obstacle to objectivity by some Western scholars and critics. But I am also aware that the Chineseness in me perhaps puts me in a position to understand Han Suyin better than many Western critics, because Han Suyin considers herself first and foremost Chinese. Indeed I strongly believe that to understand Han Suyin, one needs to know how the Chinese look at their own modern history since the

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<sup>19</sup> Simon Leys, The Chairman's New Clothes: Mao and the Cultural Revolution, trans. Carol Appleyard and Patrick Goode (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), 9; Chinese Shadows (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), 212; and John Fraser, The Chinese: Portrait of a People (Toronto: Collins, 1980), 195, 201, 228, 242.

<sup>20</sup> Cohen, p. ix.

Opium War,<sup>21</sup> and to know about Han's family and personal experiences. In this sense I agree with Said who claims:

For there is such a thing as knowledge that is less, rather than more, partial than the individual (with his entangling and distracting life circumstances) who produces it.<sup>22</sup>

That Han Suyin has been successful in her quest to focus the West's attention on China is incontrovertible. Her beautifully romantic lyric style, her will to explore the truth of the relations between East and West, her extensive description of and insight into China, and her pursuit of cultural understanding and exchange have won her support from such writers as Bertrand Russell and Malcolm MacDonald.<sup>23</sup> But her outspoken and provocative attacks on colonialism and imperialism and her staunch defence of China also invite fierce attacks from many critics such as Simon Leys and John Scott. The question of her "inconsistency" in her treatment of some Chinese leaders and political movements is clearly central here: does she belong to the class of "*fengpai*" (People who change according to the direction of the wind in a political sense), or has she an integrity that transcends such issues? It is with this and similar questions that this dissertation will be in large part concerned.

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<sup>21</sup> It is very useful to understand how the Chinese intellectuals, scholars and historians look at their own modern history by reading the chapter called "The Chinese Case" in Felix Greene's Awakened China: The Country Americans Don't Know (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), 267-294.

<sup>22</sup> Said, Orientalism, 10.

<sup>23</sup> MacDonald wrote the "Foreword" for Han Suyin's famous novel, A Many Splendoured Thing (1952).

## CHAPTER TWO

### **The Forms of Nationhood: Han Suyin's Recreation of China**

History is more than background or ultimate cause: it is the framework of the present.<sup>1</sup>

...China of today is not an inexplicable freak but a logical development of its immensely long past.<sup>2</sup>

In her major series of autobiographical/historical works, The Crippled Tree (1965), A Mortal Flower (1965), Birdless Summer (1968), My House Has Two Doors (1980), and Wind in My Sleeve (1992), Han Suyin defines herself by reference both to the previous events of her own life, and to the larger events that have shaped the country to which she has in various ways committed herself, and been committed by the circumstances of her birth, China. Since Han Suyin's description of her family sagas and her self-definition in them is a microcosm of the modern history of China, it is necessary, therefore, to review briefly such events in their historical context in order to understand the present Han Suyin, China itself, and the peculiar nature of the relationship between the two.

Like the western historians quoted above Han Suyin repeatedly expresses her view that China's present is the natural result of its past, and that the present Han Suyin is also

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<sup>1</sup> Franz Schurmann and Orville Schell, Communist China (Penguin Books, 1967), XV.

<sup>2</sup> Publisher's notes on C. P. Fitzgerald's The Birth of Communist China, 1978.

a natural result of the Han Suyin of yesterday. Hence she attempts "to grasp the motivation, the social and economic background of a whole era ... through her [China's] yesterday made explicit to grasp her wholeness in her new day," and to show the reader "a continuity between what was and what is" (CT 31; 19)

Some critics complain that Han Suyin "is making a case against the West's treatment of China;"<sup>3</sup> but her principal concern is larger and more positive. In her account of the modern history of China, a record of invasion and exploitation that stretches over more than 120 years, she is attempting to show the West that to understand the present China, the West must be aware of the disastrous impact of imperialism on the psyche of the Chinese. It is on this basis that Han Suyin passionately argues that without first understanding the trauma of the Chinese occasioned by Western and Japanese imperialism in the past, the Western countries might again misjudge China in their policy-making causing yet further misunderstanding.

Yet a mutual understanding is necessary and urgent for both China and the West as well as for the rest of the world; thus any refusal or reluctance to accept the injustice or the wrongs done to the Chinese in the past by imperialism on the West's part is counter-productive. According to Han Suyin, since 1949 China has tried several times to reconcile itself to the West by compromise, but unfortunately such attempts were not taken seriously until the early 1970s. For Han Suyin the fault lies more with the West

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<sup>3</sup> Rev. of The Crippled Tree, Far Eastern Economic Review 50 (November 1965): 84. See also "Dubious History" Time, 17 September 1965, p.99. Both reviews are anonymous.

than with China; yet the more important thing is to learn from the historical lessons in order to face the present difficulties and prepare a brighter future in the relationship between China and the West.

## I

### Han Suyin's History of China (1840 to 1949)

#### 1. Foreign Aggression (1840-1910)

In China in the Year 2001 Han Suyin begins her discussion of the history of modern China with the following statement:

The period 1840-1949 is characterized by repetitive violence, practised either singly or collectively by the European nations, the USA, and an Asian capitalist power, Japan, upon China. To these one hundred and nine years belong the burden of unequal treaties, extra-territorial rights, war indemnities, the concessions, occupation by foreign troops, massacres, and the sacking of Chinese cities (CY 21).

Then she continues her polemic against imperialist aggression and exploitation by quoting Mao Zedong's famous remark: "The whole history of modern China is indeed the history of imperialist aggression upon China, of imperialist opposition to China's independence and *to her development of capitalism*."<sup>4</sup> [italics are Han's, not Mao's original writing]. This suggests that Han Suyin's recreation of the modern history of China during the

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<sup>4</sup> According to the Marxist theory of social evolution, a modern society should develop from feudalism to capitalism, then to socialism and finally to communism. According to Mao, China does not really have a capitalist stage in its development. It goes to socialism right from feudalism; one of the reasons why China does not have a capitalist stage is provided by Mao in the quotation above.



period 1840-1949 is influenced by Mao Zedong's theory and framed by her Chinese patriotism.

To Han Suyin the history of modern China is a history of imperialist oppression, of the corruption, and incompetence of successive Chinese governments, and of the bitter struggle of the Chinese against these. She repeatedly makes the claim that:

If today China is Communist, it is the Western Powers which forced her into it; and if the peoples of Asia are beginning to believe that nothing can be achieved except by the power of the gun, it is because that was proved by decades of violence. Everyone is conditioned by experience; our future made before we are born. Today the same lesson is being taught to future generations, the lesson that the gun is sole arbiter in the end, and it is still the West which teaches this lesson (CT 265).

To examine the validity of this claim is one of the principal tasks of this study. On what ground does Han Suyin maintain that the Western powers forced China into Communism? Can her statement be justified? To answer this question, we must first examine Han Suyin's recreation of the major events in the history of China between 1840 and 1949.

To Han Suyin and most of the Chinese and Western historians, the history of modern China begins with the Opium War (1840-1842) between Britain and China. The war ended with the first of a long series of unequal treaties that define much of the history of modern China; by it China was forced to cede Hong Kong, to pay an indemnity of 21 million taels<sup>5</sup> of silver, to open five trading ports (Guangzhou, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo and Shanghai) where the British could open consulates and control tariff

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<sup>5</sup> Chinese ounce. 1 tael is about 1.7637 ounces.

on the import and export customs, and to give Britain the privileges of a unilateral most-favored-nation treatment in China. So began the sorry legacy of the Western aggression and exploitation of China by gunboats and rifles. Following in the steps of Britain, France easily forced China to sign the Treaty of Whampoa (Huangpo) with its gunboats in 1844 and so did the United States for the Treaty of Wanghsia (Wangxia) in the same year. Both treaties had substantially the same special trading rights and other privileges as the Treaty of Nanking (Nanjing). These are the beginnings of what Han Suyin calls "the disastrous wars with the West" (CT 42).

Most Western historians would agree now that China was to some extent the victim of imperialist aggression and exploitation during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Han Suyin more forcefully denounces those Western Powers that, after the Opium War, swarmed into China to demand, in Han Suyin's words, "unequal treaties, extra-territorial rights, war indemnities, the concessions" (CY 21) and many other privileges as armed conquerors. In 1849 the Portuguese occupied Macaw without even the formality of signing a treaty. For her the Second Opium War (1856-1858), or the Arrow War as Western historians call it, was but a further step of the Western powers to enlarge their so-called treaty rights and privileges in China. The Treaty of Tianjin not only allowed Western gunboats to patrol in more Chinese waters and ten more ports, and forced China to pay more indemnity to Britain and France, but also gave

the British the special right to run the Chinese customs.<sup>6</sup> Moreover it brazenly legalized the opium trade. Commenting on the treaty, Karl Marx, in his letter to Engels on October 8, 1858, writes, "England's present treaty with China ... is a mockery from beginning to end."<sup>7</sup>

Han Suyin is concerned to show that from the beginning of the Western powers' invasion of China, on the one hand they acted in collusion with one another while on the other they were in a fierce rivalry in plundering and exploiting the country. In 1860 the British and the French captured Zhoushan, Dalian, Yantai and Tianjin and then stormed Beijing. Together they wantonly looted, killed many people, destroyed much property and burned down the magnificent old Summer Palace. As Charles G. ("Chinese") Gordon, who was involved in, in Han's own words, "the loot of the Summer Palace in Peking" (CT 25), later confessed, they were "destroying in a vandal-like manner most valuable property."<sup>8</sup> They finally forced the Qing government to sign the Convention of Beijing. By it, as Bai Shouyi points out:

a portion of Kowloon (Jiulong) was ceded to Britain; French missionaries

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<sup>6</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, The Search for Modern China (New York: Norton, 1990), 205. According to Spence, "the Imperial Maritime Custom was erected on the foundation of the small foreign Inspectorate of 1854, and in the 1860s became an internationally staffed bureaucracy with agencies in all the treaty ports." Sir Robert Hart was Inspector General or superintendent of Chinese Customs from 1860 to 1911.

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, On Colonialism: Articles from the New York Tribune and Other Writings (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 322.

<sup>8</sup> A. E. Hake, Gordon in China and Sudan (London, 1896), 18.

were permitted "to buy and rent land and to construct as they wish"<sup>9</sup>; and the war indemnity to be paid to Britain and France prescribed in the treaties of Tientsin [Tianjin] was increased to eight million taels of silver each.<sup>10</sup>

All this is evidence for Han Suyin's conclusion that "Actually, every treaty since the Opium Wars, imposed by the Western powers extort[ed] indemnities, privileges from China" (CT 63).

Like many Chinese historians, Han Suyin argues that China was a helpless victim of the Western powers' collusion and rivalry in their plunder and exploitation because the weak and backward country could not stand against even one major power, let alone the joint aggression of them all. The two major rivals were Britain and France. In many events such as the ones mentioned earlier they joined together to pressure the Qing government into accepting unequal treaties that offered them special privileges and concessions. The suppression of the Taiping Uprising and the Boxer Rebellion are further examples of the larger phenomenon.

In her account, it is the self-interest of the Western powers that defined their relationship with each other and with China. They cooperated with each other when their best interest required them to do so; however, when circumstances required them to defend their own interest against the other powers they did not hesitate to jump at other

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<sup>9</sup> This clause was secretly added to the treaty by J. M. Mouly, a Catholic missionary who acted as an interpreter for the French army.

<sup>10</sup> Bai Shouyi, An Outline History of China (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1982), 446.

rivals' throats. This point is reflected in her father's observation:

The French had been for decades active in Asia, where they were countered by the British almost everywhere, except in Indo-China.... Both were hypnotized by China's reported wealth, by the trade of Central Asia and Tibet, and Szechuan was the key to Tibet. The British then thought of a swift war, annexing the whole of the Great River basin up to Szechuan, to stop the French; the French began an invasion of China through Yunnan; we were the victims of this greedy rivalry. In London and Paris, an Anglo-French war was in the offing (CT 62-63).

After the Sino-French War (1883-1885) France extended its forces and demanded more special rights in parts of Guangdong, Guangxi and Yunnan provinces (CT 63) while Britain annexed the whole area of the Yangtze basin up to Sichuan and Tibet.

In a long and forceful argument Han Suyin takes pains to show that for both commercial and strategic purposes, the Western powers also struggled fiercely against each other to build railways and later finance railway projects in China. It was the railway crises in 1910 and 1911, starting in Han Suyin's home province, Sichuan, that became, in Han Suyin's words, "one of the main factors in bringing about the Revolution of 1911" (CT 116), which in turn sounded the death knell of the Qing Empire. Han Suyin accordingly spends a great deal of time and space in The Crippled Tree describing the significance of railway-related events in the history of modern China. Through them she attempts to show both how corrupt the Chinese government officials were in dealing with the Western powers and how greedy and ambitious the Western powers themselves were. Han Suyin also attempts to show us the history of China from 1885 to 1949 through the history of railways to which her family and herself were tightly bound. Indeed the railways defined the lives of Han Suyin's family, as well as the destiny of the

whole nation. Han Suyin's father was a railway engineer who worked on railways in China for his entire life. It is because of the railways that Han's father was sent to study in Belgium where he married her mother; it is on the railways that Han's family lived for many years during which Han herself and five of her siblings were born; it is also on the railways that Han's mother encountered the many hardships that poisoned her view of China. The railway history is a microcosm of the history of modern China in Han Suyin's writing and her description of those railway-related events reflects the fate of the nation, her family and herself.

As Han Suyin demonstrates, from the late nineteenth century the Qing government had been weak and incompetent in dealing with both internal troubles such as mass uprisings, big famines and serious corruption, and external problems of foreign aggression and exploitation; therefore, it was unable to build any big railways with its own resources. Moreover, facing the aggression of the Western powers, at first the Qing government also worried that railways would be of more use for the Western powers in their penetration into China's hinterland than to China in development of its own economy; therefore, the Qing Imperial Court was not interested in railways until toward the end of the nineteenth century.

But for their own self-interest the Western powers forced the Qing government either by guns or by political manoeuvre to give them special rights to build railways or later to finance railway projects. As Han Suyin comments:

Railways, like Christianity, loans and opium, were not primarily for the good of the Chinese, but for the good of the foreigners. Railway building

was not only a matter of means of communication, it was above all a strategic and political issue of enormous importance. It was known that Russia had built the Trans-Siberian and railways in North China to transport her troops to her new frontiers on the Pacific. The British and the French both had built railway lines in China, to move their goods tariff-free and troops easily in and out, in their politics of dismemberment of China (CT 118).

Thus they acted quickly in the construction of big railways such as the Beijing-Hankou, Hankou-Guangzhou (Canton) and the Longhai, and eagerly offered big loans to the Chinese to build railways for quick and huge profits. The ambition of King Leopold II of Belgium to obtain the right to build two major railways across China, extensively described in The Crippled Tree, reflected the ambitions of all the Western powers. Although in the end such ambitions were thwarted by the short-sighted demand for instant wealth or power, all of them dreamed of building and owning railways in China in order to grab its resources and wealth, even if they could not entirely colonize the huge nation. Thus Russia and Japan built and owned the railways in North-East China; Germany did the same in Shandong province; Britain, France and the United States controlled the major ones in the South, and in the Changjiang (Yangtze) basin areas; Belgium financed (with the help of France and Russia) and ran the trunk lines in the central areas. Their success, although short-lived, manifested the actuality of the two contrasting sides: the Western powers, whose Industrial Revolution had brought them advanced technology, science and wealth, were powerful, ambitious and aggressive; the Chinese on the other hand, lacked both the technology and the wealth, and were further weakened by government corruption and Western intrusions, variously defined in

military, political and economic terms.

It was not only their desire for railways but also their ambition to get as many special privileges as possible, to occupy or control as much Chinese territory as possible, that Han Suyin so roundly condemns in her books. While the United States forced on China its Open Door Policy in the last two decades of nineteenth century, other Western powers also extorted huge Chinese territories and controlled very large parts of China as their "sphere of influence." Han Suyin notes "the terrible years, the years of accelerated wholesale, headlong plunder," and exposes the Western powers' aggressive actions against China:

China's weakness exposed, the Powers rallied to dismember the foundering land. Britain took control of the whole of the Great River basin, from Shanghai to Szechuan.... Russia took Manchuria and Mongolia as her dependencies, building railways there to move her troops into China. France again marshalled her forces for an invasion of Yunnan. America evolved the Open Door Policy, which meant that no goods from any country were to be taxed more than any other country's goods, when imported into China. Not to be outdone, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany suddenly proclaimed China the Yellow Peril ... and seized the province of Shantung [Shandong] (CT 84-85).

Even worse was the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95) which ended with China's defeat and its acceptance of the humiliating Treaty of Shimonoseki, which forced China to cede Taiwan, Penghu Islands and the Liaodong Peninsula,<sup>11</sup> pay a huge indemnity of 200 million taels of silver, open four more trading ports (Shashi, Suzhou, Hangzhou

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<sup>11</sup> Japan's occupation of the Liaodong Peninsula clashed with Russian interests in the region; therefore, Russia with the support of France and Germany pressured Japan to give up this demand and take an extra 30 million taels of silver instead.



and Chongqing) and give Japan the right to set up factories in all trading ports. Han Suyin notes the obvious fact that, "China in 1895 could not pay. Two hundred million ounces of silver was too much, more than the revenue available to her after having paid all she owed the Western powers for previous wars they had waged upon her" (CT 84). Then China had to borrow money from the Western powers to pay the never-ending debt including the accumulating interest. This pernicious circle of war-indemnity-loans forced on China by the Western powers swiftly ruined the country. Han Suyin writes:

It was the five per cent loan of 1895, to pay the war indemnity of Japan, which really ruined the Empire. China had to pay twelve hundred millions of francs; the repayment of interest on loans, even at the moderate rate of five per cent, required sixty million francs per year, and this indemnity added to the previous loans in arrears came to about seventy million francs. But the total customs receipts of the country were only eighty million francs (customs were under foreign control) in silver (CT 84).

When the Russians stopped extending their sphere of influence in the northeast of China after the Revolution in 1917 Japan gradually established its influence in Manchuria, openly invaded it in 1931 and finally extended its invasion to the eastern half of China from 1937 to 1945. The enormous damage of the invasion was inestimable: nearly half of China became Japan's colony, tens of millions of people were killed, and the property loss was beyond reckoning. These are vividly reflected in Han Suyin's The Mortal Flower, Birdless Summer and Destination Chungking. The resulting wounds left scars that linger to this day.

The above events are only the major cases of foreign invasion, extortion, and exploitation in China. Han Suyin's critique goes much further, for other Western powers,

big and small, also had their share in tearing China up. Even Belgium once attempted to establish its "Asian Congo" in Gansu province, vigorously seizing opportunities to build and control major railways in China, the details of which Han Suyin provides in The Crippled Tree. Italy, Holland, and Austria also had their parts to play in this game of plunder. In Han Suyin's words, China became "everyone's prey, no one's responsibility" (MF 54). She argues that the primary concern of the Western powers was self-interest, however different their actions. English exploitation, she suggests, although far more extensive than that of the other powers, is in nature no different:

If there is more material available, printed and published, about England's nineteenth century exploitations, that is because she was the dominant power, in all her greatness and also in all her meanness. But had Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm been the dominant colonial exploiter of the time, things might have been even more hideous. Certainly Japan, though an Asian nation, did not behave any better towards China. As for the United States, who came in as a novice in the colonial plunder-games at the tail-end of the nineteenth century ... she propounded the Open Door, free-for-all policy, just as the Kaiser tried to raise the standard of White Race *über alles*. And what about France, what about the other powers? ... The truth is, they were all the same (CT 119-20).

It is in the context of foreign oppression, exploitation and domination so extensively documented in Han Suyin's writing<sup>12</sup> that Edward Said's critical theories in both Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism gain their greatest resonance. The Western

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, CT, 63 foreign control of Chinese Customs; 63-64, 215 forced indemnities and extraterritorial privileges; 84-85, foreign occupation of China; 119 foreign exploitation; 133-34, 226, gunboat diplomacy; 136, boycott of American goods; MF, 54 extraterritorial privileges for foreigners; 67, Chinese were "barred from the Park, the good hotels and restaurants" in Shanghai concessions and in any places under Western control; 184, 217, foreign control of Chinese Customs; BS 220, extraterritorial privileges for foreigners.

powers based their aggressive actions on the grounds that they were developed and advanced in political, economic, military and technological terms while China, like other poor Asian or African countries, was backward, under-developed and weak and therefore inferior. Han Suyin's exploration of China in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reflects the principles set out by Edward Said:

Two central ideas clearly were held over from the past and still hold sway: one was the great power's right to safeguard its distant interests even to the point of military invasion; the second was that lesser powers were also peoples, with lesser rights, morals, claims.<sup>13</sup>

## 2. The Chinese Resistance

Han Suyin repeatedly points out that the Chinese are famous for their endurance and tolerance in extreme situations and hardships, but when they are cornered, they will courageously fight for survival and justice: "Indestructible as grass, all-devouring and immortal, rooted in earth as grass, they rise and fight with all the genius of a people fighting for justice" (CT 111). Thus her writing, influenced by Mao Zedong's theory of colonialism, is an attempt to show that the history of modern China is, on the one hand, a history of the Western and Japanese attempts to make China into their colony or their "sphere of influence" and on the other "a history of [the] struggle of the Chinese people against imperialism and its lackeys."<sup>14</sup> Since the Opium War (1840-1842), Han Suyin

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<sup>13</sup> Said, Culture and Imperialism, 36.

<sup>14</sup> Mao Zedong, "The Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party," in his Selected Works (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1967), 2: 314.

notes, there had been an average of two revolts a year (CT 44).

Thus for Han Suyin, if the Opium War is the beginning of Western aggression, it is also the beginning of the Chinese people's attempt to fight against such aggression. Despite the Qing government's weak response towards British aggression during the war, thousands of people, guided by the Royal Commissioner, Lin Zexu,<sup>15</sup> burned 2,376,254 catties<sup>16</sup> of British opium smuggled into Guangzhou (Canton). After the Qing government caved in, tens of thousands of peasants from more than 130 villages around the area of Sanyuanli stood up to fight against the British in 1841. It is clearly with pride that Han Suyin notes the event and writes, "Once before, in 1840, the people of Kuangtung province had organized a militia and fought the British, encouraged to do so by Lin Tzeshu [Zexu], the commissioner who burnt the British opium" (CT 44). In the decade before 1850 there were more than 100 fairly large peasant uprisings, while between 1860 and 1870, as Han Suyin points out, "no less than five large uprisings were going on at the same time: the Nians, in Anhwei, Shantung, Honan, Hupeh and Shensi; the Hueis in Shensi and Kansu; the Hueis in Yunnan; the Miaos in Kueichow; and the Chiangs in Szechuan" (CT 46). All these uprisings were generated by the huge Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864) which swept 17<sup>17</sup> provinces and occupied more than 600 walled

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<sup>15</sup> Lin Zexu was punished for his firm attitudes towards the British opium traders and was later exiled by the Qing Court to the border areas in the northwest.

<sup>16</sup> 1 catty is about 1.333 lbs.

<sup>17</sup> According to Mao Mao (Deng Rong) the Taiping reached to 18 provinces. See the instalment reprint of her book My Father Deng Xiaoping, People's Daily, overseas ed.,

cities.

Han Suyin argues that the attitudes of the Western powers towards the Taiping Rebellion provides the most telling evidence of the nature of their self-interest. They first favoured the Taiping because the leader of the Rebellion, Hong Xiuquan (1814-64) was a Christian; therefore, the policies of the Taiping were partly and loosely based on some Christian doctrines. But as soon as the Western powers discovered that the Taiping were strongly against foreign aggression and unequal treaties, and especially hated the opium trade which was one of the most important businesses of the British and the Americans, they joined with the Qing government to brutally suppress the Taiping. The British general Charles G. Gordon, who had once been involved in looting Beijing and burning the old Summer Palace (*yuan ming yuan*), "was hired to lead the imperial armies against the Taiping," as Han Suyin points out (CT 25). Facing the huge Qing Imperial army supported by the Western powers, the Taiping army, in a desperate, doomed struggle, fought to the end. Not a single soul of the last hundred thousand rebels surrendered in Nanjing, as Zeng Guofan's<sup>18</sup> report to Emperor Tongzhi shows.<sup>19</sup>

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19 August 1993, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Zeng Guofan (1811-1872) who defeated the Taiping forces and put an end to the rebellion in Nanjing in 1864 was the most important general. He was perhaps also the most important and famous Confucian statesman to serve faithfully the Qing Court in his time. His successor was Li Hongzhang (1823-1901).

<sup>19</sup> Han Suyin notes the incident thus:

At first the Western Powers favoured the Taiping, but later this attitude changed, and the Manchu dynasty

The incident should have alerted the observant to the fact that the Chinese people were not as docile and passive as many Westerners believed, reflecting the belief embedded in the old Chinese saying, "*ning wei yu sui, bu wei wa quan*;"——it is better to die in glory than live in dishonour. The Heaven and Earth Society Rebellion (1854-61) in Guangdong and Guangxi, and the Tungan (Muslim) Rebellion (1862-78) which Han Suyin's ancestors helped to put down in Gansu, Qinghai and Xinjiang areas,<sup>20</sup> were

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received help from the West. General Gordon was hired to lead the imperial armies against the Taiping. Fresh from the loot of the Summer Palace in Peking, Gordon now served the dynasty which he had helped to pillage, and was rewarded with high rank in the mandarin and much gold .... when Nanking had fallen after two years of gruelling siege not one of the forty thousand remaining inhabitants surrendered, and all were killed (CT 25).

Han Suyin's figure of the Taiping rebels killed in Nanjing is 40,000. But Zeng Guofan's report to Emperor Tongzhi says, "Not one of the 100,000 rebels in Nanjing surrendered themselves when the city was taken but in many cases gathered together and burned themselves and passed away without repentance." See Franz Michael and Chang Chung-li, The Taiping Rebellion: History and Documents, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), 1: 174.

<sup>20</sup> Han's great grandfather, Chou Taohung, his father before him and his son Chou Chieh-yu after him, were all government officials and military commanders in the fighting against the peasant rebellions during the late nineteenth century. In The Crippled Tree, Han Suyin writes: "Taohung fought both the Niens [the Nien Rebellion (1852-1868)] and the Huis [the Moslem Rebellion in Gansu Province (1862-1873)] as a commander of militia, and on his gravestone is credited with having saved Chengtu [the capital city of Sichuan Province], though details are lacking ... In these epics of peasant revolt, upheavals subsiding, simmering and again spewing forth, inchoate, fluid, elusive but tenacious and never ending, here, there and everywhere, three generations, great-grandfather, Taohung, his father before him, and his son my grandfather, were to participate. True to their class, loyal to their Emperor, they fought against their own people, and put them down" (CT 45, 46).

major rebellions mainly against the Qing Court and its corrupt local governments and officials, while the Small Sword Society Rebellion (1853-55) in Shanghai was also against foreigners. Moreover there were many more small revolts; as Han Suyin puts it, uprisings "from 1840 onwards never really stopped until 1949" (CT 43).

Han Suyin also draws attention to the fact that after the Opium War, although the Qing Court remained servile to the imperialist powers, some Chinese generals vigorously fought against foreign aggression. In 1878, General Zuo Zongtang led his army to recapture the northwest border areas north and south of the Tianshan Mountains which had been occupied by Yakub Beg from Kokand in Central Asia; the latter had been backed by both Britain and Russia. Thus Han Suyin writes:

An adventurer from Kokand, Yakub Bey [sic], allegedly paid by England to organize an independent region under British influence, and also paid by Russians to create a kingdom for himself under their protection, now reigned in this area (CT 46-47).

The Manchus were stupid, timorous and weak, but the rising Chinese landlord-gentry-scholar-official class was now armed and militarily competent. They had tasted blood fighting their own peasant revolts. They now also destroyed Yakub Bey's kingdom, and consolidated the western borders of the Empire (CT 47).

On March 23, 1885, the old General Feng Zicai led his army to defeat the French invaders, who by their own confession suffered "a disastrous defeat" at Zhennanguan. Although the French defeat caused the resignation of the French cabinet, the Qing government still negotiated cease-fire terms with France.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless the local people

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<sup>21</sup> For this point see also Bai Shouyi, 470.

organized themselves and continued their fighting. Of the resistance of this peasant army, "the Black Flag Guerrillas", Han Suyin comments:

In North Annam bands of peasants formed themselves into the Black Flag guerrillas, fought the French, and beat them.... Although the Black Flags had won a victory at Langson, the Court in Peking was not apprised of it, and when apprised took no heed (CT 63).

Like the 100,000 Taiping rebels who fought to their death in Nanjing, Captain Deng Shichang of the *Zhiyuan* and all his crew suicidally dashed their warship at the Japanese warship *Yoshino* after theirs was badly damaged in a battle during the Sino-Japanese War (1894-5). *Zhiyuan* was torpedoed and Captain Deng with more than 250 of his sailors died. So did the whole crew of the warship *Jingyuan*; all fought until their warship sank.

Echoing most Chinese historians' tone in criticizing the weak Qing government, Han Suyin agrees that the servile attitude of the Qing government towards the aggression of the imperialist powers so revolted the Chinese people that many times they themselves ignored their leaders and organized themselves to fight against foreign aggressors. The Sanyuanli resistance against the British during the Opium War (1840-42) (CT 44), the Black Flag Army led by Liu Yongfu, who fought the French from 1884 to 1885, and the self-organized volunteer army led by Xu Xiang fighting the Japanese in Taiwan in 1895 are obvious examples. The most famous, however, is of course the Boxer Rebellion which started in Shandong in 1898 and spread all over north China in 1900, "mainly in response to the provocations of Western missionaries and their Chinese converts" as



Jonathan Spence points out.<sup>22</sup> This massive rebellion clearly indicated the intensity of the hostility of the Chinese people towards the escalation of foreign aggression and interference with Chinese society in cultural, religious, and political terms. The historical causes of the Rebellion discussed in Han Suyin's The Crippled Tree (111-13), are more fully analyzed by Immanuel C. Y. Hsü:

Half a century of foreign humiliation, in war as well as in peace, had deeply wounded their national pride and self-respect. The presence of haughty foreign ministers, fire-eating consuls, aggressive missionaries, and self-seeking traders constantly reminded them of China's misfortune. This gnawing sense of injustice generated a burning desire for revenge until it burst out in a vast anti-foreign movement.<sup>23</sup>

In Eldest Son: Zhou Enlai and the Making of Modern China, 1898-1976 Han Suyin points out both the Boxers' xenophobic hatred of Western missionaries and their converts, and the worse brutality of the Western powers, including Japan, in dealing with the rebels:

The Boxers slaughtered Chinese Christians and foreign missionaries. But even greater slaughter was perpetrated when the combined forces of the Western powers and Japan walked into the capital, Beijing—then known as Peking—and for eight days killed, raped, looted at will (ES 20).

Her description of this event in The Crippled Tree is yet more graphic:

Peking was sacked by the armies of the West and Japan, fifty thousand people died. The wells were filled with corpses, the streets with bodies of men, women and children in pools of blood. Soldiers of France and England and Germany went about with open trousers to rape the women,

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<sup>22</sup> Spence, The Search for Modern China, 231.

<sup>23</sup> Immanuel C. Y. Hsü, The Rise of Modern China, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 387-88.

and spears to impale the babies. Some young men from the legation quarters armed with shotguns practised their aim on passers-by in the streets every afternoon for sport. A few militant missionaries boasted of the number of peasants they shot after baptizing them. One of them, an American, wrote: 'I sent eight hundred and forty-one new souls to heaven this week.' And there is that entrancing phrase of a German officer having his fun in Peking, quoted by L. D. Lyall in his book on China published in London in 1934: 'When I go pheasant shooting, I shoot cocks and spare hens, I kill the old birds and let the young ones go; but when hunting Chinese I kill them all, men and women, old and young' (CT 112).

Han Suyin's point here is again echoed in Hsü's statement that "the brutal demonstration of power by the foreign expeditionary forces created ... an image of invincibility and superiority."<sup>24</sup> Despite the obvious evidence of hatred and violent reaction, the Western powers did not learn any lessons from such events, refusing to see them, in Mark Mancall's words, "as a warning about structural problems in the relationship between the Empire and Oikoumene. Quite contrary [*sic*], the West dictated a settlement that took into account only its own interests; this move was guaranteed to lead, over time, to further disintegration of the relationship."<sup>25</sup>

For Han Suyin, the escalation of foreign aggression and oppression, together with the Qing government's increasing corruption, brutality to its own people, and servility to foreign powers, inevitably led to more violent resistance by the masses, which rapidly increased towards the end of the Qing Empire. She notes, "From 1902 onwards there were again [large] uprisings every year, some times twice a year." This is by no means

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<sup>24</sup> Hsü, 405.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Mancall, China at the Center: 300 Years of Foreign Policy (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 107.

an exaggeration; Mao Mao argues for a much larger scale of resistance: "In 1909 there were about 130 resistance struggles among the people in the whole country while in 1910 the number of violent resistances suddenly and rapidly increased to about 290."<sup>26</sup> Said's observation that "history also teaches us that domination breeds resistance"<sup>27</sup> is of obvious relevance here. Those uprisings would pave the way for the major revolutions to come.

### **3. The Republican Revolution (1911-1927)**

As Han Suyin relates, the sense of nationalism generated by foreign encroachment and plundering, and by the Qing government's weakness and corruption, became pressured lava waiting to erupt out of the mouth of the volcano of the revolution of 1911. The Republican forces were at first directed mainly against the Qing Empire rather than the Western powers. They had not at first intended to fight the West directly; in Spence's words, "as 'nationalists' they sought China's release from what they considered the economic stranglehold of the West and Japan"<sup>28</sup> in peaceful ways. From 1906 to 1908 the Republicans, whose organization was called Tongmen Hui (Revolutionary Alliance), inspired and directed no less than seven uprisings against the Qing Empire. After many

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<sup>26</sup> This is my translation from the instalment reprint of Mao Mao's (Deng Rong's), My Father Deng Xiaoping, People's Daily, overseas ed., 19 Aug. 1993, p. 4.

<sup>27</sup> Said, Culture and Imperialism, 287.

<sup>28</sup> Spence, The Search for Modern China, 261.

years of bitter but courageous struggle, the Republican movement, led by Sun Yatsen, finally sounded the death knell of the Qing Empire. Sun Yatsen, a Christian who was strongly influenced by Western democracy, tried hard to obtain aid and recognition from the Western powers, but he, as Spence points out, "moved with more energy than good judgement to find foreign backing,"<sup>29</sup> for "the main priority of the foreign powers was to protect their investments in China" in Felix Greene's words.<sup>30</sup> When democracy and self-interest hung in the balance, the Western powers always chose the latter, as history has clearly shown in the case of China. Another influential historian, C. P. Fitzgerald, also notes:

The powers preferred the strong man [Yuan Shikai]<sup>31</sup> and thus ensured the collapse and discredit of the early Republic. When Sun Yatsen, whose government was certainly the legitimate one by the legal tests to which the West attached so much importance, appealed for recognition and aid to end China's misery, they again refused. They did not get a third chance. The Russians stepped in where the West feared to tread.<sup>32</sup>

Sun's failure to get backing from the West once again suggests to Han Suyin and other Chinese historians that the Western powers' commitment to democracy was mere rhetoric and that self-interest was their true belief. As Greene puts it, "They were out for

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>30</sup> Greene, 287.

<sup>31</sup> Yuan Shikai (1859-1916), the head of warlords, was the so-called president of China from 1913 to 1915.

<sup>32</sup> Fitzgerald, 56.

themselves, they were out for profit."<sup>33</sup> Such statements certainly coincide with Han Suyin's comments on Sun's action:

Again and again he [Sun] appealed to the Powers, begging for international co-operation, for understanding. He pointed out that in the Revolution there had been no mob rule, no massacres, that foreign interests had not been harmed .... He asked for a chance for China. He spoke of justice, decency, honesty .... He did not get them (CT 265).

Han Suyin claims that it was only now that the Chinese finally realized that Western enthusiasm for democracy was but a castle in the air: with respect to China, the Western powers neither supported it, nor even believed in it. Clearly, if China had become independent and strong, the Western powers could neither have exploited it, nor have extorted privileges, special treaty rights and control of huge territories. Thus the Western powers did anything necessary to prevent China from becoming independent and strong rather than to promote democracy in the country. This is precisely why Han Suyin argues, "The last thing the West wanted was a strong China, capitalist or not" (CT 83).

One particularly striking example of this phenomenon is provided by the Versailles Peace Conference in 1918, which is explored several times in Han Suyin's writings. The Western powers, having ignored both China's protest and the fact that China was an ally of theirs during World War I, inexplicably, at least in conventional terms of international justice, decided to let Japan have all the special treaty rights which had been seized and enjoyed by Germany in Shandong province. This injustice ignited

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<sup>33</sup> Felix Greene, The Enemy: Notes on Imperialism and Revolution (London: Jonathan Cape 1970), 61.

the famous May 4th movement started by the students in Beijing University, which rapidly spread out all over China in 1919. It greatly changed the Chinese way of thinking in almost all areas; it also cost the powers dearly. Han Suyin glosses the consequences thus:

For China the watershed between Yesterday and Today began on May 4th, 1919. All my generation date ourselves from that year and day, which means ... everything to a quarter of the world's humanity. For it was the day on which China's intellectuals turned away from the West, because the Western democracies killed democracy that year and thus condemned themselves and their own system to the decline and fall in Asia we see enacted as we breathe (MF 53).

The Beijing newspaper, China Press, reported, as Han Suyin notes: "China, who had looked for the dawn of a new era, saw that no sun would rise for her in the *west*; we realized that the western democracies were great liars ..." (MF 56). A similar conclusion is reached by many Western historians. Fitzgerald points out, "By 1920 it was clear that Western democracy was not the solution, and tacitly it was abandoned even by the revolutionary element."<sup>34</sup> Peter Mitchell also comments that:

The revolutionary forces had hoped that the Western powers would assist them in establishing a democratic republic, but the refusal of the Western powers to aid them against the warlord-dominated Peking government fanned anti-western sentiment within the Nationalist Party. Revolutionary Russia was more sympathetic, providing arms and advisers to Sun's organization.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Fitzgerald, 56.

<sup>35</sup> Peter M. Mitchell, China: Tradition and Revolution (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1977), 121. For a similar conclusion see also Fitzgerald, p.56 and John King Fairbank, China: A New History (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 281.

Hence Han Suyin naturally finds that the disillusionment with Western democracy was in this context part of the larger awakening of patriotic nationalism. The Chinese, especially students, increasingly resented the arrogance, aggressiveness, and exploitation of the foreigners in their own country. They felt deeply shamed and humiliated by the fact that their customs, salt revenues and post were still controlled by foreigners. Foreign settlements and concessions dominated their major cities; foreign troops, gunboats and police were patrolling in their territories; foreign goods were flooding their markets, and foreign missionaries were encroaching on their culture. Even the mild, soft and gentle Yentung, Han's father, resented such humiliation. When he was receiving his language training in Shanghai he observed:

There were whole streets where Chinese, unless they were servants of foreigners, could not walk because at any moment a Sikh policeman might kick them if they loitered, or beat them with his stick. On the River the gunboats of five Powers plied, on the broad streets the soldiers of seven nations paraded (CT 157).

The situation portrayed in Han Suyin's books<sup>36</sup> is well echoed in Hsü's argument:

To Chinese patriots, these humiliating signs of imperialism were a constant irritant and a reminder of China's semicolonial status, which should no longer be endured. Fired with nationalism, they set out to 'save their country'... from imperialism, capitalistic exploitation, and warlordism.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed an explosive situation was brewing, and in the process generating anti-foreign sentiment. In such an atmosphere Han Suyin's mother, a Belgian, inevitably

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<sup>36</sup> See footnote 11.

<sup>37</sup> Hsü, 533.

became an object of much anti-Western hostility from which she suffered tremendously. A particularly painful incident in a cinema in Beijing involving the entire family indicates the depth of such hostility among the Chinese, especially the young students.<sup>38</sup>

Such anti-foreign sentiment was building and would soon reach a point that only a spark would be needed to ignite a wildfire of outrage. And as Han Suyin notes, that spark came on May 30, 1925 when the British police opened fire on students demonstrating in Shanghai, killing 11 and wounding several dozens.<sup>39</sup> This is the famous "May 30th Atrocious Incident" which originally was caused by the Japanese owner of a cotton mill in Shanghai, who killed one striker and wounded seven others on May 15. Han Suyin reports that this event immediately aroused the outrage of the people all over the country. A general strike was called in Shanghai, Guangzhou (Canton) and Hong Kong. When the British troops killed fifty-six demonstrators and wounded more than 100 in Guangzhou, "The rage all over China was immense, and the strike in Hong

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<sup>38</sup> While Han's family were watching a movie in a cinema in Beijing, a university student caused a sudden commotion when he started shouting political slogans. The student was carried out by some policemen, and the young boy next to Han's mother ran to get a closer look at the student. Then her mother asked her to take the seat left by the boy, but he returned a moment later and demanded his seat back. Her mother told the boy to take Han's seat which was in the next row but the boy insisted on getting his seat back and began to shout, "Down with all the white devils from over the sea," as Han's mother was Belgian. Suddenly the whole cinema, led by another university student, started screaming angrily: "Down with the colonialists and down with the imperialists." Han's family had to be escorted out by policemen. For more details about the incident see CT 377-79.

<sup>39</sup> According to both Spence and Hsü 11 were killed. Spence, The Search for Modern China, 340; Hsü, 534. Yet according to Mitchell the number is 13. Mitchell, 133.



Kong—which was to last sixteen months—grew in anger and intensity, backed by a massive boycott of British goods” as Spence describes.<sup>40</sup> Han Suyin’s version of this event is as follows:

In May 1925, British soldiers killed fifty-six workers ... In Shanghai, a dozen Chinese workers were shot dead by British police. Throughout China, uprisings against foreigners took place ... A strike was declared by the workers’ unions in Hong Kong, and 100,000 workers left the colony to come to Guangzhou. The strike was to last eighteen months. It seriously crippled Hong Kong’s commerce (ES 74).

Han Suyin believes that this type of anti-imperialist sentiment, transformed into a passionate nationalism, was used as a powerful weapon by the revolutionaries to fight against both the foreign powers and the warlords who were backed by foreign powers financially and politically. Thus Chinese nationalism became a spiritual and moral power which laid the foundation of the morale of the Republican Revolutionary Army and paved the way for the victory of the Northern Expedition from 1926 to 1927, which apparently unified the whole country by bringing all the warlords under the banner of Guomindang.

Such events are important in their own right in the sorry story of Western colonialism. As Han Suyin shows, their larger historical significance, however, goes well beyond this familiar narrative. They point directly towards the paradox by which the West, acting out of the narrowest sense of self-interest, in the end undermined those interests by ensuring that the real revolution, when it came, would sweep away all traces of Western influence. That is exactly why Han Suyin raises the hypothetical question of

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<sup>40</sup> Spence, The Search for Modern China, 341.

whether China would have experienced a communist revolution had the West pursued more enlightened policies (see, for example, CT 83, 85, 265; MF 54-60). Her own answer to the question is that it was the Western Powers that helped to force China into communism.<sup>41</sup> She goes on to draw a parallel with Vietnam: "as the Americans in South Vietnam with indiscriminate slaughter have succeeded in making Communism appear to the people the only salvation, so the destructive chaos, abetted by the Powers, nurtured the Communist Revolution of China and made sure of its spread" (CT 322).

Han Suyin's zest in rubbing the West's nose in the fact that it has itself created the monster it most fears has provoked the intense hostility of many anti-communist sinologists and politicians alike. Behind this zest, however, she creates an exceedingly logical argument; since the West shaped the direction of affairs in China for the century before the Revolution, and since the direction led inevitably to the Revolution, then the West is in a sense responsible for it. These issues, among others, I shall explore at considerable length in the following pages.

#### **4. The Guomindang and the Communists (1927-1949)**

The syllogism suggested above is logical; some critics, however, argue that there are many other reasons why China turned to communism. By arguing that the Western powers forced China into communism, they suggest, Han Suyin oversimplifies a very

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<sup>41</sup> See CT 265. This point is quoted earlier on page 19.

complex issue. Indeed there are surely many other reasons that can help to explain why China has turned to Communism. C. P. Fitzgerald argues that the many internal conflicts, revolts and revolutions were the fundamental forces leading to the Communist Revolution;<sup>42</sup> Roy Hofheinz and Tetsuya Kataoka argue that the genius of the Communists in organization and self-discipline made the success of their revolution possible;<sup>43</sup> while Chalmers Johnson maintains that the Communists' identification with patriotic nationalism during the Sino-Japanese War won broad and strong support from the peasants which became the major force by which the Communists won their final victory.<sup>44</sup>

Still other given reasons why China turned to Communism were the massive corruption of the Jiang Jieshi (Chiang Kaishek) regime, its inability to curb the wild inflation which ruined the Chinese economy from 1937 to 1949, and its fascist passion for control within China, which led to the savage repression of all oppositions.<sup>45</sup> Another reason is, as Fitzgerald, Hsü and Donald G. Gillin argue, the effective social

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<sup>42</sup> Fitzgerald, 16.

<sup>43</sup> See Cohen, 170.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Harold Isaacs, Images of Asia: American Views of China and India, 2nd impression (New York: Capricorn Books, 1962), 176-190; Mitchell, 142-3; Fitzgerald, 101, 105-6; Fairbank, 288, 290-92; Mancall, 306; Spence, 361-62, 438, 486, 498-504. Even Hsü who seems to favor the Guomindang also clearly maintains the point, 573, 641-42.

and economic reforms in all the Communist-occupied areas.<sup>46</sup>

This is not of course to argue that Han Suyin has ignored those factors by pursuing only a single-minded attack on the disastrous effects of Western aggression and exploitation. On the contrary she certainly notes such issues and extensively explores many of them in her books. She also repeatedly points out not only in her autobiographical volumes but also in her China in the Year 2001 (1967), Asia Today (1969) and The Morning Deluge (1972) that the Communist Revolution is a predictable result of many peasant uprisings, revolts and revolutions in the history of modern China. To this list she adds serious poverty, disease, a general backwardness caused both by Western exploitation and the weakness, corruption and inefficiency of successive governments the early 1800s to 1949, especially the Guomindang regime.

More to the point, she gives the Communists themselves due credit for bringing about their triumph and for their subsequent achievements in turning China into a modern, powerful and proud nation whose destiny was at last in its own hands. Thus she concludes that the present China is a result of both internal social, political and economic crises and external cultural, military and economic aggression: "Present-day China is a product, not only of her own long feudalism, but also of the last one hundred and twenty-five years of bitter struggle against occidental exploitation" (CY 20). Yet with her emphasis upon the Western powers' responsibility for forcing China into Communism,

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<sup>46</sup> Fitzgerald, 77; Hsü, 643; Donald G. Gillin, "'Peasant Nationalism' in the History of Chinese Communism," Journal of Asian Studies 23 no. 2 (February 1964): 269-289.

Han Suyin seems to stress the imperialist impact more than the effects of the domestic crises. This is perhaps because, driven by her sense of Chinese identity, and writing for a Western audience, she is particularly concerned to make the West aware both of its own guilt, and its responsibility for what ensued. She is writing a particular history for an audience that has long chosen to ignore or deny it.

Han Suyin's exploration of the corruption of the Guomintang (Kuomintang) regime is extensive, deep and detailed. After the massive massacres of Communists in 1927, the Guomintang openly betrayed the spirit of the Republican Revolution, dropping Sun Yatsen's policies of cooperating with Russia, with the Communists, and supporting the peasants and workers. Instead it expelled the Russian advisors as soon as the new government had been established in Nanjing in 1928. From the very beginning the Guomintang government was not for the common people but for its own power; hence it was not surprising that many of its senior officials and generals were not working for the betterment of the country but for their own interests, privileges, benefits, and ambitions as Han Suyin so vividly describes in Birdless Summer. As an old Chinese saying goes: (*de dao duo zhu, shi dao gua zhu*)—an unjust cause finds little support. Han Suyin experienced herself, through the agency of her first husband, as part of this corruption. Her extensive exploration of Guomintang corruption in Birdless Summer, The Morning Deluge and The Eldest Son is neither fiction nor exaggeration; and hers is but one voice in a larger chorus.<sup>47</sup> The issue is perhaps most concisely described by

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<sup>47</sup> See footnote 44.

Fairbank in his China: A New History.<sup>48</sup> However the analysis of the Guomindang corruption by Isaacs in his classic text, Image of Asia: American Views of China and India is better documented and more extensively researched. Isaacs comments:

Despite valiant rear-guard action by Chiang Kai-shek's [Jiang Jieshi's] partisans, the idea of corruption became almost automatically identified with the regime he had failed to maintain in China. Despite all the frenzied finger-pointing and scapegoat-hunting, the notion of *failure-through-corruption* was still the principal reason assigned by the largest single group in our panel for the collapse of the Nationalist regime and the victory of the Communists.<sup>49</sup>

Isaacs' statement here suggests the credibility of Han Suyin's argument that corruption was one of the fatal cancer cells that doomed the Guomindang led by Jiang Jieshi under whom, in Han Suyin's own words, "profiteering, bribery, and corruption ... had prevailed" (ES 228).

The military mission to South-East Asia by the Guomindang government in January 1941, of which Han's first husband was a member, documented fully in Birdless Summer, shows exhaustively that what many of the Guomindang generals, officers, and officials really cared for was their own personal interests, not the sufferings of the Chinese people, nor the urgent problems of a country that was undergoing a Japanese invasion. They took advantage of their mission for personal gain rather than national interest. Every member of the mission brought back several truck loads of commodities

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<sup>48</sup> Fairbank, China: A New History, 288-92.

<sup>49</sup> Isaacs, Image of Asia: American Views of China and India, 190. For a detailed description of the point see also 176-190.

because of the wild inflation and scarcity of goods at home. Han Suyin's sketch of her first husband and his fellow officers is by no means flattering:

All told gleefully tales of corruption, bribery, nepotism, chaos, and then did exactly what they deplored in others. For the execution of what was preached was certainly not required; it was dangerous, indeed, to be honest, hard-working, incorruptible. It was 'unnatural' not to be corrupt, eager for bribes—in fact it was being a communist (BS 131).

Her views on the Guomindang regime propped up by the Americans are perhaps best reflected in the diaries of Jiang Jieshi's American chief of staff, General Joseph W. Stilwell:

January 19 [1943]...A gang of thugs [the Jiang Jieshi regime] with the one idea of perpetuating themselves and their machine. Money, influence, and position [are] the only consideration of the leaders. Intrigue, double-crossing, lying reports. Hands out for anything they can get; their only idea [is] to let someone else do the fighting; false propaganda on their "heroic struggle"; indifference of "leaders" to their men. Cowardice rampant, squeeze paramount, smuggling above duty, colossal ignorance and stupidity of staff, total inability to control factions and cliques, continued oppression of masses...And we are manoeuvred into a position of having to support this rotten regime and glorify its figure-head, the all-wise, great patriot and soldier—Peanut [Stilwell's nickname for Jiang Jieshi]. My God.<sup>50</sup>

Han Suyin herself notes the irony of the situation: "General Joseph W. (Vinegar Joe) Stilwell, who had been sent to China expressly for the purpose of 'reorganizing' Chiang's troops and making them to fight, was bitterly antagonistic to Chiang" (MD 424).

One of the worst aspects of the situation was perhaps the wild inflation of the Guomindang years from 1937 to 1949. The reasons for the uncontrollable inflation were

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<sup>50</sup> Joseph W. Stilwell, The Stilwell Papers, ed. T. H. White (New York: MacFadden-Bartell, 1962), 157.

obvious to Han Suyin: the regime's financial mismanagement and its high officials' and officers' manipulation of the Chinese currency, its exchange rate, government bonds, and capital for personal gain. The people had already lost their confidence in the regime; therefore, they wanted to exchange their money into hard currency or precious metals. The wars, the famines and the corruption of the government also caused the economy to deteriorate and in turn the deteriorating economy led to the currency crisis. The enormous increase in note issue fuelled the inflation. It, as Hsü notes, "grew from 1.3 billion yuan in January 1937 to a fantastic 24,558,999 billion by the end of 1948, with the result that prices increased by 30 percent per month during 1945-48. During the brief span from August 1948 to April 1949, note issues multiplied by 4,524 times, and the Shanghai price index rose an astronomical 135,742 times."<sup>51</sup> By late 1948 the inflation had reached such a rate that the average prices had multiplied by 6,250,000 times since 1937.<sup>52</sup>

It is well-known that the finances of Jiang Jieshi's regime were controlled by his relatives and loyal friends like his brothers-in-law H. H. Kung and T. V. Soong. As Han Suyin and many other historians note, most of them were greedily plundering the national wealth. Because they had both the monopoly of capital and government power, they were

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<sup>51</sup> Hsü, 184-85.

<sup>52</sup> John A. Harrison, China Since 1800 (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), 191. The unbelievable figure here is not a fantastic exaggeration. Felix Greene notes: "Between 1937 and 1949, commodity prices increased 81/2 million times. Money that would buy twelve oxen in 1937 would not buy a single grain of rice in 1949." Felix Greene, Peking (New York: Mayflower Books, 1978), 53.



able to rig the financial market and manipulate the exchange rate; therefore, they easily channelled both the national wealth and American loans and grants into their own pockets. Thus Han Suyin writes:

Besides the Finance Minister, H. H. Kung, there was also Tai Lee's organization [the terrorist Blueshirts] and its monopoly companies; there was the Kuomintang [Guomindang] Army, trafficking directly with the Japanese .... A credit of U.S. \$50 million was granted that summer [1940] by the United States, but there was no exchange control, as the Finance Minister and his wife were opposed to it. They, and many government officials connected with them, were benefiting from this freedom by buying foreign exchange at the pegged rate of 20 to 1. Thus each loan, each grant, was channelled away into the pockets of officials, and by 1940 the purchasing power of the legal tender, the *fapi*, went down to one-tenth of its 1937 level. By 1941 it was one-fiftieth of that level (BS 184-85).<sup>53</sup>

Of course the government officials' and generals' fortune was accumulated by destroying the livelihood of hundreds of millions of the common people, who had no reason to believe in the regime any longer.

Moreover as Han Suyin's lengthy and detailed description of her personal experiences in Birdless Summer shows, the corruption of the Guomindang was as much intellectual, moral and spiritual as social and economic. It could offer no new framework of ideological values for the Chinese people, but relied instead on old Confucian doctrines such as the virtues of "etiquette, righteousness, integrity and conscientiousness" as its moral guidelines. Such values were of course travestied by the Guomindang regime. Han Suyin's first husband was a typical example: through him she convincingly

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<sup>53</sup> For the problem of wild inflation caused by Guomindang mismanagement and corruption see also Mitchell, 142, 153-54, 156; Hsü, 641. Stilwell, 100, 157.

reveals that the many Guomindang senior officers and officials like him applied the virtues to others, especially to women, rather than to themselves; therefore, the virtues became pretexts to accuse and oppress others rather than as moral guidelines for themselves. Yet even had the regime truly lived by these values, such feudal doctrines and virtues themselves could no longer function in the country which was facing both critical internal and external crises. Some of them were deeply prejudicial, especially against women; and their strong demand for blind obedience to the feudal system was seriously detrimental to the development of China. Further the creation of the Gestapo-like organization, "the Blueshirts," by Jiang Jieshi to extend his own institutional control, the use of a Nazi-like state terror to suppress his opposition, and his collusion with secret societies in controlling order in big cities like Shanghai,<sup>54</sup> drove the intellectuals of the liberal and democratic parties into the arms of the Communists. Han Suyin, with many other historians, points out that in the history of China whoever loses both the intellectuals and the peasants loses state power.

It is the Guomindang's linked responses to the Japanese invasion and to the Communists that perhaps most clearly define their unfitness to rule China, and likewise explains the inevitable triumph of Communism in the country. The Guomindang's non-resistant policy concerning the Japanese invasion and their many secret connections with the Japanese are most fully documented by Han Suyin in Birdless Summer, where she

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<sup>54</sup> For a detailed description of the Blueshirts, its organizations, activities, and its leaders see BS 83-89.

charts her growing disillusionment with Guomintang policies and practices, reflected in her growing conviction that, with the exception of some patriotic generals like Li Zongren, Feng Yuxiang, Ji Hongchang, Cai Tingjie and Zhang Guangnai, Jiang Jieshi and his Guomintang regime never honestly intended to fight the Japanese but instead made the Communists their primary target. It was through Jiang's "non-resistance policy" that millions of patriots saw through his self-interest and went over to the Communists. Jiang clearly saw that the Communists were winning the support of the people. If he could not completely wipe them out while they were still weak he would never be able to do it later; but although a Confucian disciple he ignored the Confucian doctrine that whoever win the heart of the people win the Mandate of Heaven.

Facing the invasion, the majority of the Chinese people wanted to fight against the Japanese; however, Jiang Jieshi unscrupulously made use of any opportunity to destroy the Communists, including giving tacit consent to the Japanese troops and their supporters fighting against the Communists. Thus he not only lost the support of the peasants, but also that of the intellectuals, especially the young students, and even many of his own troops, officers and generals who wanted to fight against the Japanese for their country. The famous young Marshal, Zhang Xueliang, and General Yang Hucheng detained Jiang in Xian to force him to fight the Japanese while he was urging them to fight the Communists in December 1936.<sup>55</sup> Despite his efforts some of his powerful generals like Cai Tingjie, Zhang Guangnai, Feng Yuxiang, Song Zheyuan, Ji Hongchang

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<sup>55</sup> See ME, 377-383; MD, 327-30 and ES, 150-56.

and others ignored his "non-resistance policy," and fought the Japanese invaders although they were aware that they might be persecuted or even assassinated by the "Blueshirts." Some of them indeed were; therefore, many later defected to the Communists with their hundreds of thousands of soldiers. Thus in the 1930s and 1940s many patriotic but non-political intellectuals, mostly young university graduates, went to the Communist headquarters, Yanan. Han Suyin writes:

By the end of 1938, Yen-an, the great Red Base, was more than just a military outpost, it was a shining beacon of fervour and patriotism, attracting students and intellectuals from all over China.... If Chiang [Jiang Jieshi] gave in to the Japanese, the prestige of Yen-an would sweep the whole of China, irresistibly (BS 58).

It is thus that the Japanese invasion of China doomed the Jiang Jieshi regime precisely because the regime did not fight against it, and therefore, lost popular support. Furthermore, the invasion helped the Communists to power, for it provided an excellent opportunity for the Communists to take advantage of the anti-Japanese patriotism that had captured the heart of the whole nation. This point was made in 1972 by Premier Zhou Enlai when some visiting Japanese delegations apologized for what they had done to the Chinese during the war: "Please do not apologize. The war hastened the crumbling of our old system, increased our patriotism. We should thank you" (ES 305).<sup>56</sup>

It is in this context that Han Suyin contrasts the remarkable performance of the

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<sup>56</sup> On September 25, 1972 in his meeting of the Japanese Prime Minister, Kakuei Tanaka, Mao Zedong also expressed a similar point. See Mao's private doctor, Li Zhisui's The Private Life of Chairman Mao, Chinese trans. from the Random House ed. (Taipei: China Times, 1994), 543, 544.

Communists themselves with that of the Guomindang during the 1930s and 40s. She vigorously praises the Communists and extols their virtues and achievements in several of her books. Here is an example from The Morning Deluge:

The popularity of the Communist government was assured by its honesty, its integrity, the high caliber of its cadres; by fair distribution, by democratic procedure, by the security given to the population, by the abolition of extortion and the low level of taxation. This was reinforced by the help given by the Army to peasants, welfare and education movements .... The terrible massacres by the Japanese, the vicious oppression and ruthless killings by Kuomintang troops, in glaring contrast to the care and scrupulous democracy of the Communist Party and Red Army, turned the support of the population towards the Communists (MD 363-64).

Such eulogy by Han Suyin has antagonised some sinologists such as Simon Leys and John Scott who harbour strong anti-communist sentiment. But most historians have agreed that the Communists indeed did a better job than the Guomindang during that period; and the single fact that the Communists, starting with nothing, finally beat a powerful Guomindang regime backed by the American government can perhaps provide the best evidence.

Virtually all the Western journalists<sup>57</sup> who visited the Communist areas (except the Catholic priest Cormac Shanahan of the China Correspondent and some other Catholic publications) had very positive reports on the Chinese Communists; as Hsü

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<sup>57</sup> They were, for example, Brooks Atkinson, James M. Bertram, T. A. Bisson, Israel Epstein, Harrison Forman, Phillip J. Jaffe, Ralph Lapwood, Michael Lindsay, Agnes Smedley, Edgar Snow, Helen Snow, Gunther Stein, Anna Louise Strong, and Theodore H. White. For further details about these journalists and their political affiliation see Hsü, 593-99.

comments:

The feeling of revulsion to [*sic*] the KMT [Guomindang] and attraction to the CCP was shared by most foreign reporters with the notable exception of one Catholic priest ... on the whole they represented a wide spectrum of political convictions; they were impressed by the Communists' activity, hope, honesty, and concern for the masses. T. A. Bisson distinguished the Nationalist "feudal China" from the Communist "democratic China." Gunther Stein of the Associated Press and The Christian Science Monitor called Chungking a "pathetic city" and a "nightmare." Flying from Yanan [Yanan] to Chungking was like travelling "from one Chinese world to another." Theodore White of Time-Life described the Yanan people as "ruddier and healthier" than elsewhere in China, while Harrison Forman of the United Press and The New York Herald Tribune considered the Red soldiers in 1943 "about the best nourished troops I had yet seen."

The yardstick comparison was ... Chungking and Yanan. The former represented "Old China"—inert, decadent, selfish, suffering, indifferent to the common people, poor, inhumanitarian, and nepotistic—and the later represented "New China"—hopeful, young, efficient, vigorous, Spartan, and enthusiastic. Edgar Snow spoke of a Red Star rising over China, and Theodore White thought that the KMT regime was losing the Mandate of Heaven by default, rotting away through moral degeneration and political misrule. Although White "distrusted Communist intentions and had no desire to see China engulfed in a Red tide," he considered the KMT "decadent" and the CCP "dynamic"—the latter had "shone by comparison."<sup>58</sup>

Hsü's description confirms Han Suyin's comments on these foreign journalists' reports in her writing (See, for example, MD 418, 424-25). Han's comparison of the Guomindang and the Communists mirrors the reports, comments and criticism by these journalists and army officers who expressed bitter disappointment at the Guomindang's

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<sup>58</sup> Hsü, 594-95.

poor performance.<sup>59</sup> After several years bitter experience with the Jiang Jieshi regime General Stilwell had this to say:

I judge Kuomintang [Guomindang] and Kungchantung (Communist Party) by what I saw: (KMT) [GMD] Corruption, neglect, chaos, economy, taxes, words and deeds. Hoarding, black market, trading with the enemy [the Japanese]. Communist program ... reduce taxes, rents, interest. Raise production, and standard of living. Participate in government. Practice what they preach.<sup>60</sup>

Echoing Stilwell's comments in her description of the Dixie mission in Yanan, Han Suyin writes:

Yenan's spartan virtues, honesty, egalitarianism, the good health and discipline of the Eighth Route Army ... Everything impressed the Americans. It was so utterly different from Chongqing with its corrupt officials, its heartless way of treating the poor .... John Service, Barrett, and others of the Dixie Mission filed favorable comments on their visit, and as a result would become victims of McCarthyism in the following years (ES 183-84).

Han Suyin also reports that some American officers, diplomats and journalists were convinced that the future of China lay with the Communists rather than the Guomindang. And they were proved to be right by history although some of them were to suffer harassment, humiliation and even persecution during the McCarthy era. In The Morning

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<sup>59</sup> In addition to "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell, discussed earlier, General Patrick Hurley, who was Roosevelt's special emissary to China from 1944 to 1945, Captain Evans F. Carlson who was the first American officer to enter the Communist areas to observe Communist military operations in 1937, Foreign Service Officer John S. Service, John P. Davis who was the political adviser to General Stilwell and Colonel David D. Barrett who first served as military attach in Beijing and later led "the Dixie Mission" group of 18 officers in 1944, are all important witnesses. See also footnote 57, p.55.

<sup>60</sup> Stilwell, 251.

Deluge, while praising the Chinese Communists, Han Suyin notes John Paton Davis's commentary on them:

"The Communist government and armies are the first in modern Chinese history to have positive and widespread popular support ... because they are genuinely of the people," wrote John Paton Davis, an American observer in November 1944, one of a score of such favorable reports on the Communist administration (MD 363).

To questions of Han Suyin's objectivity in her preference for the Communists over the Guomindang, the eye-witness accounts by Western journalists, and more significantly, the American observers, officers and officials who went to Yanan are of some relevance. Hsü's description of the reaction of some of the Americans who had been to the Communist areas is a useful gauge of Han Suyin's credibility:

At the beginning of November 1944 Davis, who had replaced Service [as Foreign Service Officer] in Yen-an, came to the conclusion that "the Communists are in China to stay. And China's destiny is not Chiang's but theirs" .... The Army Mission [the Dixie Mission] in Yen-an called the Communists' area "a different country," and Yen-an "the most modern place in China." The Americans repeatedly noted Communist nationalism and pragmatism, and during the fall of 1944 predicted the very real possibility of their ultimate triumph. Even Roosevelt's special emissary to China, Patrick Hurley, known for his pro-Nationalist stand, remarked after a visit to Yen-an in November 1944 that the Communists were "the only real democrats in China" and that they were "not in fact Communists; they were striving for democratic principles." Ambassador Clarence Gauss also believed that it was likely that they would eventually win, and favored "pulling the plug and allowing the show [the Nationalist Government] to go down the drain."<sup>61</sup>

Hsü's description provides a context for Han Suyin's outrage over the fact that although many American diplomats, officers and political advisers presented their sharp criticism

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<sup>61</sup> Hsü, 598-99.



of the "Peanut" to their government, the American government did not dismiss him.

According to Han Suyin, the United States' huge military and economic support to Jiang Jieshi regime is but another example of its imprudent miscalculations. As a result, it lost all influence in and access to China until well into the 1970s. It seems that the American government had three principal aims in supporting the Jiang regime: it considered the Jiang regime as the only Chinese government that could unify China simply because of the huge size of its military force at that time; it wanted to keep Jiang as an ally within the war against the enemy, Japan; it certainly did not want to see China turn to communism and the Jiang regime had already proved itself anti-communist.

It was obvious to Han Suyin however that those concerns were based on American self-interest rather than on principles of democracy; the triumph of the Jiang regime would certainly have brought the American government considerable political and economic advantage. A Jiang government would not only prevent China from turning communist but also stand at the front line to fight against the U.S.S.R. Han Suyin's argument here is well supported by the views of John K. Fairbank:

After 1941, the American government became for the first time directly and deeply involved in China's domestic affairs. The result was a disaster, for American activity was now guided not by a primary concern for the Chinese people but by a primary concern for the American national interest, first to defeat Japan using China as a base, second to counter Soviet influence by nurturing a non-Communist China.<sup>62</sup>

It is in this context that Han Suyin argues:

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<sup>62</sup> John K. Fairbank, "The New China and the American Connection," Foreign Affairs 51 no. 1 (October 1972): 43.

The thirty years from 1919 to 1949 saw the birth and ascendancy of New China, through the most epic and prolonged, heroic and violent armed struggle of modern times, in which colossal numbers were involved. And the outcome was bound to be a communist China, since no other kind of China was possible; Western "democracy" had made quite sure of that (CY 28).

The Americans, of course, were unwilling to draw the same conclusion, and found it impossible to believe that they did not have, as world leaders, the right to shape China's affairs. They were disappointed that they could not take the world leadership onto their own shoulders in the case of China, although they once confidently believed that they were capable of doing it. As Said points out,

Besides, is there not an unquestioned assumption on our part that our destiny is to rule and lead the world, a destiny that we have assigned ourselves as part of our errand into the wilderness?<sup>63</sup>

Yet as Han Suyin has argued throughout her works, the Chinese have always resented such a hegemonic attitude; therefore, the American government's hostility to the Communists during the Chinese Civil War from 1946 to 1949 provided only another irritant, another cause for outraged protest. In the end, Western historians have tended to echo Han Suyin's conclusion that the Americans' attempt to prevent China from turning to communism by supporting the Jiang Jieshi regime was counter-productive. The Guomindang regime, even though supported by the American government, was too corrupt to survive; it did not represent, or care about the common people, especially the poor. The Communists, on the other hand, had won the support of the majority of the

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<sup>63</sup> Said, Culture and Imperialism, 55.

people, and already become the main force in defining the destiny of the country; therefore, the American government misjudged not only the reality of the political situation, but also the larger reshaping of China itself.

America's grand plan was of course to incorporate China into its own ideology, namely anti-communism; but as Said points out, "There are far too many politicized people on earth today for any nation readily to accept the finality of America's historical mission to lead the world."<sup>64</sup> After more than a century's foreign domination and exploitation the Communists effectively turned the American plan into a powerful propaganda tool against imperialist interference in China. They succeeded, that is, in using American antipathy to communism to strengthen the communist cause.

## II

### Han Suyin and the Historians of Modern China

#### 1. Objectivity vs Subjectivity

The central issue that divides Han Suyin from most Western historians is, in John K. Fairbank's words, "the degree of China's victimization and exploitation by the treaty powers."<sup>65</sup> Many feel that Han Suyin's passionate commitment to China leads here to a certain subjectivity of perception. She has, however, both witnessed and participated in the unfolding process of China's self-creation; her account is by that token based on

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>65</sup> Fairbank, China: A New History, 170.

evidence inaccessible to Western sinologists. Although her insistence that the Western powers forced China into communism may seem in some respects slightly overstressed, Han Suyin acknowledges many more historical issues that played their part. The West may well have driven the Chinese to revolution, but it was the Chinese who made the revolution, and the new China that followed. Several times Han Suyin clearly indicates that a revolution is made by the people who are exploited, but prepared by those who exploit them. She explores such an idea through her Third Uncle's mouth in The Crippled Tree:

'For me,' said Third Uncle,...'If you get to the point where you have nothing to lose, then you get up and make a revolution. But a revolution is not **made** only by the people who are exploited, it is also **prepared** by those who exploit them. That is the paradox of history. The Japanese, the West, all of them **helped** [emphasis mine] to bring about the Revolution of 1911, and who knows but that after this big War [Anti-Japanese War 1937-45] another Revolution may come (CT 85)?'

Most forcefully in China in the Year 2001, Han Suyin argues that the peasant uprisings in China and the corruption and decadence of the traditional feudal system that caused them inevitably planted the seed of the Communist Revolution which brought about the People's Republic of China, while Western aggression and exploitation created the right temperature and moisture which helped the seed to sprout and grow. Han Suyin's point here echoes C. P. Fitzgerald's argument:

The Chinese Revolution was made possible by the long growth of elements of instability in Chinese society. The increasing maladjustment of institutions, the ever more apparent inadequacy of the ruling orthodox doctrines, the manifest decline in the prestige and power of the Empire both at home and abroad, all these factors had brought about a situation in which only a small agent was needed to bring the aged structure down

in ruin.... The cause of this great upheaval therefore lay principally in China herself; the agency was western imperialism, but the reaction was far more extensive than the force applied gave any reason to expect.<sup>66</sup>

It is here that the issue of Han Suyin's subjectivity becomes complex. How much was China exploited? How much did the Chinese suffer from such exploitation? For Han Suyin and other Chinese historians the answer is unambiguous; the suffering recorded in political, cultural, economic and psychological terms is both intense and extensive. Hence their "subjective feelings" towards the injustice and exploitation by the Western powers are very negative because of their suffering from them. Han Suyin's facts, very much in accord with those of other Chinese historians, clearly reflect the point that Said makes in Orientalism:

The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony.<sup>67</sup>

The key problem here is the nature of the West's domination or hegemony, which Western historians consciously or unconsciously tend to minimize, but to which Han Suyin, with other Chinese historians, gives maximum emphasis. Of course it is true that feelings of outrage and indignation are understandably involved in the Chinese interpretation of their modern history. It is equally true, however, that many Western responses are based on a refusal to acknowledge the historical facts of colonialism and

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<sup>66</sup> Fitzgerald, The Birth of Communist China, 16, 30.

<sup>67</sup> Said, Orientalism, 5.

imperialism,<sup>68</sup> with the logical implications of such facts; behind this lies a deeper refusal to acknowledge that China, once so helpless and acquiescent, is now master of a destiny in which they have no part.

Some Western historians tend to argue that the consequences of Western domination were either ultimately good, or not as bad as all that, ignoring or dismissing the Chinese argument that such exploitation and oppression were both bad in themselves and in their consequences. Some say that the impact of imperialism on China's traditional economy is "virtually insignificant"; that even if there were an impact, it was favourable and helpful to the Chinese economy rather than negative and harmful.<sup>69</sup> Others argue that imperialism injected some fresh blood into an aged, feeble and incompetent feudal society which had long been static because in its isolation it had been unable to transform itself into a modern system; in other words, China was pulled out of a system which had shackled it tightly for more than two thousand years and was pushed into the modern

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<sup>68</sup> The recent denial of the historical crimes of the Japanese invasion of China and some other Asian countries by the Japanese Minister of Culture on August 9, 1995 is a typical example of the point, and such denial is one of many stated by quite a few Japanese politicians in the last decade. See People's Daily, (overseas ed.), 16 August, 1996, p.3.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Rawski, Shannon Brown, Ramon H. Myers, Rhoad Murphy, and John K. Fairbank have these views. See for example Rawski, China's Republican Economy: An Introduction (Toronto: Joint Centre on Modern East Asia, University of Toronto-York University, 1978), 2-13; Brown, "The Partially Opened Door: Limitation on Economic Change in China in the 1860s," Modern Asian Studies 12, no. 2 (April 1978): 177-192; Myers, The Chinese Peasant Economy: Agricultural Development in Hopei and Shantung, 1890-1949 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 23-4; Murphy, The Outsiders: The Western Experience in India and China (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977), 132-34, 145-46, 167.

world by the imperialist powers. China did not have "too much" imperialism but scarcely enough, especially in terms of its economy, for it was imperialism that transformed the traditional, self-sufficient Chinese economy, which could no longer function properly in the modern world.<sup>70</sup>

This, as it happens, is also one of the central issues at the heart of Orientalism; as Said explains it:

they [Orientals] are a subject race, dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves. Their great moments were in the past; they are useful in the modern world only because the powerful and up-to-date empires have effectively brought them out of the wretchedness of their decline and turned them into rehabilitated residents of productive colonies.<sup>71</sup>

It is precisely this Orientalist view that Han Suyin criticizes:

Past depredations have conditioned many in the West to consider China as "object", the passive, natural recipient of the actions of Western powers, and like all victims, unable to decide for herself (CY 3).

Others claim by contrast that imperialism was harmful to China in some aspects

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<sup>70</sup> Joseph Levenson, Thomas A. Metzger, Mark Elvin, Robert F. Dernberger and some others explicitly maintain this point. See Levenson's trilogy, Confucian China and Its Modern Fate, vol. 1, The Problem of Intellectual Continuity (Berkeley: University of California, 1968), 145, 158-9, 162-3; vol. III, The Problem of Historical Significance, 104, 113; Metzger, Escape from Predicament: Neo-Confucianism and China's Evolving Political Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 17, 197, 214-15; Elvin, The Pattern of the Chinese Past: A Social and Economic Interpretation (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1973), 312-15; Dernberger, "The Role of The Foreigner In China's Economic Development, 1840-1949," in China's Modern Economy in Historical Perspective, ed. Dwight H. Perkins (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1975), 23-24.

<sup>71</sup> Said, Orientalism, 35.

and beneficial in others. They acknowledge that imperialism impeded the economic and industrial development of China; however, in other respects, the efficient management of modern industry and commerce, the advanced science and technology in civil and military industries from the West, all influenced more benignly the development of the Chinese economy and industry.<sup>72</sup>

This however is again a refurbished Orientalist claim, namely that the Chinese were backward in modern science and technology, not mechanical-minded, and that "science ... emanated from the West."<sup>73</sup> The West helped China to promote modern science and technology with the influence of its advanced technology and management.

But for Han Suyin the matter is more complex. Whether the economic effects of imperialism are good or bad, for example, is not Han Suyin's primary concern, for the central issue for her is the inherent evil of exploitation and domination. Yet even if this issue is ignored, she insists that the impact of imperialism and its consequences are negative rather than positive.

Han Suyin strenuously argues that if there were any good effects of imperialism on the Chinese economy, they were merely the unintended by-products of the whole process of the powers' profit making. One might conclude by borrowing an Orientalist cliché that the whole business of industrial, capital, religious, cultural investments and

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<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Hsü, 436-37; Chi-ming Hou, Foreign Investment and Economic Development in China, 1840-1937 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), 217, 221.

<sup>73</sup> Said, Culture and Imperialism, 24.



trade which were forced on China on the powers' terms rather than on China's own is analogous to the attentions of a wealthy and powerful man towards a resisting but weak woman who is brutally raped and then financially compensated by him afterwards. It would be interesting to know how, were the situation reversed, such purportedly "objective" economists and historians as Joseph Levenson, Max Weber, Thomas A. Metzger and Mark Elvin would respond. Would they accept the financial benefit and ignore the rape?<sup>74</sup> It was, after all, over just such issues that the American nation began, with the cry of no taxation without representation.

It is in this context that Han Suyin rejects the argument that imperialism also had a positive impact on China, and firmly insists:

The economic, political, social and spiritual consequences of imperialist exploitation in China, from 1840 to 1949, form part of the accumulation of anguish which is ours today, as we reap the results of these historical actions and perceive their true implications (CY 20).

## 2. The Western Economic Impact on China

The argument suggested above that imperialism had positive effects on the Chinese economy is weak, for it is through the economic case that Han Suyin, echoing other

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<sup>74</sup> This analogy is a reworking of the Orientalist preoccupation of the Western male image vs. the Eastern female image. It is inspired by the story of Sir Robert Hart, the famous Inspector General of the Imperial Maritime Customs of China from 1860 to 1911. He had a Chinese woman who bore him three sons in the 1850s, though he never intended to marry her. When he married an English lady from a good family he paid his Chinese woman \$3,000 and sent his three sons to England in order not to be embarrassed by them. Thus the Chinese woman was financially benefited but bankrupted in terms of love, social respectability and family. See Spence, The Search for Modern China, 209.

Chinese historians, can most easily trace the disastrous implications of Western domination and exploitation. She vigorously sets out both national issues and the particular case of her family to prove that in fact imperialism was enormously destructive in economic terms. She strongly argues that not only did the Western powers' attempts to undermine the Chinese government impede the development of China's economy, as virtually all Western historians now agree,<sup>75</sup> but the heavy indemnities which led to unending foreign loans and interest, the direct control of the Chinese customs duties and revenues, the unfair inroad tax system, the unequal competition, and the huge export of opium to China all directly drained the Chinese economy.

By 1895 China had to pay an indemnity of 230 million taels of silver to Japan, which was one of the major indemnities that hastened the collapse of the Qing Empire.<sup>76</sup> Hsü makes the same point: "The Ch'ing [Qing] court with an annual revenue of 89 million taels, was in no position to meet these obligations except by contracting loans."<sup>77</sup> Moreover, only six years later in 1901 China, because of the Boxer Rebellion, had to pay the Western powers another huge indemnity of 450 million taels of silver or "five hundred million dollars" in Han Suyin's figure (CT 113), which amounted to almost one billion taels with interest. A similar observation is also made by Spence:

The Chinese were to pay the indemnity in gold, on an ascending scale,

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<sup>75</sup> See Cohen, 142.

<sup>76</sup> See CT, 84.

<sup>77</sup> Hsü, 346.

with 4 percent interest charges, until the debt was amortized on December 31, 1940. With all interest charges factored in, total Chinese payments over the thirty-nine-year period would amount to almost 1 billion taels (precisely 982,238,150).<sup>78</sup>

Han Suyin forcefully and persuasively argues that the huge indemnities decisively broke China's economy. China could not develop any constructive infrastructures to strengthen itself because of the lack of funds; all its revenues were not enough to pay the interest on its debts in 1907. She makes the point clear through her Third Uncle's words:

By 1907 not all the revenue of China was enough to pay the interests [sic] on all indemnities we owed, let alone to give back the capital...To guarantee repayment our lands and mines and existing railways and natural resources were mortgaged, our customs revenue was in the foreigners' hands, and now the *likin* [*lijin*] or mileage taxes, both by land and water, was also mortgaged to them (CT 215).

Moreover Han Suyin argues that the control of the tariff on imports and exports of all foreign goods since 1842 (5% for all Western powers' goods and 2.5% on import goods from Kokand) and the control of Chinese customs since 1854<sup>79</sup> by the British also directly affected the development of the Chinese economy. Under their control they could use the revenue to pay China's huge debt of indemnities and loans on their terms; the point is also convincingly made by Spence:

By 1913 only two million *yuan* [Chinese dollars] or less were coming in from provincial land taxes, and the government was running a deficit of 13 million *yuan* each month. The revenue from tariffs on foreign trade

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<sup>78</sup> Spence, 235.

<sup>79</sup> See also Spence, 205.

was also mainly out of Yuan's<sup>80</sup> reach, since in response to the unrest of the revolution, the Imperial Maritime Customs (now under Robert Hart's successor, Hart having died in 1911) deposited the customs revenues in foreign banks so they could be used to pay off the interest on China's rapidly accumulating foreign debts. China thus lost not only the income, but even the banking profits on this revenue.<sup>81</sup>

From 1858 the transit tax of foreign goods to the inland had been fixed at 2.5% while the transit tax (*lijin*) of Chinese goods had been increased so much that many Chinese companies went bankrupt. The tobacco business of Han Suyin's family, which was founded in 1795 and finally went bankrupt in 1917, is Han Suyin's example. It went bankrupt because the heavy taxes on local tobacco, and on transportation, and the unfair competition from the British-American Tobacco Company. The British-American Tobacco Company dominated the local market and drove most native tobacco industries out of business, because of its special privileges and unfair advantages, such as its immunity from the heavy Chinese taxes guaranteed by the unequal treaties. Here is what the economist, banker, and businessman, Han Suyin's Third Uncle, tells her:

Our tobacco trade was strangled, and later tobacco became a monopoly in the hands of the British-American Tobacco Company in Middle and South China, while in North China it fell into the hands of the Japanese; it was exported on an outward transit pass, not taxable, taken to the foreign cigarette factories erected in Shanghai, Hankow and Tientsin, in the foreign concession territories, enclaves of Western territory on our soil then re-sold to us in the form of cigarettes (CT 87).

Third Uncle had good cause to know the reality of the situation. As an economic

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<sup>80</sup> Yuan Shikai was the so-called president of China from 1913 to 1915.

<sup>81</sup> Spence, Search for Modern China, 284.

expert who served as the financial advisor for the Governor of Sichuan, the warlord Liu Xiang, for several years, he drew on his own experience and eye-witness accounts to describe the negative effects of imperialism in China. Han's family tobacco business had to pay 14 to 20 different taxes on a distance of 70 miles for a load of tobacco whose price increased to four times higher than the original one. Because of the mushrooming war indemnities and debts, taxes were almost doubled in 1895; such taxes, including the inroad toll tax, hurt only the Chinese businesses and industries, not the Western ones, whose goods, in Han's Third Uncle's words, "came in under a 'transit pass' totally exempt by the treaties imposed upon us ... And so all our native industries were ruined"

(CT 86). Han Suyin argues:

No protection of native goods within the internal market was allowed. Financial control by Western capitalism of the customs, the tariffs upon imports, the import-export trade, and communications, was imposed; the revenue of customs and railways was earmarked to pay for war indemnities and loans, payment which obliged the Chinese government to resort to self-mutilating taxation such as the *likin* (or internal transport tax) which worked to the disadvantage of native goods, restricted commercial transport within provinces, and drove provincial, native capitalist enterprises to bankruptcy (CY 22).

So too the handloom textile firms went bankrupt because Western and, later, Japanese cotton goods flooded the Chinese market. They bought the Chinese raw cotton and transported it to their factories either in the treaty ports or in their colonies near China, without paying transit taxes, and later brought their textile products back to the Chinese market, making huge profits. So too the transportation workers were out of business, especially the boatmen on the Yangtze River, for they had to pay taxes for their

junks and boats while the foreign steamers did not. Hence, Han Suyin points out, "... a whole population of former boatmen lived on [junks], reduced to stark beggary now that the foreign steamboats had taken much of their livelihood away from them" (CT 157). And so too a large number of craftsmen lost their jobs because their products could in no way compete with foreign mass-produced goods such as tools and house utensils.

What Han Suyin argues here are reflected in Hsü's analysis:

The influx of foreign imports after the Opium War created a depressant effect on the native economy, and the fixed 5 percent *ad valorem* customs duty ruined China's protective tariff. Foreign cotton cloth sold for only one-third of the price of Chinese cloth, driving native weavers and textile manufacturers into bankruptcy. Handicraft household industries fared especially badly in the face of foreign competition, casting many workers into unemployment.<sup>82</sup>

Perhaps the most obvious example of such destructive economic practices explained by Han Suyin was the opium trade by the British and the Americans that lasted for more than a hundred years. That John K. Fairbank can say that it is "one of the longest-continued international crimes of modern times"<sup>83</sup> is a striking confirmation of Han Suyin's views. It is certainly the biggest example of drug trafficking in the history of mankind; what is more shocking is that it was legal and open. Indeed opium became a curse on the Chinese not only in the treaty ports but all over the country where it spread like a wild plague. It not only poisoned its victims, but sucked the wealth out of

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<sup>82</sup> Hsü, 39.

<sup>83</sup> John K. Fairbank, The United States and China, 4th ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 162.

the country. Han's Third Uncle recorded the process clearly: "I learned about opium, and how it had drained us of silver ... the curse of opium was upon us" (CT 214). At the beginning of the twentieth century, as Han Suyin's Third Uncle tells her, "sixty out of a hundred men in Chengtu smoked opium" (CT 214) It is also well known that many high public figures like the Last Emperor's wife, Wanrong, the Young Marshal, Zhang Xueliang, and even the Commander in Chief of the whole Communist Army, Zhu De, were once addicts to opium in their lives. Empress Wanrong finally died of her addiction and both Zhang Xueliang and Zhu De struggled very hard to get rid of their addiction when they decided to kick the habit. Almost everywhere in China opium became a big business manipulated by foreigners, smugglers, and warlords during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When Han Suyin's Third Uncle was the financial advisor for the warlord, Liu Xiang, one of his most important jobs was to supervise the opium business in Sichuan province.

According to Zhang Zhidong (1837-1909), an important general and official in the Qing government, who served as governor of several provinces, "[opium] smokers made up 80 percent of the population in Shansi [Shanxi] cities and 60 percent in the countryside" in 1892. Discussing the claims, Spence notes, "Kansu [Gansu] observers also came up with an 80 percent figure."<sup>84</sup> Although these figures cannot be verified, Zhang was once the governor of Shansi, and it seems fair to assume that he had some

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<sup>84</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, Chinese Roundabout: Essays in History and Culture (New York: Norton, 1992), 237.

statistical data to make such a claim. Moreover, Shansi and Gansu are hinterland provinces, (one is in the middle of China, the other in the northwest) and their cases would suggest that opium smoking was widely spread out and the opium trade, therefore, a huge business in the whole country rather than in just the treaty ports and cities in the Yangtze Valley. Even some experienced Western diplomats or scholars like James Legge and Dr. William Lockhart estimated that about 10% of the whole population were opium smokers before 1890.<sup>85</sup> However Han Suyin does not claim that all the opium smoked in China was imported by the British and the Americans, for a large portion of it was cultivated by the Chinese themselves. How much was imported? Here is what Spence reports:

Import...stayed within the 4,000-to 5,000-chest mark until 1820. During the 1820s they hovered around the 10,000-chest mark, with a sharp upward jump in 1828, to 18,000. They had passed the 20,000-chest mark by 1832, and reached 40,000 by 1839. The steady climb continued, to 76,000 chests in 1865 and 81,000 in 1884. There followed a slow drop until the 1900s, when imports stabilized around 50,000 chests.<sup>86</sup>

In purely economic terms, the huge import of opium certainly caused very serious problems. First, the rapid import of opium caused the fast outflow of silver, as Han's Third Uncle pointed out (CT 214). Hsü makes a similar point:

The economic repercussion of opium-smoking were most serious ... the constant inflow of opium caused a continuous outflow of silver ... The

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 235. Spence uses the statistical data from The Minutes of Evidence and The Final Report of the British government's Royal Commission on Opium (London, 1894-95). One chest is about 150 pounds.



drain was most acute in the middle of and late 1830s, somewhere between 4 and 5 million [silver] dollars annually. The silver depletion upset the domestic economy and rocked the exchange rate between silver and copper [money] in the market. Whereas a tael of silver in 1740 exchanged 800 copper coins, in 1828 it was worth 2,500 in Chihli [now Hebei] and Shantung.<sup>87</sup>

Second, the fact that much money went into the opium pipes decreased the demand for other commodities, and therefore made the Chinese market slack. Third, opium-smoking caused serious health problems, especially for the poor peasants, the coolies, the boatmen and other labour forces which directly or indirectly lay behind production, and thus economic development.<sup>88</sup> The destructive consequences of smoking opium were well-known and widely condemned; the British government, however, ignored the moral issue but rather encouraged its merchants in the opium trade in China and other Asian countries. Han Suyin certainly notes the contradiction:

Fifty-nine per cent of total revenue of the British government in Singapore and Malaya in 1903 and in 1904 was due to opium, Yet in England [there] was great agitation to ban the curse of opium (CT 172).

The positive-effect historians tend as well to ignore the substantial profit that the British East India Company made through its opium trade in China even before the 1850s. The following is Hsü's estimation:

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<sup>87</sup> According to Hsü the British exported opium worth \$37.9 million between 1828 and 1836 from Canton alone and between 1818 and 1834 they shipped about \$50 million of specie out of China. Hsü, 170.

<sup>88</sup> Spence, in Chinese Roundabout, points out, "... but for the poor, addiction was a serious health hazard ... since scarce cash resources were used to purchase opium rather than food ... and by 1902 one could find entirely rural communities that were in desperate straits because addiction had become almost total" (230).

In 1832 the East India Company made 10 million rupees from its opium production, in 1837, 20 million, and in 1838, 30 million. Opium provided over 5 percent of the Company's revenue in India in 1826-27, 9 percent in 1828-29, and 12 percent in the 1850s, a sum close to 4 million sterling.<sup>89</sup>

It is in face of facts such as these that Han Suyin argues: "The last thing the West wanted was a strong China, capitalist or not. If we are not capitalist today, it is because the West broke our native capitalism very early on, or rather never allowed it to grow" (CT 83).<sup>90</sup> Han Suyin's statement reflects the official Chinese interpretation of the Western powers' domination of China during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This does not, however, undermine its validity, which rests on the accuracy of her analysis discussed above. Many Western historians and sinologists may well disapprove of her conclusions, but they have not provided persuasive evidence to overturn them.

### 3. *Nan Yuan Bei Zhe*<sup>91</sup>

History repeats itself in China, as it does elsewhere. In Han Suyin's view, the

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<sup>89</sup> Hsü, 172-73.

<sup>90</sup> This point again echoes Mao Zedong's often-quoted remark which she uses at the beginning of China in the Year 2001, and which I have reused at the beginning of this chapter.

<sup>91</sup> Old Chinese saying. Literally it means that one tries to go north by driving the chariot south because, turning around to look at the ruts of his chariot, the driver sees that they point towards the north; therefore, he believes that he can reach his destination in the north. Thus it means that one acts in a way that defeats one's purpose.

West repeatedly pursues short-term interests at the expense of both moral principles and long-term benefits. In the 1850s the West backed the decaying Qing court against the Taiping rebellion to protect their opium trade and unequal treaty rights and privileges. Then the West slammed the door in the face of the Republican Revolution in the early 1910s and refused to recognize and support Sun Yatsen, who had been a faithful follower of Western democracy. At the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919 the West sold China, which had been its ally during W.W.I, to Japan; by so doing, Han Suyin believes, the West both sold its principles and betrayed its real interests. During the 1920s the West preferred the warlords, the "strong men" like Yuan Shikai, Zhang Zuolin, and Duan Qirui to the Republicans. The West's (mostly America's) blind support for Jiang Jieshi was, in Han Suyin's view, another act in this continuing drama of short-sightedness and miscalculation. Even Simon Leys, strongly anti-communist as he is, notes the peculiar situation:

For generations the West has systematically ignored the revolutionary forces that have appeared in China, always preferring to support the decaying order against which these forces have risen. Thus it was that from the mid-nineteenth century onward the West preferred to prop up the crumbling Manchu dynasty against the Taiping rebellion. As the twentieth century dawned, it set its face in hostility and scorn against those who worked to create the republican movement, and preferred, yet again, to back the fossilised Empire. It never considered Sun Yat-sen ... as anything more than a picturesque mountebank who was half dangerous and half foolish; but it was perfectly ready to take a man like Yuan Shi-k'ai seriously. It distrusted Chiang Kai-shek as long as he had all the appearances of a revolutionary, but gave him its confidence and support as soon as he had shown his true nature.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Leys, The Chairman's New Clothes, 7.

Over the last two centuries the actions of the West in and toward China have caused outrage, hostility, indignation, and anti-foreign sentiment in the country; they have also invited endless and fierce condemnation, vehement protests and violent resistance. Nowhere is this process so evident as in the relationship of East and West after 1949. The West took great pains to "Open" the door of China 150 years ago, and made great efforts to keep that door "Open" for more than a century; by so doing, however, it paradoxically helped to tightly shut it again from 1949 to the 1970s. It is from this historical lesson that some Western historians finally realize that "to understand China today we need to know about China in the past;"<sup>93</sup> It is in the context of this historical lesson that Han Suyin so vigorously urges the West to understand the new China by honestly acknowledging the wrongs it has done rather than by denying or belittling them, by listening to Chinese views without built-in prejudice. This Han Suyin advocated as early as 1967:

The history of Asia must be reappraised and events reinterpreted by Asians themselves within the context of their own independence movements. The record of colonial exploitation, as well as the present reiterated attempt at domination by military means, must be seen in its proper sequence. The great waves of resistance to colonialism, which turned Asia in the nineteenth century into the most intensive battlefield ever known, must be studied anew (CY 8).

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<sup>93</sup> Spence, The Search for Modern China, xx.

### **III**

#### **Han Suyin's China After 1949**

##### **1. China and the West**

The founding of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949 proclaimed the triumph of the Communists over the Guomindang, and marked the end of foreign interference and exploitation in the country. It also witnessed Han Suyin's own re-engagement with China, which continues to this present day. Having completed her medical training in England, and shed her Chinese husband, she went to Hongkong in order to be close to China, and to be part of its future, although it would have been easier for her to take up a safe and comfortable life as a doctor in England. For seven years, the Chinese refused to let her return to China. It was now, however, that her "writing of China" could properly be said to begin. The date also marks a different sort of exclusion, that of China itself from its place in the world. In the following pages I shall deal with Han Suyin's treatment of China's relation to the outside world, before turning to her account of China itself.

In 1949 began the Western or rather the American blockade of China, which in the anti-communist fervour of the Cold War found itself demonized and isolated, denied even a name. The West of course could hardly accept the reality that more than a century's political and economic investment was irrevocably lost. Nor could it easily face the fact that China, a quarter of humanity, had turned to communism and become its ideological arch enemy; therefore the West, led by the United States, exerted itself to its

utmost to blockade China by every political and economic means.

Yet, Han Suyin argues, out of this involuntary isolation grew the myth created by the politicians and the media in the West from 1949 to 1972 that China isolated itself rather than being isolated by others, that China was a danger to the civilized and democratic world. To unveil the myth of China's isolation Han Suyin has this to suggest:

The complaint that China "cannot be understood", that it is her complexity, her self-imposed isolation, which stand in the way, must be denounced, for it is not her doing but the wilful refusal of the West to accept her as she is, which obscures our understanding. China is not isolated, except by the exertions of others to isolate her ... but there are many built-in, conditioned complexes in those who slander her, which must be overcome (CY 2).

Han Suyin suggests that the question of whether China's isolation was its own fault, or whether it was brought about by the exertions of others can only be answered by a consideration of historical facts. The fact that the United States continued to support the Guomindang regime after the Communists founded the People's Republic of China in 1949 and prevented China from entering the United Nations until 1972, as Han Suyin mentions several times in her writing,<sup>94</sup> may convincingly explain away part of the myth. Her argument here is echoed by John K. Fairbank:

Since the Chinese Communist Party was already the leader of the great revolution, the United States wound up in the 1950s intervening against it in support of the Nationalists after they had already been defeated

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<sup>94</sup> See, for example, CY, 207, 211, 213; MD, 507, 525, 535; ES, 379.

except on Taiwan.<sup>95</sup>

The well-documented influence of McCarthyism is also central here. Many times, Han Suyin condemns the obsessive prejudice of McCarthyism against anyone who perhaps said only a few favourable words about communism rather than being real communists themselves in the past. The American officers in the Dixie mission simply reported to their own government the accurate facts about the Chinese Communists that they saw with their own eyes; yet many of them suffered later during the McCarthy era. For Han Suyin this is an obvious example of the absurdity of McCarthyism.<sup>96</sup>

Cases like this were common in the United States during the Cold War period until the 1980s. The philosophy of American imperialism after World War II was, in Edward Said's terms, still to take on its own shoulders the responsibilities of leading the world to a democratic world which was free from communism. In this context Han Suyin points out that the rhetoric of democracy is but a fig-leaf covering the true nature of post-war imperialism; the underlying convictions of the American policy makers after World

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<sup>95</sup> Fairbank, "The New China and the American Connection," 43.

<sup>96</sup> Here is Han Suyin's comment on the fate of some members in the Dixie Mission:

This observer group [the Dixie mission to Yanan, including seventeen officers of the U.S. Army and two foreign service men] would report diligently, accurately and honestly on the Communist forces, organizations, and intentions; and for this scrupulous devotion to the best interests of the United States many of them were to lose their positions, even be attacked as "pro-Red," in that orgy of anti-Communist unreason which seized America from 1945 on and culminated in McCarthyism (MD 425).

War II, she suggests, are that

a "vacuum of power" exists wherever a corner of the globe is not occupied by a Western presence, for it is this assumption, namely that such a presence outside the boundaries of Europe or the USA is the *normal* feature of a normal world, that is abnormal (CY 6).

The Western hegemonic view is of course absurd to Han Suyin who repeatedly identifies it, analyses it and dismisses it. Nevertheless it has been one of the corner stones of Western foreign policy for almost two centuries. This historical fact may offer a clue to illuminate the second aspect of the myth, namely that China has been aggressive since the Communists took power in 1949. Has China been aggressive? Han Suyin's answer to the question is an absolute "No." On the contrary it was the West, especially the United States, that had been aggressive toward China until well into the 1970s, not the other way around. Han Suyin has much to say about this:

The patrolling of the Formosa [Taiwan] straits by the Seventh Fleet was a flagrant and direct provocation to China, and the announced accelerated military assistance to Indochina, viewed in the light of China's own national interests and her geographical position, was also another beachhead for American war against China; for China's interests require that marginal lands that surrounded her should not be used as bases by an enemy power, in order to launch or mount an attack upon her (CY 209-210).

From that date America's preoccupations with the other side of the Pacific, her rebuilding of Japan (again in the traditional sense of utilizing her against China), her occupation of South Korea, Taiwan and now of Thailand, part of Laos and the South Zone of Vietnam, are hard to explain away, except as a confirmation of the Chinese statement (CY 210).

... in 1953 the "unleashing" of the Chiang régime by Eisenhower nullified the "neutralization" of Taiwan; in September 1954, as soon as the Geneva accords had been passed, the formation of SEATO, a joint defence system for South-East Asia against China, was initiated by the USA. In December



1954, the USA concluded a bilateral alliance with Chiang Kai-shek. The ANZUS pact, the establishment of American strategy of "massive retaliation" all formed part of a policy of rearmament, which started to boom after 1958 (CY 212).

China's involvement in the Korean War was condemned as aggressive by the West; but Han Suyin forcefully argues, "Whatever the truth of the matter, the fact remains that *China had nothing to do with the Korean outbreak* [italics original]" (CY 208). She maintains that China was forced to be involved in the war because "MacArthur's threatening gestures towards the Chinese border could not be ignored" (CY 208). Indeed the Americans were at both the front and the back doorsteps of China. In the South the Seventh Fleet patrolled the Taiwan straits and "blockaded China's southern coastal ports" (ES 223) while in the North-East MacArthur boasted that he would cross the Yalu River to invade Chinese territories. Han Suyin's claim that MacArthur indeed had attempted to cross the Chinese border is based on extensive research and has been echoed by other Western critics and historians.<sup>97</sup>

It was then that the United States began its full range of sanctions against China, followed by the other Western countries; as Han Suyin points out, "China had been branded as an 'aggressor' by the United Nations, and a United States embargo was placed on all goods to and from China, an embargo followed by all of Western Europe" (ES 226). The fact that the American embargo lasted until the beginning of the 1970s suggests the validity of Han Suyin's argument that it was American hostility and

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<sup>97</sup> See MD, 535-46.

hegemonic policies toward China that forced China to defend itself and it also gives strength to the Chinese argument that the real aggressor was not China toward the West, but rather, the West headed by the United States, toward China. John K. Fairbank makes essentially the same point:

As the Chinese see it, today the American record in Asia since 1946, and particularly in Vietnam since 1964, serves only to confirm the idea that we are imperialist aggressors. Indeed, this idea has spread around the world and among ourselves .... From this record, which everyone must balance out for himself, it seems to be difficult not to conclude that the Chinese, despite their blind spots, have the better of the argument.<sup>98</sup>

Han Suyin spends much time analyzing the United States' involvement in Asia since World War II, especially in South-East Asia, in political, economic and military terms. The purpose of such involvement, she concludes, was a double-edged one. It was designed at least until the beginning of the 1970s to confine and isolate China and thus to prevent China's influence from spreading out in Asia and perhaps in other Third World countries. The aim of the American military bases in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand and the Philippines and some other Asian countries was certainly to threaten China; its prolonged involvement in the Vietnam War was also partly directed against China, for Vietnam was turning to communism, and China was its main material and ideological supporter in the view of most Western critics.

Han Suyin, however, suggests that the American policy makers did not attempt to understand what and how the Chinese think about their own national security. Talking

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<sup>98</sup> Fairbank, "The New China and the American Connection," 43.

about American involvement in the Taiwan region, Premier Zhou Enlai asked Edgar Snow in 1960:

Suppose someone occupied the Hawaiian Islands and dispatched a fleet to the waters between the mainland of the United States and the Hawaiian Islands, or supposing someone occupied Long Island and sent a fleet to the straits north of Long Island, how would the people of the United States feel in such a situation? You can thus imagine how the Chinese feel.<sup>99</sup>

The American response to the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 suggests the obvious answer to Zhou Enlai's question about American feelings. Of course America is rich and powerful; therefore, Han Suyin complains, the American policy-makers assume the right and responsibility of leading the world. Han Suyin's point here can be neatly expressed by a Chinese proverb: the magistrates are free to burn down houses, while the common people are forbidden to light lamps [*zhi xu zhou guan fang huo, bu xu bai xing dian deng*]. While Han Suyin allows that the tendency to dominate is perhaps not as strong now as it used to be among policy makers of the major powers, it is still not uncommon. Her observation of two decades ago still retains its relevance:

Nations ... which for a time have lorded over others, come to accept their superiority as natural and feel threatened when the cycle of change overtakes them, and overthrows their domination (CY 1).

Han Suyin gives considerable emphasis to the degree to which some American policy makers before the 1970s believed that their superiority had been threatened. At

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<sup>99</sup> Edgar Snow, The Other Side of the River (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), 92.

the Geneva Conference in 1954, John Foster Dulles refused to shake Zhou Enlai's hand<sup>100</sup> and "expressed his disapproval of the Chinese presence by laying down rigorous rules of conduct for the American delegation. They were to ignore totally both Chinese and North Vietnamese representatives. No socialization, no handshaking" (ES 235). She goes on to describe how Walter Bedell Smith, the deputy leader of the American delegation, "gripped Zhou's left arm, instead of shaking hands" (ES 236), in order not to break Dulles' strict rule. Yet Zhou Enlai had offered to negotiate with the United States at both the Geneva conference in 1954 and the Bandung conference in 1955; and it was because of Zhou's initiative that talks between China and the United States started in Warsaw at the ambassadorial level right after the Geneva conference in 1954. The anecdote points to the reluctance of the United States government to change its hostile attitudes towards China. Han Suyin describes the results thus:

The hostility of the United States expressed itself in a steady torrent of worldwide propaganda against China, in military threats, in a ring of bases around China, and in the continued protection of Chiang's refugee regime in Taiwan province ... together with the patrolling of Taiwan Strait by the Seventh Fleet (WT 111).

Such views gain added resonance when presented by an orthodox American historian such as John K. Fairbank. After a study trip to China in 1972, Fairbank had this to say:

What then are we to conclude about the U.S.-China policy since 1949? ... MacArthur's push for the Yalu in late 1950 was folly. Only Stalin, perhaps, profited from the Sino-American War in Korea. The ensuing

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<sup>100</sup> See Snow, 94-5.

Dullesian cold war against Peking in the 1950s was fundamentally mistaken and unnecessary, based on an utter misconception of Chinese history and the Chinese Revolution. Only the Nixon visit could get us beyond this quagmire of errors, and we still have a long way to go to reach firm ground.<sup>101</sup>

Han Suyin also responds to the fact that the American military threats included its massive nuclear stockpile. She notes that the United States often threatened to "bomb China back to the stone age," and that until late 1960s the Western press had often talked about using nuclear weapons against China. When evidence appeared showing that China might develop its own nuclear bombs, the United States together with the Soviet Union did their utmost to prevent China from testing nuclear weapons. The 1963 ban on nuclear tests in the air was clearly intended to prevent China from producing nuclear bombs, for both the United States and the Soviet Union were ready for underground nuclear tests. The aim of the test ban seemed clear to Han Suyin and she was able to cite support for her view from Western writers such as Steward Alsop:

The agreement on prohibition of nuclear testing in the air was finally concluded in September 1963, and was described by Stewart Alsop as directed at stopping China from producing her own nuclear armament. It would neither prevent nor limit the continued development and piling of nuclear weapons by both great powers. "The Chinese Communists, who have alleged that the test ban agreement is a plot to manacle China by denying it nuclear weapons, have understood the real meaning of the test ban ... President Kennedy and his inner circle of advisers have agreed in principle that China must be prevented, by whatever means, from becoming a nuclear power" (WT 171-2).

With the evidence provided by Alsop, Han Suyin argues that the United States

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<sup>101</sup> Fairbank, "The New China and the American Connection," 37-8.

and the Soviet Union tried very hard to prevent China from becoming a nuclear power: "According to some European sources there were even talks between Kennedy and Khrushchev in which a joint preemptive operation upon China's nuclear plants was discussed" (WT 243).

Han Suyin pays considerable attention to the fact that at the beginning of the sixties, the U.S.S.R. joined the United States in its aggressive policies towards China. Both attempted to force China to fit into their own plans; of course both ignored the historical lesson that the last thing China wanted was to put its national independence and sovereignty into any foreign powers' hands again, for these were the very things that the Chinese had fought for over generations with blood and lives. Politically the Russians attempted to incorporate China into their own realm; that is, they intended to renew their dead tsars' old dream of controlling China. When they found that China was not acquiescent, they immediately cut off all aid, tore up all signed contracts, withdrew all their technical personnel and pressed for payment for the debts that China had incurred during the Korean War. Here is Han Suyin's description of the Russian withdrawal of aid:

In July [1960] the Soviet Party served notice on China that within one month the 1,390 Soviet experts in China would withdraw and "suspended" 343 contracts, 257 projects. The withdrawal was timed with the knowledge that the harvest would be grimly under par that year (161 million tons). At the same time the USSR refused, for the next eighteen months, to supply any spare parts for equipment; there was also a demand for payment of debts for military equipment supplied during the Korean War (WT 175).

The withdrawal, in other words, was intended to augment the problem caused by

China's serious natural calamities. The tremendous pressure put on China by the Russians forced China into a fiercely ideological war against them from the 1960s to 1970s. However Han Suyin's account makes it clear that the Russian military threat, including nuclear blackmail, was counter-productive; it did not intimidate the Chinese but rather led them to develop their own nuclear technology. China exploded its first atom bomb the day after Khrushchev was toppled, on October 16, 1964 and its first H-bomb three years later.

Han Suyin's attitude towards China's nuclear program throughout this account is one of pride in the Chinese technological ability to produce sophisticated nuclear weapons. It seems paradoxical that as a lover of peace and international understanding Han Suyin does not condemn China's nuclear program; yet when she writes that the Malaysian Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, who was against communism, felt proud of being an Asian because China, an Asian country, could produce a nuclear device, she is documenting a similar, and no less paradoxical, sense of pride in China's achievement. For her China could not be blackmailed any longer by world nuclear powers.

During those years between 1959 to 1971, China was condemned as aggressive and warmongering by the West, especially by the United States and the Soviet Union. Han Suyin explains at length the Chinese side of the story; one thing is clear to her, namely, that during this time the Chinese, rightly or wrongly, did not do what the United States and the Soviet Union told or expected them to do. This became a serious offence

to both the United States of America and the Soviet Union, who called China either communist aggressors, trouble-makers and warmongers or traitors and heretics, but China refused to be bullied and controlled by either of them. For Han Suyin, that is something that the Chinese should be proud of, because they resisted foreign pressure from both sides simultaneously. Han Suyin extends her earlier analysis, explaining how the real aggressors are not the Chinese. She notes that from the very beginning in 1949 China declared its wish to establish diplomatic relations with all countries: "In 1949 Mao had reiterated that the People's Republic of China was prepared to have diplomatic and trade relations with all countries provided the latter did not aid the 'Chinese reactionary' (Chiang Kai-shek)" (WT 110). At both the Geneva and Bandung conferences Zhou Enlai expressed good will towards the United States. Although Zhou had got the cold shoulder from John Foster Dulles in the Geneva conference in 1954, at the Bandung Conference the next year he repeated China's desire to improve relations with the United States by saying:

The American people are our friends. We do not want war with the United States ... the Chinese government is ready to enter into negotiations with the American government to discuss relaxation of tension in the Far East ... especially in the Straits of Taiwan (WT 111).<sup>102</sup>

Then China released some American airmen, who had been captured on spying flights into the country, to show its good will towards the United States again. In 1956

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<sup>102</sup> Zhou Enlai also repeated the same point to Edgar Snow in 1960. See Snow's The Other Side of the River, 89, 92.



China offered fifteen visas to American journalists to come to report on China but the American State Department flatly turned them down.<sup>103</sup> In 1956 when Han Suyin returned to Hongkong from her first trip back to China since 1949 and mentioned that the Chinese intended to give six visas to American newsmen to go to China, the response of the Americans in Hongkong was dramatic, derisive and angry: "That's the best joke of the year." ... "Go and tell your Red friends, I won't shake hands with bloody murderers" (HTD 181).

Han Suyin's repeated insistence that China kept trying to relax the tension with the United States is an attempt to set the record straight. During the Geneva Laos Conference the Chinese Foreign Minister Chen Yi attempted again to make peace with the United States by "untying knots" between the two countries, but the Americans again ignored the friendly gesture from the Chinese. Han Suyin argues that unfortunately the American government during those years obscured the real issues by demonizing China as a hostile, trouble-making enemy; and the Western countries were not yet prepared to make the effort to understand Chinese intentions:

It was the beginning of China's role as a world power in world politics, opening a period in which active initiatives were taken, and yet this epoch of good-will and moderation has been one of the most distorted of present history, for at no time between 1954 and 1965 were China's moderate statements, or active peace initiatives, given any notice, credence or publicity in the Western Press .... In those years time and again, at international conferences, in statements, in interviews, the essentially realistic postulates upon which China wished to construct her foreign relations with other countries were repeated, only to fall on deaf ears (CY

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<sup>103</sup> See MD, 112; CY, 211.

211).

Even in the potentially problematic area of nuclear weapons, Han Suyin also argues that China is not aggressive towards other countries in the world, especially small and developing countries. Before China acquired nuclear weapons in October 1964, it had repeatedly called for regional and international agreements not to use nuclear weapons in non-nuclear countries, and for establishing nuclear free zones.<sup>104</sup> Right after the nuclear test ban in 1964 Premier Zhou Enlai wrote to all government heads in the world, "proposing a conference to discuss the complete, thorough, total and resolute prohibition and destruction of all nuclear weapons" (CY 225). Again, however, Han Suyin points out that no one in the West was listening to the Chinese proposal and the obvious reason for not listening was that the Chinese did not have a nuclear bomb yet, and therefore need not be taken seriously. Without nuclear technology, China did not have the right to initiate such a proposal. As soon as China exploded its first atom bomb on October 16, 1964, China repeated its position concerning nuclear weapons, and added that China would never use nuclear weapons first under any circumstances. Since then, China repeats its policy every time it has a nuclear test.

It was not until February 1972, when president Richard Nixon visited China, that the United States began to change its attitude toward China. Nevertheless even with the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, the United States has not fully abandoned its old policies of interference. Han Suyin argues that it is still convinced

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<sup>104</sup> See, for example, CY, 212-13.

of superiority, a conviction that leads it, consciously or unconsciously, to gloat over China's problems or crises. She adds that whenever China faces an internal problem certain Western media, particularly the Voice of America, play an important role in adding fuel to the fire. This, for example, was the case during the 1985 student unrest in China and this was again the case of the student movement in 1989 when students protested against the Chinese government at Tiananmen Square. Describing the turning point of the student movement in 1989, she has this to suggest:

At this juncture, everything that could be done was done by certain western media to help and stimulate the student demonstrations. Voice of America increased its broadcasts to China to twenty-four hours a day, relaying any and every rumour that circulated (WS 163).

Han Suyin is not here arguing that the suppression of the students by the Chinese government was justified but merely notes that the United States's assumption that it is its responsibility to lead or guide the world has not changed as much as it might first appear. Some American politicians still believe that they have the right to interfere with any country whose ideology and system are different from theirs, while ignoring the fact that the world is a complex place and all the nations in the world have their own unique cultures and histories which may require different social systems for their development. Han Suyin by contrast argues that the historical development of different countries is not the same; different countries cannot take the same road for social, cultural, political and economic development. The West today, she notes, is different from the West decades ago and Western democracy is also a result of many years of struggle over many generations:

All systems change, evolve. They *must* change, must evolve. Capitalism in the West has evolved, and certainly it is no longer the capitalism of the days of Marx. It is now hedged with legality, it has rules, laws, trade unions ... (WS 125).

Yet this is a lesson many Western politicians seem unwilling to learn, particularly once the emotive issue of human rights is raised. Han Suyin sounds here a warning:

The right to interfere in the name of human rights dominates the councils of the West. This will bring about, in China, an increased stiffening, and, perceptibly now, reliance on the army (WS 224).

As interference in China's affairs was counter-productive before the revolution, so is it even more so now; China is far less vulnerable to the threats of the West, and swifter to take offence. If the West presses China too hard, what it achieves may well be just the opposite to what it wishes. The best way to deal with the Chinese is through diplomatic channels or private talks, as the Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien did in November 1994 when he led the biggest delegation in Canadian history to visit China.<sup>105</sup>

Thus Han Suyin often urges dialogue on mutual and equal terms between China and the West but rejects strongly high-handed political pressure and interference, or economic blockade, let alone military threats:

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<sup>105</sup> As with a number of other Eastern cultures, the issue of "face" is paramount in Chinese dealings with others. They will not accept open condemnation if they have an alternative; therefore, though they may accept a private protest or a private deal which will not make them lose face publicly, they will not accept an open one from the West if they can afford it. Thus the Chinese government let the most important manipulators behind the students' protests at Tiananmen Square, Mr. Fang Lizhi and his wife, go out of the country through a secret deal with the United States, while publically denouncing them in the media.

The rediscovery of China by the West is of paramount importance; for as we accord respect to the pronouncements and views of the governments of the United States, Russia, France or England, in the same way we shall have to learn to listen to what the Chinese say, without automatically discounting, warping or insulting their statements, or ascribing their desire to be heard to imperial arrogance (CY 2).

This is exactly why Han Suyin advocates that because the world has changed and is still changing, mutual understanding is absolutely necessary, especially in the case of China:

In the case of China, this lag [in understanding] is reinforced by an unwillingness to accept the evidence of today's reality. For that evidence would destroy the easy assumption that the West still *has a right* [stress added] to interfere, either in the name of balance of power, or containment of communism.... Instead, courses of action are chosen, such as the "containment" of China, which are only an attempt to reinstate a world order already doomed when policies concerning China were made in London or Washington, and Western military and financial domination on the Asian mainland was regarded as a natural state of affairs (CY 3-4).

History has already established the credibility of Han Suyin's statement and the reality that lies behind it, namely that China is a rising world power which can no longer be bullied as it was in the past. Han Suyin clearly points out that any attempt to channel or shape it into a certain pattern which it does not want is illogical and unreasonable. She warns that any change in China has to come from within rather than without, and that the first duty of policy-makers is to understand this, if they are to understand China at all.

## **2. Han Suyin's China Within**

From 1949 to 1990 the internal history of China has often been even more

tempestuous than its external relations with the West. The major internal events in the contemporary history of China since 1949 include the Hundred Flower Movement (1957), the Great Leap Forward (1958-59), the Great Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and the student protests against the Chinese government (1989). All these are controversial events which provide the substance for Han Suyin's later books. It is here perhaps that she has achieved her greatest popularity or notoriety, for it has become a cliché of many critics and commentators in the West that she indiscriminately follows the official Chinese version of events whatever it may be. Indeed she is often accused of being a propagandist for the Chinese government: as one reviewer puts it, she "plays the role of an obvious apologist who has swallowed legends whole."<sup>106</sup> John Scott calls her writing "the official Peking gospel coated in a thick layer of feminine schmaltz."<sup>107</sup> Jacques Guillermaz complains, "Han Suyin has, in fact, chosen almost invariably to stick closely to officially accepted truths."<sup>108</sup> K. N. Ramachandran maintains, "Han Suyin has accepted without any critical scrutiny what the cadres and leaders have told her about CCP's history."<sup>109</sup> Simon Leys, the champion of all the critics of Han Suyin, charges, "The sole constant factor in her work is the faithfulness with which events have confuted

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<sup>106</sup> Rev. of The Morning Deluge, Publishers Weekly, 7 August 1972, 48.

<sup>107</sup> Scott, "Mao is a Many Splendoured Thing," 779.

<sup>108</sup> Jacques Guillermaz, "Rev. of The Morning Deluge," The China Quarterly 14.5 (July/September 1973):585.

<sup>109</sup> K.N. Ramachandran, "Rev. of The Morning Deluge, India Quarterly 30 (October-December 1974):324.

her analyses and forecasts at every turn."<sup>110</sup> It is necessary to consider the matter seriously, for the charge itself, if true, gravely undermines the worth of much of her work.<sup>111</sup>

A careful reading of her work suggests that although she is not always consistent in her presentation of Chinese history, she struggles hard nevertheless to be an independent witness who is open about her commitments and priorities. It is true that she more often than not defends the policies of the Chinese government; yet it is equally true that she does so without overlooking the limitations or failures of those policies, and justifies her support with detailed evidence of the ways in which those policies are good for the Revolution, for the country and the common Chinese people, especially when compared to those of the old regimes in the past. The following pages will attempt to evaluate her critics' accusations that her presentation of Chinese history is merely propaganda.

Han Suyin does not pretend to be a completely objective writer; she freely acknowledges:

As long as something was good for the Chinese people, however illogical, however opposed to theory it appeared, I was for it. Not for ever, but only for the time that it did any good. For me there was no eternity in policies or in methods or in people. And in this simplicity I had ample space for all vagaries, seasonal and political. I did not erect great logical structures divorced from the solid, concrete and changing realities of

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<sup>110</sup> Simon Leys, The Burning Forest (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1986), 193.

<sup>111</sup> This issue will be treated again from a different perspective in Chapter Four.

China (HTD 310).

She may well indeed be often contradictory and inconsistent; but as the above statement suggests, if she is an apologist or a propagandist, what she apologizes and propagandizes for is the Chinese people and the betterment of China rather than for any specific Chinese government. Reading her later works such as Tigers and Butterflies and Wind in My Sleeve, one certainly finds that she is not an apologist or propagandist for the Chinese government.<sup>112</sup> It can be argued, therefore, that those critics' major concern is that Han Suyin often (but certainly not always) praises the Chinese government and this fact alone is enough for them to condemn her, for to them anything connected to communism should be condemned. Reading Simon Leys' books one will not find a single positive thing that the Chinese government has done since 1949. With such an attitude his condemnation of Han Suyin's historiography, and of herself, seems natural. Equally natural is her dismissal:

Only one attitude was allowed, and that was vehement anti-communism, horror at the revolution in China. Anything else classified one as 'communist' (HTD 20).

True, she does not detach herself from China where she was born and spent her childhood and from the Chinese people whose sufferings she has witnessed herself. That in itself does not make her an apologist, however. Her exploration of the major events of Chinese history since the Revolution has its own kind of logic and integrity. Anti-communist disapproval of her views does not by that token invalidate them. In the pages

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<sup>112</sup> This point will be discussed more extensively later.



that follow, the significant events of Chinese life since the Revolution will be considered in the context of both Han Suyin's presentation, and her critics' charges. These include the Hundred Flower Movement, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution and the Student Movement.

### **A. The Hundred Flower Movement**

In China in the Year 2001, Wind in the Tower, My House Has Two Doors and Eldest Son, Han Suyin repeatedly argues that with steady political and economic development and visible achievements, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai had good reasons to be confident of success when they launched the Hundred Flower Movement at the beginning of 1957. They hoped to invite intellectuals to help the Party and the government to battle bureaucratism, sectarianism and subjectivism. Thus the Party and the government could be rectified or purified and do a better job for the country and the people. Clearly Mao Zedong intended to educate Party members and government officials by asking people to expose the evils or mistakes of the Party and the government, for he clearly wished to instill in Party members and the Chinese people a respect for communist doctrine and principle. The most important task for Mao in his later life, Han Suyin claims, was to keep the Party and the country in the Communist framework based on Marxist-Leninist doctrines. What he was concerned with most was how to train the younger generation to follow such principles and doctrines, especially the younger generation in the Party itself. Thus Han Suyin describes Mao's purpose for the Hundred

Flowers Movement as "to have a multi-level 'blooming and contending'... to show up all the ideas ... to prove that 'class struggle' was indeed still acute; to educate Party and people in this mutual confrontation and exposure, to catalyze awareness" (WT 98).

Perhaps inevitably, however, the criticisms of the Party and the government by some intellectuals quickly went beyond such comparatively modest ends, and soon turned into radical attacks. Some threatening letters and statements against people who supported the Communist government appeared, and violent disturbances took place in some universities and colleges. Some people openly condemned the Party and the government and demanded that Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai step down, while others called for the abolition of Communism itself and the restoration of the parliamentary system. Some non-Communist party leaders asked to share power with the Communists or to govern the country with full power. Han Suyin puts it thus:

Under glaring headlines Mao Tsetung and Chou En-lai were condemned, enjoined to "get down," and intellectuals demanded to share power with the Communist Party (WT 102).

But it was of course the more erratic and extravagant statements which stood out. "The masses may knock you down." ... "Kill all the Communists." ... "The machine guns will be turned one day against you." Posters reading "Down with Communism" were brandished in some universities. Mob violence and murders of Party cadres broke out in some regions (ES 262).

Han Suyin's account here is echoed by Vidya Prakash Dutt's exploration of the event. Dutt, a leading specialist on China's foreign policies, was in China during the Hundred Flowers Movement. He witnessed what was happening at the time, and his account accordingly has that authority which Han Suyin's critics lack. He writes:

The gathering storm of criticism had burst and opinions had come like flood-tide. As the movement snowballed, criticism became sharper and more violent. Its tone became more and more menacing .... There were scattered reports of disturbances and minor riots in many parts of the country, particularly in some educational institutions. Where was all this leading to? The movement seemed to be getting out of hand and taking a threatening turn.<sup>113</sup>

Finally the movement became almost uncontrollable and the whole phenomenon clearly took the leaders of the country by surprise; they had intended to ask for constructive criticism which could help the Party and the government to overcome defects or shortcomings, not violent attacks. Because of their confidence that their notable achievements, scrupulous honesty and very hard work would be acknowledged and respected, the top leaders were surprised by the eruption of attacks on, and threats to, the Party and the government, which clearly they felt they by no means deserved. Dutt comments on this surprise:

It seemed almost incredible to the leaders that people should want to say all the bad things they did say about the Party's policies and behaviour. Mao had expected only minor criticism about lapses here and there, which could be rectified without substantial overhaul of the system; that fundamental issues of state structure and of the Party's power would be raised and aired had not been considered a serious possibility, for in that case the rectification movement would never have been launched.<sup>114</sup>

The Party machine itself had not been in favour of the movement in the first place; thus the hot-headed attacks offered a convenient handle to those in the Party who

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<sup>113</sup> Vidya Prakash Dutt, China's Foreign Policy (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1964), 13.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 154.

had been against the movement at the beginning and later helped to start the Anti-Rightist Movement. Han Suyin thus describes the process:

But the repeated threats of bringing about a 'Hungarian incident' in China played into the hands of those in the party (a silent but obvious majority) who did not want such an opinion (HTD 201-2).

There must be well-chosen arguments, counter-criticism against extreme demands. But the Party machine had begun a move to crush all opposition, an unstoppable juggernaut (ES 263).

Han Suyin argues consistently that the Hundred Flowers Movement was launched by Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai "to use the recriminations of the intelligentsia to curb the evils of their own Party; to redress grievances and educate the cadres" (HTD 201). She challenges the allegation by some Western critics that it was a trap<sup>115</sup> that was laid for the intellectuals to fall into. Her view is shared by many.<sup>116</sup> Even Han Suyin's vehement critic Simon Leys agrees that the Hundred Flowers Movement was not a trap or a trick:

It would be misleading to think that the "Hundred Flowers" movement was some sort of machiavellian trick played by the régime in order to get its opponents to throw off the mask and expose themselves to repression; the wave of repression in which the movement ended was not the last act of a scenario prepared in advance but rather an emergency measure, hastily improvised to cut short an unforeseen and catastrophic

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<sup>115</sup> See, for example, Maurice Meisner, Mao's China and After: A History of the People's Republic, (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 195-96.

<sup>116</sup> See, for example, Richard H. Solomon, Mao's Revolution and the Chinese Political Culture (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971) 263, 272, 311-12, 322; Stanley Karnow, Mao and China: A Legacy of Turmoil (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 80-81; Spence, The Search for Modern China, 569-70, 574.

development.<sup>117</sup>

Han Suyin is not naive; if it was not a trap, it was, nevertheless, "an openly baited, clearly signposted test for everyone who used common sense and was percipient" (HTD 201). Certainly neither Mao nor anyone else in the Party leadership and the government expected any extreme demands for big changes in the fundamental structure of the Communist system, for they had never given any indication that they would tolerate fundamental changes to the basic system. The paradoxical nature of Han Suyin's attitudes toward the whole event is reflected in the fact that she is wholeheartedly for the democratic aspect of the movement because it freed the thought of the intellectuals from a too tight control by the Party machine; therefore, the intellectuals could freely use and develop their talents in the development and construction of China into a strong power in the world. But she also clearly blames the irrationality and irresponsibility of the radical and extremist intellectuals who abused the democratic opportunity, demanding that the Communist system be dismantled and they be allowed to rule the country in turn:

It was ludicrous to expect that a government like the present one in China, installed by a communist party which had fought its way to power through decades of agonizing suffering and two enormous wars, which had performed the extraordinary feats it had performed, including the Long March, would meekly allow itself to be displaced (HTD 202).

Her logic is that those radical and extremist intellectuals did a disservice to the Hundred Flowers Movement, whose original purposes were relatively beneficial to the intellectuals themselves. If they had not reacted rashly, but grabbed the opportunity to

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<sup>117</sup> Leys, The Chairman's New Clothes, 18.

urge the Chinese government to reform, things would have been quite different and there might not have been the Anti-Rightist Movement afterwards. Clearly on the one hand she is sympathetic towards the intellectuals because as an intellectual herself she is obviously concerned about their fate; on the other she disapproves of their hasty irrationality because it harmed their interests rather than benefited them. It is a divided response very characteristic of Han Suyin; it is the defining feature of her attitude shown in her treatment of the next political movement to be discussed, the Leap Forward.

### **B. The Great Leap Forward**

Han Suyin argues that Mao's revolution was a mass revolution and that his success had been based on mass movements in China ever since he first became the leader of the Communist Army in January 1935. When the Chinese revolution experienced a crisis, Mao often turned to the masses, and this was perhaps again the case after the setback caused by the Hundred Flowers Movement. Mao needed to show the "rightists" that the majority of the Chinese people, the peasants, the workers, and the army were with the Party and the government. This was perhaps one of the factors that brought about the Great Leap Forward, a mobilization of the masses by the Party for quicker economic results.

From a historical point of view the Leap Forward is a controversial event, condemned by most Western critics as a disastrous failure.<sup>118</sup> Even many senior

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<sup>118</sup> See, for example, Leys, The Chairman's New Clothes, 21; Meisner, 250-51.

Chinese Communists have admitted that it was a serious mistake. Although Han Suyin does not deny that gross exaggerations, an excessive frenzy of enthusiasm, and misjudgment of the real circumstances, were frequent, she argues that the Leap has its own historical importance in terms of self-reliance, national independence and mental emancipation from feudalism. In Wind in the Tower, she praises the Great Leap Forward:

Though misjudged for many years, few today will disagree that China's development, her autarkic self-reliance, her prosperity, are due to the broad lines of the Great Leap Forward, the methods invented during those extraordinary years 1958 and 1959 (WT 124).

The "leap" was a war against complacency, superstition, prejudice, bureaucratic procrastination, as well as against Nature. To remodel the Chinese earth; to remake Chinese man (WT 125).

Thus the ... revolution [the Leap], whatever its mishaps and mistakes, was a success: by an immense effort, one-quarter of humanity was making a two-millennia leap from Confucian China to modern China, from prescientific thought to scientific thought, breaking all barriers and questioning all accepted values, creating a new economic framework and new societal relations, a new way of thinking and being (WT 136).

The context in which she defends the Leap Forward is its historical, ideological and theoretical influence in the ongoing Chinese revolution. She defends it because she is well aware that with a very long history of feudalism the Chinese still have many fierce battles to wage before they can really free themselves. Contradictions of course abound. As a Chinese patriot she consciously or unconsciously sets out to defend China. In the 1960s and 70s she set out to eulogize China's achievements and to strive not to belittle them by dwelling on failures. Nevertheless as an independent writer she also

struggles to give a full picture of China. To argue that she is inconsistent and that she is an apologist for the government is to ignore the complexity of her works.

Han Suyin has never denied that the Great Leap Forward had serious problems and does explore them in several of her books, but her way of treating them is completely different from those of the Western critics. Hers is an emotionally involved approach which fully recognizes the problems faced by the Chinese people, who suffered from serious shortages of food and other daily necessities in part because of the Leap Forward; and so she sympathized while many Western critics gloated over China's difficulties, hoping to see the collapse of the Communist system. Although she does not celebrate the mistakes of China, she gives detailed descriptions of them. During the Leap Forward and the years after, she was inspired and deeply moved by the attitude of the Chinese people and their determination to solve their problems, and as a result she was more closely bound to China than ever:

Looking at the ineffective small craters which littered the streets, I wondered. Were they, had they really been educative in their starkness? Well, perhaps. As I walked on and on, an immense warmth and protectiveness came upon me. 'It's fantastic, magnificent, appalling ... and also perhaps idiotic ... I don't know ... no one else would have the courage to try this ... you're trying to tell all of us that we must rely on ourselves, do everything the hard way because there is no other way ...' Thus I apostrophized my love, the faceless multi-millioned, whose courage and fortitude gripped my heart .... 'I'm with you, with you.' ... The Westerners in the Hsinchiao Hotel had not stopped laughing at the steel drive and I could not bear their laughter. 'It may be silly, but at least you're trying, trying to make the sun and the moon shine in a new heaven. Silly or not I'm with you" (HTD 243).

Such sympathetic involvement gives a humane and personal touch to Han Suyin's



writing about China and the Chinese that is quite divorced from propaganda. The fundamental difference between Han Suyin and the Western critics is that Han Suyin will do anything to support the Chinese people, including supporting the Chinese government that, she believes, has made great contributions to the betterment of the country and its people despite its many mistakes; by contrast most Western critics, in their zest to discredit communism, seem indifferent to the Chinese people. The people are indeed secondary in such treatments of China; the only good China was the one of the past, the one created in the Orientalist mode in Western imagination, the one needing sympathy, help, teaching and enlightenment.

Whenever China has either a natural or a man-made disaster, as Han Suyin complains, "China is to be condemned, to be found fault with ..." (WS 226). When China had "the most catastrophic floods for the last half century" in 1991 and called for help, almost nothing came from the West, except for more than a hundred million dollars from the overseas Chinese. Speaking of this, Han Suyin puts her complaints into her friend's mouth, who comments, "For all their beautiful words on human rights, they exhibit little compassion for the Chinese as *human beings*" (WS 226).

One reason Han Suyin defends China in its worst years right after the Leap Forward in the early 1960s is that in three consecutive climatic catastrophes, China was able to avoid large-scale famines. The country was very well organized and there was little speculating on, or hoarding of, food and daily necessities. Contrasting these circumstances with the horrible scenes of the famines and food shortages she had

witnessed in the pre-Revolution years, Han Suyin was deeply impressed by the Chinese government's handling of the serious problems during those difficult years. Moreover, as what she saw and recorded, throughout the Chinese society, the people did not grumble at that time; they tightened their belts to endure the difficulties of food shortages and to conquer both internal and external problems.

The Communist egalitarian system itself was responsible at that time for keeping government corruption to a minimum, and denying much privilege to the leaders at different levels of the government. Han Suyin's amusing anecdote in My House Has Two Doors concerning Chen Yi, the Foreign Minister, who had carelessly finished his food coupons before new ones were issued to him and had to ask for food from his friends, suggests that there was not much privilege even for the top leaders of the country. Even Premier Zhou Enlai had to use coupons to buy food and suffered a great deal in the two meagre years. The most notable example is perhaps Mao Zedong himself, who refused to eat meat in the most difficult year of 1960.<sup>119</sup> Such austerity, displayed by government officials no less than the people, forms a sharp contrast to the rhetorical insistence upon Confucian values of the Guomindang government, one which masked the corruption exposed so clearly by Han Suyin. It was just such austere and puritanical qualities that attracted her admiration for high government officials such as Zhou Enlai, Deng Yingchao, Chen Yi, Gong Peng, as well as for the common people who sacrificed

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<sup>119</sup> See also Li, 326-27.

much for the sake of the country. Such admiration fuels the emotional engagement with China reflected in such a passage as this (an engagement characteristically accompanied by a confession of duplicity):

Where feeling was concerned, there was no doubt. Especially in that winter of 1960. Fiercely, whole-heartedly, I was defending China, even lying through my teeth (with a smile) to the diplomats and the newsmen who probed. Because only China was the heartbeat of my heart, the rise and fall of my blood, the substance of every cell of my body. I had not chosen this. It had chosen me. And all the more so when the wind howled like a wolf and winter fastened its iron will upon the land, and the whole world seemed to rise with glee to threaten China. Then, above all, I was Chinese (HTD 296).

### C. The Cultural Revolution

Nowhere are the multiple selves and dimensions of Han Suyin so amply demonstrated as in her account of the Cultural Revolution. Here the deeply engaged the Chinese patriot and the detached professional writer, the enthusiastic eyewitness and the more reflective commentator drawing away from the lime-light, all jostle for our attention. Here the gap between her truth about China, and that of her critics, is widest.

Of all events in recent Chinese history, the Cultural Revolution is most easily used as ammunition by critics such as Simon Leys to attack her "inconsistency." Simon Leys' fiercest attacks on Han Suyin appear in an article titled "The Double Vision of Han Suyin: On the Character of a Trimmer"<sup>120</sup> in which he cites many isolated passages

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<sup>120</sup> It was first published in Encounter 55, no. 5 (Nov. 190): 79-84, reprinted in Far Eastern Economic Review (Dec. 26, 1980), 32-35, then reprinted again in his The Burning Forest, 177-93.

from Han Suyin's earlier books such as China in the Year 2001 and Asia Today, and compares them with passages in her later books such as The Morning Deluge and My House Has Two Doors. Leys' main point, as suggested by his subtitle, is that Han Suyin is a trimmer,<sup>121</sup> whose writing always follows the weathercock of the Chinese political turns and twists; this, he argues, is particularly so in her treatment of the Cultural Revolution. If we read only Leys's citations from Han Suyin's books in isolation we might agree with his judgment, but to do so would certainly be misleading.

Han Suyin herself in her later books freely confesses that she made some rash points in her judgement of the Cultural Revolution. But it is equally true that time plays an extremely important role in understanding her changing attitudes. China in the Year 2001 was finished in March 1967 and so was Birdless Summer, when the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution was rapidly rising. She must have been working on the former book during the first stage of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to early 1967. It had not revealed its ugly side then, so it is unreasonable to condemn her for not writing of what had not happened yet. It is not surprising that Han Suyin has different views on the Cultural Revolution some years later. One should understand that the whole picture of the Cultural Revolution was not complete until the post-Maoist era began in early 1977. Any books on the Cultural Revolution written before 1976 are necessarily fragmentary.

Asia Today was the published version of Han Suyin's Beatty Memorial Lectures

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<sup>121</sup> Leys' term here suggests that out of self-interest Han Suyin changes her beliefs about some political events, changes her attitudes towards some top leaders and fluctuates support of the Guomindang government and the Communist one.

at McGill University on October 22, 24, and 29, 1968 when the tumult of the Cultural Revolution was at its peak. Han Suyin, however, had herself been denied permission to go back to China during 1967 and 1968; therefore, she could not really know exactly what was happening during these two years, being dependent on information that she obtained from reading and research. Clearly in both China in the Year 2001 and Asia Today, Han Suyin's comments on the Cultural Revolution neither take into account the many ugly and violent incidents nor human tragedies in its later stages. Even in Wind in the Tower, completed in the spring of 1975, there are some views which, she herself has noted later, cannot be sustained:

My euphoria was due to the holding of the Third National People's Congress.<sup>122</sup> Perhaps I should have waited, since there was to be so much change immediately, and all conjectures and conclusions were proved invalid (HTD 624).

Of course these rapid and sometimes unexpected changes in China would make every attempt to record contemporary history outdated almost immediately, and of this Han Suyin is fully aware:

The tremendous pace of change in China, especially since the Cultural Revolution of 1966, tends to leave every study of events out of date (CY v).

Han Suyin "writing China" in a historical context must of course be responsive to the "tremendous pace of change" noted above. This makes her view of China unstable, as events unfold which transform it. That fact, however, does not make her the

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<sup>122</sup> In this congress Zhou Enlai announced the Four Modernizations of agriculture, industry, national defence and science and technology.

opportunistic trimmer that Simon Leys identifies. Were she so, one might naturally ask: for what would she do it? For money or material gains as Simon Leys maintains? For fame? Han Suyin's own answer is of course an absolute No: "When it came to choosing what I would do, I would always choose the loyalty of my emotions. Not fame or money or opportunity" (HTD 653). Han Suyin's claims here can be substantiated by her life. Twice she has abandoned a materially better life and opportunities for advancement to return to China, or to stay close to China. It would be difficult to argue that this was done for money, opportunity and fame, for by so doing she could get none of them at the time she took the risks of doing it.

Leys' charge that Han Suyin writes about China for royalties and profits is more transparent. Certainly Han Suyin's books are popular in the West, and she does make substantial sums from royalties. Yet her books about China do not play much part in those royalties. Han Suyin was already famous before she began to write books on China in the 1960s; several times she mentions that she in fact has given up her status as a successful popular novelist to write about China. As for money, she most certainly understands the power of it and has observed that, "Money buys freedom" (HTD 216); when she needed it, for example, to study in Brussels, she got it, in this case from Joseph Hers. Money, as Virginia Woolf before her understood, can indeed buy freedom, especially for a woman. But by the time Simon Leys accused her of being a writer writing for royalties in the 1980s, Han Suyin was already rich and famous, and no longer needed money, fame and opportunity. She had them all. The financial flow is indeed in

the opposite direction; she gives much of her own money to China.<sup>123</sup>

The fact that many of her statements in her early books about the necessity of the Cultural Revolution, the positive qualities of Red Guards and assessments of some top leaders have changed in her later books can perhaps also be explained by the availability of important materials which offer different interpretations of the huge event. Han Suyin's complaint that sometimes it is impossible to obtain hard-core information about certain important events in China (HTD 482-3) is no exaggeration. Indeed it is not an easy task for anyone to have a complete picture of an important political event or a top leader in China unless that event or leader has subsequently been reassessed. The mistakes or crimes of the leaders in particular are not made public until they are in disgrace. It was simply impossible for Han Suyin, or any writer on China for that matter, to give a final assessment of the events in question. Of course this is not arguing that one should never trust the official statements of the Chinese government as Simon Leys does. Leys argues, for example, that the official Chinese explanation of Lin Biao's death is a gross and outrageous "lie" but there is no compelling evidence at all that he can offer to

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<sup>123</sup> In 1960 when China had its worst time, Han Suyin offered to give all her cash in the Belgian Bank in Hong Kong, a large amount, to China (See HTD, 319-20). Several times she donated money to some disabled groups and a village that suffered from serious flooding (See WS, 61-62, 110). She has also set up a fund for Chinese science scholars to go abroad, prizes with her own money for outstanding Chinese translators, and together with her Indian husband they also set up a prize to be given to Chinese scholars specializing in Indian studies (See WS, 112-113). It is not without interest in this context that Simon Leys (whose real name is Pierre Ryckmans) himself also received \$500 US from Han Suyin when he was a student, studying Chinese in Nanyang University in Singapore in 1957 (See HTD, 226) but the question why the patronized should become the dead enemy of the patron is beyond the scope and the purpose of this study.

replace the "lie" and his argument is in that sense at most a speculative conjecture. Such a conjecture is called into question now by the first-hand evidence offered by Mao Zedong's private doctor, Li Zhisui.<sup>124</sup> In this context there is no reason why Han Suyin should not change her views of the Cultural Revolution, or any other matter, when new evidence suggests otherwise. Moreover government changes, which can release or bring about new ideas among the people, in turn offer her new evidence for new interpretations. The fact that she does change her views in the light of new evidence obviously suggests that she is more concerned with the searching for the truth, accepting her own mistakes in the process, than with covering them up to save face.

In her later books, some of the massive destruction, man-made disasters, and human tragedies in the Cultural Revolution are revealed. Sometimes her changes of perspective on these events do indeed coincide with the changes of Chinese official statements; this seems to stem less from her desire to flatter than a result of the fact that she has learned more. In this sense all her books reflect the reality, however partially and subjectively, of China as she understood it when those books were written.

Han Suyin's account of the Cultural Revolution raises one issue in particular, namely her attitude to the leaders of the time. These include Zhou Enlai, Mao Zedong, Jiang Qing, Liu Shaoqi, Hua Guofeng, Li Peng and Deng Xiaoping. Beyond this issue

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<sup>124</sup> In his recent book The Private Life of Chairman Mao, Dr. Li gives a detailed description of Lin Biao's death (pp.514-16). His description coincides with the official statement of the event by the Chinese government. Li's description has some authority, for when the event took place, he was with Mao all the time, watching the whole event with his own eyes.



lies the broader one touched upon earlier: her attitude towards the leaders of China in general. Simon Leys argues that Han Suyin is loyal to any leader in power in China; thus he charges that:

she is consistently loyal to everybody and anybody, providing that they are safely in power. She was loyal to Chiang Kaishek and then to Mao Zedong, to Liu Shaoqi, then to Lin Biao, to Jiang Qing and then to Hua Guofeng—and we may be sure she is loyal before the event to whoever replaces Hua Guofeng, no matter who it is, so thoroughly has loyalty to established authority become second nature to her.<sup>125</sup>

It is not hard to demonstrate the inadequacy of such criticism. Han Suyin has been really loyal to only one Chinese leader in her life and that leader was the late Premier Zhou Enlai; as she confesses:

He changed my bone marrow. He was truly, not only my teacher, but my guide for life.

All my life I will be a follower of Chou Enlai (HTD 412, 414).

That she has admired almost to adoration Zhou is no surprise, because in her view it was always the selfless, noble, wise, unsullied Zhou who was loyal to the Party and the Chinese people throughout his life, who saved the Party and the country from many crises and much chaos, who in his capacity as a leader protected as many people in trouble and danger as possible.

Of course she admired Mao Zedong intensely as well because Mao was the leader who took China out of the abyss of external aggression and exploitation and internal feudal backwardness, extreme poverty and wars, through the Chinese Revolution and the

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<sup>125</sup> Leys, The Burning Forest, 190.

defeat of Jiang Jieshi's Guomindang regime, to the founding of the People's Republic of China. The Chinese people have, in Han Suyin's own words, "discovered national dignity through Mao" (HTD 47). In this sense she is loyal to Mao, but her loyalty to Mao is quite different from her loyalty to Zhou, for the former is a moral commitment to the cause of the Chinese that Mao represented rather than to Mao himself, while the later is both spiritual and personal devotion to both the cause to which Zhou completely devoted himself and Zhou himself as a noble person.

It is clearly not the case, however, that Han Suyin is loyal to Liu Shaoqi, for in all her books there is no evidence at all to support this claim. Even in 1980, long after Liu Shaoqi had been fully rehabilitated by the Chinese Communist Party, Han Suyin still insisted, "I have never had any feeling for this man ... he was impossibly colourless although handsome" (HTD 311).<sup>126</sup>

It is also true that she has mentioned briefly and positively Mao's wife, Jiang Qing, in Wind in the Tower (pp.238-9, 316, 317, 333), probably because Jiang was under Mao's halo at the time and also because she had become the symbol of women's emancipation in China before her fall in 1976. As a woman writer, Han Suyin in this context states, "There is great praise of Chiang Ching [Jiang Qing], who has called for at least 30 per cent of women in administrative roles. My heart warms to her" (HTD 499). Although she detested Jiang Qing because Jiang persecuted so many people,

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<sup>126</sup> For Han's disagreement with Liu Shaoqi long after his rehabilitation see also HTD, 500.

especially artists in theatre and film industry, she still felt sorry for her even after Jiang had been disgraced, not because she was loyal to her but because she understood Jiang's tragedy was both a personal one to herself and a political one for the Chinese people. The fact that at least twice she politely declined to write Jiang Qing's biography (HTD 612) when she was still in power also suggests that she was never loyally attached to Jiang Qing. Even after Jiang's disgrace Han Suyin several times protested that it was not fair to dump all the faults and crimes on Jiang Qing when other people were also responsible for the disasters of the Cultural Revolution (HTD 602, 614, 640). She takes this position, not because she is loyal to Jiang Qing but because she worries that the course of women's liberation in China might suffer from Jiang's negative example (HTD 640). Han Suyin's reaction here provides strong counter-evidence to Simon Leys' criticism of her, for Han is fair to Jiang Qing even after Jiang's downfall.

Han Suyin has not written much about Hua Guofeng. All she has written about him is positive and so if she was loyal to him her loyalty has been consistent through to the end and even long after Hua's resignation.<sup>127</sup> This again discredits Simon Leys' charge that Han Suyin is loyal to "everybody and anybody, providing that they were safely in power."

Reading Han Suyin's last volume of autobiography Wind in My Sleeve, one is even clearer that Han Suyin is not really "loyal" to those safely in power. The best example to illustrate this point is her description of the paramount leader Deng Xiaoping

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<sup>127</sup> See WS, 18; ES, 452.

in both positive and negative terms. Although she agrees that Deng Xiaoping has tremendous energy, great intelligence, tough tenacity, challenging courage and unswerving determination, she sets out her reservations about him frankly, for she suggests that Deng is inflexible, unmoving, impolite, discourteous, stubborn and stern. While interviewing Deng in 1977, she got the impression that "He brooked no interruption ... and irked easily" (WS 10) that he neither took other's opinion often nor accepted contradictions well. When Han Suyin suggested that it would be a good idea to cautiously select and send mature students to study abroad, thus ensuring that the Chinese government could first train the students and provide them with a good psychological preparation for the western world, Deng simply ignored her:

Deng went on with his discourse as if he had not heard. Perhaps he was truly deaf, as I had been told, perhaps, as others hinted, conveniently deaf when he simply did not wish to listen (WS 11).

Han Suyin further insists that Deng is at least partly responsible for the Anti-Rightist Movement in which many intellectuals were persecuted because of their radical attacks on the Communist Party and the government during the Hundred Flowers Movement in 1957 (WS 111).<sup>128</sup> She also points out that "Deng Xiaoping, or at least those around him, seem dizzy with their own success" which they have overstated while belittling others' contribution to the construction of the new China, and that "this is a very bad sign. It means that less than ever will 'the top leadership' listen to a contrary opinion" (WS 112). She even hints that like many "crown princes" "Deng Pufang, the

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<sup>128</sup> See also ES, 263, 265.

crippled son of Deng Xiaoping is allegedly involved in a major company making money in Hongkong" (WS 121). Such references certainly suggest that she is not "loyal" to Deng Xiaoping who is in absolute power, but strives to give a neutral or objective view of him.

Han Suyin's description of Li Peng, while she was a dinner guest at Li's home, seems equally neutral and independent rather than "loyal":

Again I realize he has no charisma, does not know how to please, does not put people at ease, is stiff. But he is full of facts, and delivers them in order, one two three four as if reading a statistical report (WS 216).

[However] this man *is* capable of very deep feeling, but he is hidebound by shyness, and suddenly I sense in him a still frightened, lonely youth, uncertain of himself. He is a good family man, he is incorrupt, none of his children have privileges or is a 'crown prince'. Perhaps that is why people find him dull (WS 217).<sup>129</sup>

There is in him a capacity of endurance not to be belittled. It is perhaps precisely his lack of glamour and charisma, the colourless tenacity which he projects which, in the midst of the new chaos shambling our world, is necessary for a while (WS 219).

Clearly Han Suyin's treatment of the Cultural revolution and some of the Chinese top leaders seems contradictory at times; it seems plausible, however, given the evidence, to attribute this to the inevitable tension between, on one hand, her deep involvement in the cause of the Chinese people and, on the other, her professional integrity as an independent writer. The evidence that she belongs to *fengpai*<sup>130</sup> as some of her critics

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<sup>129</sup> For a similar description, see also WS, 143-44.

<sup>130</sup> It means that one always follows the political trend out of self-interest.

such as Simon Leys have accused her of being, seems by the same token less plausible.

#### **D. The Student Movement**

Han Suyin's exploration of the student movement in China since 1986 is equally multi-faceted in nature. On the one hand she realizes the dangerous gap between those who made the new China and those who were born in it. It is a gap that has led to dissatisfaction among the young and irritation among the old; both have precipitated new crises in China. She is perplexed by both the students' agitation and government corruption which was virtually non-existent during Mao's era and alarmed by the imbalance between the urban and the rural areas, between the coastal and the hinterland areas. She was well aware that all these serious problems would naturally invite agitation among the young students. Moreover as usual China changes rapidly and the great changes bring about great problems; yet the new leadership no longer has the magic power to keep the problems in firm control as Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai did in the past.

As a consequence, Han Suyin no longer has the deep trust or faith in the new leadership that she used to have in Mao and Zhou. This enables her to detach herself from the new Chinese policy and examine it more critically. She agrees with the open-door policy established by Deng Xiaoping, which broadens and deepens China's economic development and speeds up China's four modernizations in agriculture, industry, national defence, science and technology, while she is at the same time deeply

concerned about the tremendous problems that have been brought about by rapid economic development. Many of these problems, of course, can be traced back to the confusion generated during the later stage of the Cultural Revolution. She is well aware that the younger generation is an ideologically "lost generation," not unlike the generation portrayed by Ernest Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald after the Second World War in the United States. Many young people who grew up during the Cultural Revolution are utterly confused and do not know what to make of China and the world, for they can no longer identify themselves with any specific ideology. Their blind faith in the old ideology created and developed by Mao Zedong and his followers was shattered by both their own disillusionment nurtured during the Cultural Revolution and the new political and economic policy adopted by the pragmatic leadership represented by Deng Xiaoping.

With the open-door policy, moreover, the younger generation has been able to broaden its vision of the world. Its boundary has expanded out of the limits of the Middle Kingdom and finally it has realized how poor their people are, compared with the people in developed industrial countries such as the United States, France, Germany and Japan. With broken faith in ideology many young people in higher educational institutions have turned to Western democracy and also to material incentives.

Han Suyin is clearly shocked; she points out that unlike the older generations who would sacrifice their personal interests for the sake of their suffering people, many young students believe that it is their right to enjoy democratic freedom and live a good life,

for they do not have the heavy moral burden of the country and the people on their back, although they may still be concerned for their country in an abstract and theoretical sense. With this type of mentality, the young students are easily agitated when their ideological and personal demands cannot be satisfactorily met and Han Suyin has noted the situation during her lecture trips to universities in China. She has expressed her deep concern for the situation:

I write a memorandum about the students. 'The time has come to be truly concerned ... it is absolutely necessary to institute serious dialogue ... essential to involve the young in matters of importance' (WS 131).

As the comment above must suggest, Han Suyin does not think that the Party and the government leadership have handled the students' restiveness well. The Party and the government failed to initiate efficient measures to deal with the situation because the new leadership strongly favoured order and stability and discipline by governmental organizations. Yet the situation in China changed; many young students did not want to accept patriarchal or moral admonitions and instead they demanded democratic change. Again as in her response to the intellectuals involved in the Hundred Flowers Movement, Han Suyin sympathizes with the students but disagrees with their impatient and aggressive demand for quick changes and for the demolition of the Communist system:

Once again, the demonstrations [in 1986] have a counter-productive effect. They bolster the diehard sector in the Party who frown upon the laxness of recent years (WS 130).

Although Han Suyin agrees with the students that China needs democratic reform, especially legal reform, she opposes the idea that China should adopt fully a Western



system like the American one which Mr. Fang Lizhi and many of his young followers wish China to adopt. Han Suyin believes on the contrary, that China, in her words, must "develop her own system, adapted to Chinese conditions, to Chinese reality" (WS 125). The Chinese reality for Han Suyin is that China cannot totally give up its socialist system, at least for the time being, because the vast population problem is not an easy one to solve and "no system in China can be stable without a contented peasantry." "In China the peasantry still determines the rise and fall of dynasties, socialist or not" (HTD 648), and any hastened reforms will certainly affect the life of the peasants, who can be easily exploited in rapid industrial development, and therefore may be made easily discontented. This in turn will generate new social agitation. Slow and cautious change is surely better than unrealistic or misguided change, and the change must come from within, as Han Suyin frequently repeats:

But the change will come from within, from those in the Party, and in the other parties, the non-communist parties, from the intellectuals, the middle school teachers, from China's countryside (WS 200).<sup>131</sup>

To the Tiananmen Square student movement Han Suyin's attitude is clear. She believes that even though the students were being worked up and to some extent manipulated by certain intellectuals such as Mr. Fang Lizhi and his wife, "the student movement was a genuine, idealistic surge" (WS 161) and so she also repeatedly claims that the killing was "a terrible error," that the Chinese government handled the event badly. She even sent angry faxes to Beijing to protest on June 5, 1989 right after the

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<sup>131</sup> See also WS, 224.

killing, expressing her dismay:

**GRIEF, ANGER, DESOLATION** are glib words thinned by use. Tiananmen Square, or as in China we now call it, 4 June, was a shock, a gash into our consciousness, so deep, so stunning, that it may never be entirely effaced among us .... Even today I feel the wound, unhealed (WS 183).

Nevertheless her attitude toward the whole event is again complex. Although she shows her full sympathy with the majority of the students and understands their demand for democratic changes in China, she obviously disagrees with their desire to have a totally *laissez-faire*, Western style system by bringing down the present government, that is, to totally cast away Chinese culture by parroting everything in the West. She warned the students that any attempt to obtain support from the West was unwise and counter-productive:

But I see clearly that democracy cannot be imposed by outside interference, by influence, however benign or not so benign, and by imitation. I agree with a friend from Singapore who writes: 'Any precipitate change will only lead to a military regime, to a return of warlord era, to chaos. It is better for China to evolve slowly than to evolve wrongly' (WS 214).

Obviously Han Suyin's attitude toward the student movement again discredits Simon Leys's charge that for Han Suyin, "the safest approach is to stick to the official communiqués provided by the currently ensconced editorial staff of the *Beijing Review*."<sup>132</sup> The fact is that in Wind in My Sleeve, Han Suyin is more in doubt about, and sometimes in disagreement with, the policies of the Chinese government than in

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<sup>132</sup> Simon Leys, The Burning Forest, 191.

support of them. She writes a great deal about ideological crises among the young; élitism in education; corruption in the Party and the government; imbalance between the urban and rural areas, and the coastal and hinterland areas; neglect of water conservancy; problems of deforestation, pollution, population, and inflation; and problems of prostitution, drugs and smuggling. It is scarcely surprising that some critics such as Jonathan Mirsky complains that Han Suyin too easily finds fault with Deng Xiaoping and his policy of rapid reforms:

She reports that in conversation Deng Xiaoping 'brooked no interruption', that he allowed a cult to form around him, and that venereal disease and prostitution, and bride-selling have reappeared during his reform. Valid enough. Then comes the inevitable distortion. Chinese have probably never eaten so well as under Deng Xiaoping. They starved in their millions under Mao. But Han, who wishes to discredit Deng utterly, quotes a 1988 street song:

Oh, with ten cents in the time of Mao Dzedong [sic]  
                                     We ate plenty,  
 With a dollar in the time of Deng Xiaoping,  
                                     We starve.<sup>133</sup>

One of the stranger ironies attached to Han Suyin's attempt to "write China," and particularly modern Chinese history, lies in the very notion of history itself as a record of the past, however subjective; such a record, it is presumed, is directed towards informing and shaping the future. For Han Suyin, China's past for most of the last two hundred years has been one of infamy and degradation, partly imposed by the West, partly by a corrupted and incompetent government, partly a heritage of out-moded

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<sup>133</sup> Jonathan Mirsky, "Economical with the Food," The Spectator 270 (10 April 1993): 33.

Confucian values, and partly by a feudal social order that left the majority of the population in abject misery.

Such a past needed in the present not reform, but revolution, and in 1949 China got it. Han Suyin has spent the last 46 years celebrating it. Yet revolution, by its nature, is designed not merely to sweep away the past, but to obliterate it. And so indeed it has. Old Confucian values may from time to time resurface, but their roots have been cut; the old social order is only a distant memory to the older generation, including Han Suyin; and the shame and degradation have disappeared forever. All this too Han Suyin has celebrated.

To sweep away the past, however, is not only to sweep away whatever positive aspects it might have had, the humane and civilized values of Third Uncle, for example, who faithfully preserved the past in the Family Book of Generations, who practised calligraphy out of a love of beauty, and who shaped Han Suyin's very character; it is to sweep away the very knowledge of the past, both good and ill. In Wind in My Sleeve, Han Suyin is both perplexed and pained to find that Chinese history ends in a China without history; she comments that the students to whom she talks know little of that which went before, of that to which she has dedicated her life in one sense or another:

I find a dismaying ignorance of history [among young students]. Not only of western history, but also of Chinese history.... 'How can history affect me? I do not need to know the past,' says a student who is the class 'joker' (WS 94).<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> For the same point see also WS, 23; and TB, 240.

To be ignorant of the past, the old adage has it, is to risk repeating it. Such is the evil genie that Han Suyin has discovered in the lamp of revolution. As ever, however, optimistic and energetic in the face of yet another challenge, she strives to make Chinese history live. The final word should be hers:

Before me a whole new generation, a China reborn. My books will one day help them greatly to know how to believe without faith; how to keep faith with oneself and serve Man's cause with a clean heart. I want to help others to write their stories; the young will need to know them. Stories of courage and loyalty and unshaken devotion (CT 653).

I am an optimist. Anyone who has lived in Old China and seen China today would naturally be an optimist. There is no other way but faith and trust in humanity, however frail, imperfect and fallible it is. For fraternity is a sustaining virtue, the heightening of the human being's discovery of ourself [sic]. And today we are bound to each other as never before (TB 221).

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Forms of Ancestry: Han Suyin's Recreation of Her Family

Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.<sup>1</sup>

...human societies, at least the more advanced cultures, have rarely offered the individual anything but imperialism, racism, and ethnocentrism for dealing with "other" cultures.<sup>2</sup>

The dis/mantling, de/mystification and unmasking of European authority that has been an essential political and cultural strategy towards decolonization and the retrieval or creation of an independent identity from the beginning persists as a prime impuse [*sic*] in all post-colonial literatures.<sup>3</sup>

The historical events related in the first section reflect more than the changing pattern of East-West relations explored in Han Suyin's works; they also reflect the changing pattern of the relations between two very different cultures. It is with these cultures, defined in the largest possible terms, that Han Suyin is primarily concerned in her autobiographical books and novels. In most of these works, set against the macrocosmic sweep of history is the microcosmic saga of her family, which becomes both a primary subject and a model of the intersection of East and West at which Han Suyin literally and metaphorically has always positioned herself.

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<sup>1</sup> Rudyard Kipling, "The Ballad of East and West" in Complete Verse, definitive ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 233.

<sup>2</sup> Said, Orientalism, 204.

<sup>3</sup> Helen Tiffin, "Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism and the Rehabilitation of Post-Colonial History," Journal of Commonwealth Literature 23 no. 1 (1988): 171.

This section will examine Han Suyin's treatment of both sides of her family and their multiple cultures, and more specifically, of her own creation of a family history that opens up new perspectives on the larger history of Western-Chinese relationships. Here attention first will be paid to the decline of the traditional Chinese culture to which Han's father belonged, beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century when the West began to penetrate into China, then to the inability of her father's family to face the challenge of Western culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and finally to the conflicts or problems of cultural exchange between her family members, especially between Han Suyin's parents. The last is especially important, since it embodies both the larger historical context of cultural confrontation between China and the West, and the possibilities of equality, mutual recognition and reconciliation in East-West cultural exchanges. In other words both East-West cultural exchange and conflicts to a larger extent are theoretically inherent in, but more practically frustrated by her father's marriage to her mother. Again my approach to Han Suyin's cultural themes will be historical, and the theoretical frames of the discussion will be those suggested by Said's Orientalism; and Culture and Imperialism and by other recent post-colonial criticism. The structural frame of this chapter is chiefly chronological.

Han Suyin's treatment of traditional Chinese culture is mainly based on the long development of her family history on her father's side, which is compared and contrasted to the Western culture of her mother's family. Her account of the long history of her father's family thus becomes a microcosm of the cultural, political and economic history

of modern China, with her father's gentry family, together with its strong background of traditional Chinese culture, serving as a model of Chinese political and economic systems. When Western culture began to penetrate into China, her father's family was forced to confront it, and suffered accordingly. It is the period (1886-1995) from the Qing Empire's accelerated disintegration through its conflicts with both the domestic rebellions and the West to the present that is carefully examined by Han Suyin through her family history and her own personal experience in her autobiographical works.

## I

### **The Decline of Traditional Chinese Culture**

Han Suyin begins the long account of her life by identifying her ancestral roots among the Hakka people (Guest People in Chinese) in The Crippled Tree. A distinctive group of northern Chinese, they exemplified to an extreme degree the characteristic Chinese ability to survive in difficult conditions. Like all Chinese the Hakka people were deeply influenced by traditional cultural values defined by Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, yet were perhaps more courageous, progressive and open-minded than most in trying new possibilities in life. They were restless, migrating from place to place, especially when affected by wars, famines, natural calamities and social instability. Their migrations on the one hand reflected their attempt to both survive and prosper, but on the other mirrored the reality of the historical changes that marked Chinese society over the centuries.



Han Suyin links the five major migrations of the Hakka people with the large process of Chinese history. She claims that their first migration around A. D. 311 was probably caused by famine or war and their "second migration took place from A. D. 874, during the decade of turbulence which saw the end of the Tang dynasty" (CT 23). Their third started after the Mongols, led by Genghis Khan, had occupied northern China around 1276 and during this migration Han's father's ancestor, Chienhsi, who was the seventh generation in Third Uncle's Family Book of Generations, moved to Meih sien, Guangdong (Kuangtung) Province. Their fourth one was due to the encouraged resettlement of the Hakkas by the imperial government after the depopulation caused by the peasant uprising led by Zhang Xianzhong (Chang Hsienchung) between 1635 to 1645. During this migration between 1680 and 1720 her father's ancestor Mofah, who was the fifteenth generation, came to settle in Sichuan. He was a very poor itinerant pedlar when he first came to Sichuan around 1690, then he became a land-tiller and later a small tenant-farmer. Gradually his descendants obtained land and did well in farming. The fifth and last major migration of the Hakkas was caused by the failure of the Taiping Rebellion in which the Hakkas were deeply involved; indeed the leader of the Rebellion, Hong Xiuquan (Hung Hsiuchuan) was himself a Hakka. Although her grandmother was originally from the Hong clan, Han Suyin's ancestors did not take part in this rebellion, and therefore did not have to migrate, for by then their family was well established and prosperous. Both her great-grand father Taohung and her grandfather Chieh-yu, as government officials and administrators, were actively involved in suppressing the

Moslem rebellions stirred up by the Taiping Rebellion in Gansu province.

Thus the migrations and growing prosperity of Han's ancestors reflect Chinese culture both in the context of Confucian conventions and as a reflection of the changes, developments and internal conflicts of Chinese society more generally. Han Suyin suggests that her ancestors firmly believed that their success was due to the uprightness and virtues bequeathed by their progenitors in Confucian terms, as her Third Uncle argues in his preface to the Family Book of Generations (CT 31). He identifies the continuity and unity of his family over many centuries, including the several long migrations, as defining characteristics of Chinese culture, which the Chinese themselves identified with the philosophy of harmony. With harmony the family effectively prevented, avoided and ignored behaviour of its individual members that might be considered discordant. Whatever quarrels, misconduct or scandals they might have were certainly never recorded in the family history; as Han Suyin comments:

What affected the Family as a whole is recorded, the final, authoritative decision is inscribed on paper, or even carved on stone if weighty enough; but the transient concern of an individual member, a wayward and aberrant effusion soon terminated, finds no place here ... there was no place for the individual choice. The tenor of continuity, an invisible but relentless heart, beats its steady pulsation, propelling the Family forward into its own destiny through these two centuries, the seventeenth to the nineteenth. Only a harmony unceasingly displayed could sustain this relentless holding together, nonconformism and disunity were erased from memory lest they maintain or suscite discord (CT 30).

Her father's ancestors, like all successful Chinese of the gentry class, began to put down roots in the land where they had settled and prospered. Land became the foundation of the family fortune and on it the family based its spiritual, political and

economic fortunes as they extended their activities into business and scholarly learning as well as government administrative positions. As the family gradually obtained more land, and grew richer, Han's ancestors could either rent the land to tenant peasants or hire managers to take care of it. By following the traditional social system of self-sufficiency, the family hired relatives, friends and "adopted children" to manage the land and its rent. The family reinvested the profit from the land into the tobacco business and established its own company, Kuang Hsing, which was also managed by the family's relatives and adopted children.

As landowners and businessmen Han's ancestors then began to ask their younger generations to pursue high classical learning, for such learning was the only passport to get into government administration. Thus Han's great great grandfather, her great grandfather Chou Taohung and her grandfather Chou Chieh-yu all became scholar-official-administrators who duly achieved the honours that all traditional families sought. The family strictly followed the Confucian moral principles that for many centuries had been the central pillars on which Chinese society rested, and which Han's ancestors' firmly believed were the guiding principles for success in cultural, social, political and economic activities. As Han points out, "Third Uncle's preface [to the Family Book of Generations] gives compendiously the Confucian moral structure which propped the feudal gentry family in its social and economic framework" (CT 31). Thus the development of the family reflects the principal structures of Chinese traditional society in agriculture, economics, arts, literature, philosophy and politics.

The fortunes of Han Suyin's ancestral' Chou clan to some extent reflect Harold Isaacs's divisions of the general situation of China in history in his classic Images of Asia: American Views of China and India. He divides American views of China into the following six ages:

1. The Age of Respect (Eighteenth Century)
2. The Age of Contempt (1840-1905)
3. The Age of Benevolence (1905-1937)
4. The Age of Admiration (1937-1944)
5. The Age of Disenchantment (1944-1949)
6. The Age of Hostility (1949- )<sup>4</sup>

Although these divisions are too general to accurately reflect the total reality of Chinese history and too broad to cover all individual cases, they perhaps represent the dominant view of not only the Americans but also the Europeans towards China; therefore, they will be used in the broadest sense in the following discussion. Before the nineteenth century China had been seen by the West as a great and powerful empire with a long history. Marco Polo's Travels; the writings by the Moroccan, Ibn Batuta, about life, tradition, arts, economics, agriculture in China; and the well-known works of many famous missionaries like Matteo Ricci (Italian, 1552-1610), Julio Aleni (Italian 1582-1649), Nicolas Trigault (French, 1577-1628), Johann Ada Schall von Bell (German, 1591-1666), and Ferdinand Verbiest (Belgian, 1623-1688) all vividly described a prosperous Chinese society, and highly civilized Chinese culture, which enchanted the West. Of course the sketches of China by these pioneer Orientalists described only one

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<sup>4</sup> Isaacs, 71.

side of China. Han Suyin's father's family with its history of migration, development and prosperity from the seventeenth century to nineteenth century was just the type of family brought to the attention of the West by these missionaries, other writers and travellers. Such families earned for China the reputation referred to in Isaacs' first category: "The Age of Respect."

The passing of "The Age of Respect" defined by Isaacs was to have important consequences for her father's family no less than for China and it is these consequences that Han Suyin documents so fully in the account of her father's family. During the nineteenth century the positive image of Chinese culture and civilization gradually turned into an "Orientalist" fantasy of sensual, exotic feminine beauty which either invited Western penetration or was to be dominated by the Western powers because of the decline of the Qing Empire. In discussing Orientalism, Edward Said sums up the complex process thus: "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences. Now it was disappearing; in a sense it had happened, its time was over."<sup>5</sup> Indeed China before the nineteenth century had been "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes" and Han Suyin's description of her father's ancestors and the stories of their migrations and prosperity testify to the power of such exoticism. But after the Opium War (1840-42) the Western powers through their military superiority penetrated into China and began to lord it over a country that was

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<sup>5</sup> Said, Orientalism, 1.

becoming weaker and weaker. The self-sufficiency of the system was shattered by Western interference, aggression and exploitation and the Age of Contempt had begun.

Han Suyin's books such as The Crippled Tree, A Mortal Flower, and Birdless Summer offer an over-view of the process through cultural comparison and contrast between China and the West. She shows above all that the tremendous continuity of Chinese culture and society was interrupted and derailed by the intrusion of the Western powers in the historical period after "the Age of Respect." Since 1840 China had been declining, while the Western countries, including Japan, had become stronger and stronger because of their political and economic reforms and revolutions, especially the Industrial Revolution. Thus the long history of Chinese civilization, formerly an object of admiration, was dismissed by all except those who still wrapped themselves in romantic Chinese fairy tales in the illusionary world of the Oriental exotic, as Han Suyin's mother did when she fell in love with Han's father. Such fragile illusions did not survive contact, however, with the unending wars, wide-spread famines, disease, starvation and poverty on one side, and the magic power of gunboats and rifles of the Western powers in China on the other. This Han's mother discovered to her cost during her long stay in China.

Han's family provides a more specific focus on the historical fact that as the country began to decline, in part through the corruption and ignorance of the Qing court but more certainly through the aggression and exploitation of the Western powers, her family was also rapidly declining. Its decline was directly bound to the larger fate of the

country and reflected the worsening situation of the Chinese cultural, political and economic systems. The family's tobacco business, which had lasted more than a century, went bankrupt because of the fierce and unfair competition from the gigantic British-American Tobacco Company, with its exemption from the crippling taxes that Chinese manufactures and businesses were obliged to pay. The fortunes of the family further declined as a result of the wars against the never-ending rebellions such as the Nians, the Moslems and the Boxers, and the wars against the Western powers such as Britain, France, Russia, Japan and the United States. All these wars resulted in countless and heavy taxes which were used to pay war indemnities and which would ruin numberless families like Han's father's. By 1913 Han's grandmother had to sell her jewellery to give a face-saving reception for Han's mother.

One context for the decline of Han's father's family is provided by the disintegration of the Qing Empire, whose collapse could trace its origins back as far as the late eighteenth century. By then the Qing Empire was already exhibiting signs of its corruption and decline; yet it refused to acknowledge the potential danger of adopting a closed-door policy, or the threat posed by the outside world. Beyond the corruption and incompetence of the Court, the traditional insularity of the Chinese played its part.<sup>6</sup> For

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<sup>6</sup> When the British government sent Lord Macartney to China to seek trade and diplomatic relations in 1793, Emperor Qianlong (Ch'ien-lung's) sent King George III the following message:

We possess all things. I set no value on objects  
strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's  
manufactures ... It behooves you, O King, to respect my

centuries the Chinese had considered their country to be the centre of the world, the Middle Kingdom, and their culture to be superior to all other cultures, which were merely barbarian to them. Such arrogance was based on ignorance, for they blindly refused to accept anything foreign beyond their own boundaries, and therefore did not know much about the rapidly rising powers of the West after the Industrial Revolution until it was too late.

Thus the roots of the threat that affected the Chous ran deep. The virtues that had traditionally sustained them proved inadequate. Neither the political and social systems, nor traditional culture based on Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism could stand the challenge from the West. This had become evident to the West as early as 1763 as the French historian Nicolas Boulanger made clear even then:

All the remains of her ancient institutions, which China now possesses, will necessarily be lost; they will disappear in the future revolutions; as what she hath already lost of them vanished in former ones; and finally, as she acquires nothing new, she will always be on the losing side.<sup>7</sup>

In the meeting of East and West, one of the more significant sites of confrontation

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sentiments and to display even greater devotion and loyalty in future, so that, by perpetual submission to our Throne, you may secure peace and prosperity for your country thereafter.

H. F. MacNir, Modern Chinese History: Selected Readings, (Shanghai, 1913), I, 2-4. Quoted by Hsü, 161.

This often quoted remark clearly shows the arrogance and ignorance of the Chinese court about the outside world at that time.

<sup>7</sup> Nicolas Antoine Boulanger, quoted by Spence in The Search for Modern China, 134.



was religion. For many Westerners, traditional Chinese beliefs, ceremonies, and traditions were simply pagan and therefore to be obliterated as swiftly as possible. Missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, were the shock troops who would transform not merely religious belief, but the culture that generated it, thereby bringing China even more firmly under Western control. When the Chinese not unnaturally resisted such a transformation, secular military might could easily be brought in to back up the spiritual arm of the church in the imposition of Western values. Harold R. Isaacs comments thus:

Missionaries served their governments as interpreters and emissaries and utilized to the full the support of their governments and armed forces for their effort to propagate their Gospel.<sup>8</sup>

Even Kenneth Latourette, "a product of the missionary movement and one of its principal American historians," admits that "the Church had become a partner in Western imperialism and could not well disavow some responsibility for the consequences."<sup>9</sup>

One of the most powerful tools the Catholic church possessed was its ability to give the Chinese converts special powers and privileges, and in particular exemption from Chinese law. One incident illustrating the point is particularly significant, having profound consequences for both Han Suyin's family in particular and the entire Sichuan

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<sup>8</sup> Isaacs, 133.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Latourette, A History of Christian Missions in China (New York, 1929), 280. Quoted by Isaacs, 133. For similar views see also Paul A. Cohen, China and Christianity: The Missionary Movement and the Growth of Chinese Antiforeignism 1860-1870 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), 84, 86; Hsü, 388. Spence, The Search for Modern China, 205. Fairbank, The United States and China, 202.

region in general. In 1886, Han's grandmother's niece-by-affection<sup>10</sup> was engaged to a young man, the son of a family relative and clansman Hung. A local Catholic convert, Middleman Tu, however, wanted Lee's daughter to marry his son and forced Lee to break his daughter's engagement. Lee was very afraid of Tu, who had the strong support of the Catholic church, and finally broke his daughter's engagement and married her to Tu's son. But the young bride strangled herself in her sedan-chair on the way to Tu's family and later having heard the tragic news her mother also committed suicide.

There were at least two immediate consequences of the deaths. Han Suyin's grandmother in her shock and grief became very sick, and consequentially gave birth prematurely to Yentung, Han Suyin's father. The incident also brought about a widespread revulsion against the church, and led to violent and passionate protests. More than a thousand anti-missionary uprisings exploded in Sichuan province in the next few years, as Han's father records:

Big and small, involving whole districts, for the next few years over one thousand anti-missionary risings took place in Szechuan. They were savagely put down, in one instance a thousand peasants being decapitated. Our gentry were not spared; they openly incited the peasantry against the Christians; some were caught leading local revolts, and put to death (CT 66).

This incident points to the ideological role of the Christian missionaries as agents

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<sup>10</sup> In traditional Chinese society, especially in rural areas, it was fairly common that people adopt (not in the legal sense but often in oral agreement between the parties involved) children as their sons-by-affection, daughters-by-affection or nieces-by-affection. In this case because Han's grandmother was the best friend of Lee's wife, she adopted Lee's daughter as her niece-by-affection.

of Western domination. Here it is God himself who sanctions their right to enlighten and rule the Chinese people, for the Chinese were so backward that they were unaware that they were living in a dark world. If they protested, or resisted, or rebelled against being enlightened and ruled, it was the missionaries' duty to control and suppress them with either the Bible or the rifle, as necessary. Their attitude towards the Chinese marks typical Orientalist discourses, as described by Said:

What are striking in these [Orientalist] discourses are ... the notions about bringing civilization to primitive or barbaric peoples, the disturbingly familiar ideas about flogging or death or extended punishment being required when "they" misbehaved or became rebellious, because "they" mainly understood force or violence best; "they" were not like "us", and for that reason to be ruled.<sup>11</sup>

History, however, clearly points to the counter-productive nature of the process; inequality and injustice generate resentment, resistance and rebellion, which naturally bring about suppression in return, which of course causes further resistance. Said identifies the loss both sides suffer:

... history also teaches us that domination breeds resistance, and that the violence inherent in the imperial contest—is an impoverishment for both sides. These truths hold in an era saturated with the memory of past imperialisms.<sup>12</sup>

The truth of Said's conclusion is amply demonstrated by the incident that involved the Hung, Lee and Tu families. The suppression of its own people by the Qing government, forced to do so by the missionaries backed by their own governments, led to bloodshed

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<sup>11</sup> Said, Culture and Imperialism, xi.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 287.

and cost many lives; the price both the Qing government and the missionaries had to pay were hostility, hatred, and rejection. It is necessary to point out that the incident was not an isolated one but rather a typical example of Chinese hostility to the domineering high-handedness of the missionaries and the powerful military forces that stood behind them.

Obviously for Han Suyin, the incident, while of importance in the family's history, has a larger significance as a representative example of the many wrongs<sup>13</sup> that led up to the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1900) which was to symbolize the inevitable and violent clash between Chinese and Western cultures generated by the West's political hegemony. In other words the incident was merely a drop of water contributing to the torrent that would storm first over North China and eventually the entire country.

The incident has one more level of interest, namely as an illustration of the

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<sup>13</sup> Another celebrated example is the Tianjin Incident of 1870. In 1860 the French missionaries razed an old imperial garden and a Buddhist temple to build an orphanage on the site, but no Chinese sent orphans there at first. Hence the nuns paid a certain amount of money for each child sent there; this not only encouraged bad people to steal children to sell them there but also caused suspicion, especially since, as the nuns particularly wanted to have dying children so that they could baptize them, the death rate was very high. Suspicion brought widely-spread rumors that the nuns killed children and made medicine with their eyes and hearts; therefore, the local government sent officials to inspect the orphanage. This enraged the arrogant French consul Henri Fontanier who went to the local magistrate to demand justice for the sisters. In his outrage he shot the magistrate's servant dead, missing the magistrate himself and this provoked a mass riot that killed Fontanier and his chancellor, M. Simon as well as ten sisters, two priests, three Russian businessmen, and destroyed four British and American churches. Of course the result was that the Chinese officials and citizens involved were severely punished by the Qing government that was threatened by gunboats at Tianjin Port; the psychological trauma and hostility, however, continued to develop. For further details about this incident see Hsü, 299-302.

breakdown of Chinese culture. The weak and corrupted Qing government was no longer able to protect its own culture, while under the protection of unequal treaties the missionaries could freely build churches and schools to propagate their culture and to preach their doctrines. The Qing government's harsh treatment of its own people and acquiescent attitude towards the Western powers points to the betrayal of its Confucian virtues of benevolence, humanity and good conduct in a Faustian bargain with the West to maintain its power.

Without protection from his own government, Lee for his part was forced to abandon his moral integrity to break his daughter's engagement; Lee's action, however immoral in its violation of the Confucian principles of righteousness, propriety and integrity, was his only chance to survive in the face of Tu's overbearing demand. Even the young bride, who defended her honour and integrity by committing suicide, herself violated the Confucian principle of filial piety, for the girl did not obey her father's order; she was faced with a choice of evils. Like the young bride, the mother's suicide was also a silent protest against both her husband's immoral decision and the high-handedness of the Tu family. By so doing, however, she was also disloyal to her husband in Confucian terms.

The violent protests and uprisings against the missionaries caused by the incident show that the moral and social forces that governed Chinese society were upset, and that, faced with the challenge of the Western culture, traditional Confucian culture seemed no longer functioning. Of course the severe punishment of the young man of the Hung clan

who was first engaged to the girl and thousands of others led by him against the missionaries and the converts was a clear sign of the government's weakness and the missionaries' domineering show of power.<sup>14</sup> In the wide-spread Chinese xenophobia generated by the incident, Han Suyin's family was fully engaged. Her great-grandfather, Taohung wrote: "If your son becomes a Christian, kill him, for he will desecrate the graves [of your ancestors]" (CT 66).

The incident in its largest sense demonstrates the degree to which the decaying feudal system was falling apart, and to which the Chinese government was unable to deal with the serious situation at home, let alone taking effective measures to deal with the aggression of the West. The decline of the Qing Empire directly affected the gentry class to which Han's ancestors belonged, and it suggests the larger inadequacies of traditional Chinese culture in such a context. The gentry class, which consisted of land-owners, businessmen, and scholars-officials, could not stand the challenge of Western learning in science, technology and philosophy, let alone of Western military might. Han Suyin's father commented:

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<sup>14</sup> Such a situation in China in the late nineteenth century is in its principles of course similar to that to be found in any post-colonial society Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin provide a useful gloss in their The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature (London: Routledge, 1989), 172:

But in post-colonial societies, the participants are frozen into a hierarchical relationship in which the oppressed is locked into position by the assumed moral superiority of the dominant group, a superiority which is reinforced when necessary by the use of physical force.

Already the system was crumbling, the predatory West within our gates, feeding on our decay. Already all had changed, below the lacquer of our floors the wood had rotted, but we tried hard not to pronounce the word: *change* (CT 77).

Paradoxically it was the corruption and weakness of the Qing Empire that ensured its survival, for the West supported the government because of these qualities, and indeed nurtured them, for it was such qualities that made it easy for the West to exploit and dominate China.

Han's grandfather and great-grandfather were both participants in this process. As soldiers and administrators, both helped to put down the Moslem revolts in the northwest generated by the weakness, incompetence and corruption of the Court. As always worrying to lose its own power, the government brutally suppressed such rebellions. Han's grandfather for his part seemed not happy about his actions, perhaps realizing that by carrying out government orders he did not help to solve the serious problems but rather intensified them. In the end he fell into a profound melancholy, deepened perhaps also by anxiety caused by foreign aggression and cultural encroachment. This melancholy helped to hasten his death in his early forties and intensified the family's crisis, for with his death the official position from the government that the family had held for many years came to an end.

With the decline of the family's tobacco business, with the many heavy taxes, and with the loss of the official position from the government, the family fortunes were collapsing. The failure of the family was a microcosm of the ruin of the country, as social harmony was disrupted by both internal conflicts and external aggression. The

West understood that it was high time to take advantage of the Qing Empire's weakness, ignorance and corruption and demand treaty rights, including cultural clauses with military forces. The Qing government was easily subdued by the aggressive and vigorous West whose culture began to penetrate into even the hinterland of China. Thus it was that traditional Chinese culture began to clash with the modern culture of the West in the middle of the nineteenth century and crumbled and disintegrated from then on.

To understand the fate of China from the 1840s, it is necessary to understand not merely the social, political, and economic crises of China under assault, but the basic aspects of Chinese traditional culture in its broadest sense. To simplify, traditional Chinese culture had rested on three pillars. The first of them was Confucianism, whose major principles include good conduct, practical wisdom and proper social relationships and whose primary virtues include righteousness, propriety, integrity, and filial piety. All these principles and virtues of Confucianism were family heirlooms, the inheritance of all Han's ancestors and a heritage to be passed on to younger generations. The second is Taoism whose, fundamental essence is the natural balance of *yin* (the feminine and negative principle in nature) and *yang* (the masculine and positive principle in nature) of both the human world and the natural universe through conforming the spontaneous self with the latent or potential law of the universe. Even to this day Han Suyin herself believes the basic principles of *yin* and *yang* of Taoism. The third was Buddhism, which offers escape from the sufferings of life by meditating on the nature of existence of all things, whose spiritual harmony can be achieved only by understanding and perceiving



the true nature of existence.

While Confucianism played the most important role in the traditional Chinese culture all three shared a common emphasis on harmony. The first is harmony in society, harmony among people, between the junior and the senior; the second, harmony between men and women, between human beings and nature; and the third, harmony in the spiritual world. Thus for more than two thousand years Chinese civilization, which consisted of millions of self-sufficient families like Han's father's, had survived on the basis of harmonious principles of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Such qualities do not foster aggression, and up to the last half of this century, the Chinese have been in general a mild, though sometimes passively self-righteous people, ill equipped to deal with foreign aggression. From the middle of the nineteenth century, these qualities cost China dearly in its confrontation with the West, as it suffered one defeat and humiliation after another.

One of the more important aspects of traditional Chinese culture is veneration of the deceased ancestors; it is part of the more general Confucian respect for the elders. From this respect flows the continuity of Chinese life. To worship one's ancestors is to respect their virtues, and thus to pass them on, thereby guaranteeing the prosperity and integrity of future generations. The practice of the Hakka people of carrying their ancestors' bones wherever they migrated and burying them in new graves; the ritual ceremonies of festivals and funerals, such as that for Han's great-grandfather; and Third Uncle's serious research and recording of the family history, all demonstrate the family's

emphasis on establishing a cultural continuity over two millennia. Such ancestor worship was typical of Third Uncle's preface to the Family Book of Generations, which makes the point thus:

All things under heaven have their rise and fall; and these occur beyond our intercession; only resolution and uprightness, virtues bequeathed by our ancestors, can transform ruin into resurgence. That is why a family erects its ancestral sanctuaries, to maintain the veneration due to progenitors and the remembrance of its own humble beginnings. Hence the necessity for filial virtue, to accomplish the rites due to the spirits of predecessors (CT 31).

Until the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Catholic church took a tolerant policy towards traditional Chinese ritual and worship; this tolerance was carefully and effectively cultivated by some intelligent, scholarly Jesuits like Alessandro Valignano, Michele Ruggieri, Matteo Ricci and Adam Scha von Bell. In 1705 Pope Clement XI, however, took a firm stand against Chinese rites and subsequently the Catholic church abandoned its tolerance, redefining them as pagan superstition. The tragic story of the Hung and Lee families shows one example of the destructive impact of the church on Han Suyin's family. A more immediate example with consequences for Han Suyin herself was the final break between her mother, Marguerite, and Yentung's family. This was occasioned by her refusal to let Han's Elder Brother light joss-sticks, for Marguerite's confessor, the Catholic priest, had forbidden it. Facing the confrontation, traditional Chinese culture could not match the aggressive Western culture and so the Chinese were forced to deal with the consequences of the serious situation.

The paralysis of the Qing Court, the increasing domination of the West, the

endless cycle of outrage, revolt, and suppression illustrated by the Hung-Lee-Tu incident, all pointed in one direction: the collapse of China itself. Patriotic intellectuals, scholars, and some politicians all searched desperately for ways to save their country and their culture. They concluded that, in Third Uncle's words, "Only when we were strong would people respect us, as the Whites began to respect Japan after 1895" (CT 88), or as the writer Li Chiehjen maintains, "No one is kind to the weak. Only when we could be strong, like Japan, would no one dare to parade gunboats on our waters, to push our people off the sidewalks of our cities, to garrison troops on our land" (CT 225).

The problem was how to become strong and one of the solutions was to learn from the West. Thus came the Tongzhi Restoration during the 1860s and 1870s, "the Self-Strengthening Movement" from 1861 to 1895 and "the Reform Movement" in 1898. All failed because all were preoccupied with, in Hsü's words, "restoring the traditional order through reaffirmation of old morality"<sup>15</sup> rather than with reforming all the inadequate principles in political, economic, and cultural terms. Thus Third Uncle remarks: "All the talk of Reform was hypocrisy, meant to delude us. All these corrupt men who talked of Constitutional Monarchy were defrauding us of the truth. To become strong, we must fight" (CT 220).

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<sup>15</sup> Hsü, 261.

## II

### Facing the Challenge

The crisis in Chinese life posed by the West explored in The Crippled Tree was particularly acute, though in different ways for those of Yentung's generation, and the generation preceding. To the latter we shall shortly turn. In The Crippled Tree, one illuminating illustration of the former is provided by the very different responses of Han Suyin's father, Yentung, and his best friend, Liu Tachuan, to the collapse of their country. Han Suyin explores it at length, because it has direct relevance to the argument made more abstractly by Third Uncle. Liu Tachuan saw the problems of corruption and weakness of the Qing Empire and at first believed in the reformers such as Kang Yuwei, Tan Citong and Liang Qichao, from whom he learned that they had to change themselves and become strong. Thereafter, no powers would be able to take advantage of their weakness. But gradually he realized that no reform without strong support from both the military and the government could be successful; however, the majority of the Confucian politicians of the Qing regime, led by the selfish and autocratic Dowager Cixi, wanted no real reforms but only to keep their power.

The reforms were, therefore, bound to fail and from the bitter lessons of their failures Chinese like Liu Tachuan understood that they had to search for new ways to save their country, for they realized, "If we do not plan in advance, but are divided among ourselves, our fate shall be unspeakable, utterly unspeakable ..." (CT 98). Yet, as Shakespeare's Brutus discovers to his cost in Julius Caesar, it is no easy job to decide

which are the right ways to save a country and Tachuan's frustration and psychic bafflement were no less complicated and complex than those of Brutus. Thus Tachuan was first an ardent believer in reform and finally became a radical revolutionary, a Sun Yatsen follower who gave his life to the revolutionary cause. He was representative of hundreds of thousands of young Chinese who searched for possible ways to save their country, many of whom would like him give their lives for it.

Han's father and Tachuan disagreed over the proper response, for Yentung was neither an active reformer nor a radical revolutionary like Tachuan, and went a very different way. Yet the influence of Tachuan on him was very deep. He experienced the same frustration and grief for the tragic fate of the country, hoped for change, sympathized with the reformers and desired to do something to help the development of his country. But his traditional family background and Confucian education, which required him to be mild and gentle toward others and always to adopt the middle road, never the radical way, to handle important affairs,<sup>16</sup> ensured that he would never be radical in political affairs. Though he came to regret the fact, through most of his life he accepted the political status quo even though sometimes he really did not endorse the system and longed for changes. Indeed it was the traditional system, the Confucian education and his conservative family background that nurtured his passive and mild personality that confined him within a world that was cut off from any radical social and political reforms or changes.

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<sup>16</sup> See the Confucian classic The Doctrine of the Mean.

The dilemma facing the Elders of such a family as Yentung's was in many ways even more complex than that of the younger generation. It was upon them that the responsibility for preserving the family rested, and with it all the inherited values it represented. Yet it was in large part the inadequacy of these values in the face of the challenge posed by the West that had led to the crisis in the first place. The two thousand year old phantom of Confucianism still haunted them, like the ghost of Hamlet's father; it produced a paralysis of the will to act effectively that could only be broken by the spectre of death and the shedding of blood.

Han's father was in many ways a typical product of the system, although he rebelled to marry a girl outside his own cultural tradition. As he himself observed: "I should have known, for around me was misery enough, tangible, unavoidable. But I had been taught not to think, not to act in any way that would bring admonition" (CT 76). Han Suyin uses her father's case to show how traditional Chinese culture could at its best produce only passive spectators unprepared for great changes, unless they were trapped in a cataclysmic crisis and forced to stand up, facing the challenge they could no longer avoid.

Thus in the case of internal conflicts and external aggression even the Confucian elders fearfully asked themselves, as Han Suyin puts it, "Must we discard our institutions in order to save ourselves? Must we become barbarians in order to avoid annihilation? How can we learn strength, yet remain civilized? Learn to build machines and become powerful, yet retain our souls, our morality, our civilization, all that distinguishes man

from beast?" (CT 98). With a divided personality not unlike that of Jekyll and Hyde, the Elders were attempting to learn the "strength" and the ways to become powerful from the West, driven by the basic imperatives of survival; they were also scared and ashamed of doing so, however, because of their moral guilt. In the end the impending struggle for survival forced them into a urgent search for ways out of the dead end into which the country was heading. They had to make a choice, however reluctantly; and the choice was to learn from the West although they had been fearfully against it not long before.

The agonizing and protracted nature of the internal struggle is suggested by the two different decisions made by Han's family and found in the two family councils of 1896 and 1902. In the first, the elders of the family were strongly against the New Learning, namely the Learning of the Western modern civilization:

What is to be done? Already among us men have risen to say that only by reforming our education, by learning from our enemies the new science and arts of industry and war, can we too become strong. But our family elders have noticed one thing: that such learning is not moral nor righteous; it depraves men's minds and makes them heedless of virtue; its corrupting influence extends to both male and female .... Therefore we enjoin our descendants not to fall into the trap of the new learning, nor to forget their primal being in their acquisition of perverse knowledge (CT 114-5).

Six years later, in the 1902 council of her family, the elders changed their minds and decided to send their eldest son to Japan to study governmental administration, the second son (Han's father) to Europe to study science, and the third son to a local military academy to study military affairs.

This change of mind obviously indicates that even the Confucian elders had to

admit that because of the aggression of the West, their political, economic and cultural systems and values were no longer functioning properly; it is a recognition that in order to survive traditional morality and ancient wisdom were no longer enough. Now they had to learn new ideas, new cultures, advanced science and technology from the West while reluctantly abandoning some of their own inherited moral and cultural principles and values of their own. Han Suyin implies that although the family decision pointed to the elders' attempt to revive their family fortune, glory, and honour by asking their descendants to study new military skills, new administrative theories and advanced science and technology from the West, it also indicated the desire of the whole nation for survival and revival by reforms; it was part of the same phenomenon representing the Self-Strengthening Movement (1861-1895) by Emperor Tongzhi and the Reform Movement (1898) started by Emperor Guangxu.

Although all the reforms in the end failed as a result of tenacious resistance from the conservatives, they did have some results, one of them being that the country began to set up new military academies to train new troops with Western military strategies. Han's Third Uncle became one of the cadets in such a military academy; thousands of other young students were sent to either Japan or to the United States and Europe, with both Han's First Uncle and her father among them.

The efforts of the elders, however, were largely in vain. The famous Chinese historian Si-ma Qian (145-85 B.C.) once said, "When the skin has gone, what can the hair adhere to?" Since the country was in ruin, the likelihood that the family would be



prosperous again was slight, for Han Suyin's father's family fortunes heavily depended on the fortunes of the nation. Indeed the family plan failed just as the old feudal system failed. The conservative Chinese lost their battle to the aggressive West, even as the dreams of the Elders did not come true; they lost Yentung, who would eventually betray their tradition for love, rather than gaining fortune. Even Third Uncle's apparent success in his military service and banking business was merely a flash in the pan; it vanished with the rapid current of history which would give birth to a new China in 1949 when the Communists took over the country.

Yet no matter how inadequate Chinese traditional culture was, it retained at least partly its hold over those exposed to the new world of the West; Han Suyin explores at length the cultural trauma of those, like Yentung, sent abroad to study. Such students were torn from the very beginning by the superior-inferior complex (superior in aesthetics and ancient wisdom but inferior in economy, science and technology), for they simply could not erase what their culture had branded deeply in their souls. Certainly it was a painful process for them to abandon what they had been familiar with while trying or being forced to learn something new. A typical case is that of one of Han's father's friends, who was interested in arts and literature, but decided in Belgium that there was nothing he could learn from Western culture, for everything in his own culture was clearly superior. Finally he became mad in a situation in which he was always treated as an inferior "other," despite his interior belief in his own superiority.

As Han Suyin shows, he was not alone in his disorientation, for the arrogant

attitude of many people in the West who believed that their culture, philosophy, logic, science, technology, and economics were superior to those of the Orientals, made it difficult for the Chinese students to keep their mental equilibrium. From the very start the Chinese students were treated as learning children (CT 162, 177, 181) by the Westerners who behaved as their parents. They acted as if they had the right to shout, lecture, and order them about when they felt it necessary. They believed that, in Said's terms, "The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different'; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, 'normal'." <sup>17</sup> To them, the Chinese students after all came to learn from their culture, science, technology, economics and anything they could offer. They themselves were, in the post-colonial phenomenon, the teachers, the guardians or the parents who had the responsibility to educate these foreign students, for they honestly believed that, in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's words, "parents are more experienced, more important, more substantial, less brash than their offspring. Above all they are the *origin* and therefore claim the final authority in questions of taste and value." <sup>18</sup> In short, their self-assumed superiority led them to believe that the Chinese students were inferior, backward, ignorant and undeveloped. Chinua Achebe's complaint concerning Europeans in Africa that "Those worthy men saw

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<sup>17</sup> Said, Orientalism, 40.

<sup>18</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, 16.

little good around them [in Africa], only childlike and grotesque distortions"<sup>19</sup> can be easily transposed to the attitude of Europeans encountering Chinese abroad no less than in China. Indeed Achebe's remark shows the colonial idea, which is perhaps best demonstrated by writers such as Rudyard Kipling who once explicitly called Asians (or other non-white peoples for that matter) the "new-caught, sullen peoples/Half devil and half child."<sup>20</sup>

One revealing incident that Han Suyin relates concerning this issue involves her father's French language teacher at the Language School in Shanghai. Yentung was receiving some language training for his future study in Belgium and once he was asked by his teacher, Mr. Bonami, to write an essay on the best book he had ever read. Intending to please Mr. Bonami by showing him that even in the hinterland of China he had read some famous books from the West, Yentung wrote an essay on Huxley's Ethics and Evolution, expressing his admiration of the book. However Mr. Bonami, a faithful Catholic who disapproved deeply of Huxley, was furious at Yentung and shouted at him for writing such a worthless essay. Bonami's attitude towards Yentung reflects the parental and authoritative tone of many white people towards the colonized, their children.

It was this arrogance that formed a psychological barrier that most Chinese

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<sup>19</sup> Chinua Achebe, Morning Yet on Creation Day (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975), 26.

<sup>20</sup> Kipling, "The White Man's Burden," 321.

students found difficult to cross; therefore, mentally they always kept a distance from the West even though physically they lived there and might have some individuals as their very good friends. Some, Han Suyin herself for example, claim that they have the privileges and background of both cultures; therefore, they have the right to the heritage of both cultures to which they believe that they belong. The successful ones, however, are certainly far fewer than the failed and isolated ones who never become part of the new cultural world, though they had already slipped away from the solid ground of their own native culture. Spiritually they become, in Saul Bellow's words, the "Dangling Men" in a cultural waste space, for often they are denied by both cultures, or not really accepted by either. Even of such spectacularly successful ones like Han Suyin could it be said that they are perhaps not fully accepted by either the Chinese or Western worlds.

The dilemma of Chinese students such as Yentung, fully documented in The Crippled Tree, is yet more complex. He was sent abroad to study railway engineering, that is, a quintessential symbol of Western technology that had a central role in the growing Western domination of China; on his return he would dutifully work for his Belgian masters as they attempted to extend their domination. Yet trained to master Western technology, and to serve Western ends, Yentung, like his daughter after him, refused to accept the right of the West to control either his destiny or his country. It is in this context that the West used to complain that the Chinese bit the hand that had fed them. Yet as Han Suyin shows with clarity, the West accepted those young Chinese students into their educational institutions (with China's own money—the Boxer

Rebellion war indemnity) in order to mould them, absorb them or incorporate them into their cultures, or teach them to be as their admirers and faithful devotees. Thus Han Suyin writes:

After the First World War and the return to China of the Powers, a movement to finance a new westernized Chinese élite began among the Powers. Each country hoped that the Chinese educated by them would naturally favour their country of education; gratitude, ties of friendship, as well as cultural and emotional orientations, would see to that (CT 145).

This is certainly one aspect of the West's larger project of incorporating the "others," in post-colonialist terms, with cultural weapons rather than armed forces. Indeed the Orientalists assume the responsibility of finding efficient answers to the problems the Orient raises; thus Maurice Barrès comments:

How will we be able to form for ourselves an intellectual elite with which we can work, made out of Orientals who would not be deracinated, who would continue to evolve according to their own norms, who would remain penetrated by family traditions, and who would thus form a link between us and the mass of natives.<sup>21</sup>

This is precisely why Monsieur Navarre, who was in charge of the Chinese students at Brussels University, in Han Suyin's words, "wanted to 'bore a hole in their [the Chinese students'] souls'" (CT 180) and attempted to convert the students to Christianity. His example amply demonstrates the Orientalists' ambition to foster an intellectual elite among the Orientals to help them in their domination of the Orient, the grand plan illustrated by Maurice Barrès.

There is an obvious paradox in the Western project to create a subservient

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<sup>21</sup> Maurice Barrès, quoted by Said in his Orientalism, 245.

"intellectual elite" that Han Suyin explores at length. Chinese students absorbed not merely technical knowledge, but came to understand the principles of freedom and democracy proclaimed by the West; they also came to understand that such principles applied only in the West, certainly not in backward and passive China. They learned, that is, that the principles enshrined in the English Declaration of Rights in 1689, Reform Acts of 1832, 1867, and 1885, the French Revolution which brought about Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen in 1789, and the American Declaration of Independence in 1776 not only were not for them, but must indeed be kept from them. Boasting about the superiority of their culture, civilization, and democratic systems, the Western powers systematically prevented China from achieving them,<sup>22</sup> for, in Han Suyin's words, "the last thing the West wanted was a strong China" (CT 83). Thus, as Han Suyin argues, the double standard of the West discredited its commitment to democracy, and so it was that Han's puzzled father asked his friend Poh Hungwen in his trip to France: "Why did they not welcome a revolution in another country, a revolution similar to theirs?" (CT 186).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> This point has been fully discussed in Chapter Two.

<sup>23</sup> Edward Said's following remark in Culture and Imperialism provides a handy answer to the question that Han's father asked:

Almost all colonial schemes begin with an assumption of native backwardness and general inadequacy to be independent, "equal," and fit ... Why that should be so, why sacred obligation on one front should not be binding on another, are questions best understood in the terms of a culture well-grounded in moral, economic, and even

As it happened, Yentung's confrontation with the West acquired a very much more immediate and intimate dimension. During his study in Brussels, in May 1905, he met a young Belgian woman, Marguerite Denis, of an upper-middle-class Belgian family; they fell in love, and despite the strong opposition of the families on both sides, got married on July 1, 1908.

The circumstances of the romance are of some importance. Marguerite had been raised on romantic tales of the exotic East; Yentung for his part fuelled such literary Orientalism with beautiful accounts of his family's former splendour which became part of the happy memory of his childhood:

Because of childhood happiness I wronged my wife, for when I met her and told her of China, it was of this China, the China seen on Delft porcelain, a China of palaces and bridges, of satins and gardens, of mountains and rivers wildly beautiful, of obedient servants and benevolent kinsmen, which I described to her. I was only describing my prosperous, secure family. I thought it China. She had read novels on Cathay, fashionable at the time .... China was a land of exotic beauty, ancient traditions, and the restless minds of Europeans hankered for the imagined order and serenity of a China that did not exist. They deluded themselves. I helped to delude Marguerite (CT 67-8).

Despite their unquestioned love, however, the match almost certainly would not have taken place had not the unthinkable been self-evident; Marguerite was pregnant. Both Marguerite and Yentung violated every taboo of their respective societies, sexual, social, moral, cultural and racial alike.

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metaphysical norms designed to approve a satisfying local, that is European, order and to permit the abrogation of the right to a similar order abroad (80-1).

The resentment and hostility of the Denis clan toward the love and marriage between Han's parents show all the basic signs of the cultural, racial and religious prejudice which lead to Orientalist hegemony. At the beginning of the twentieth century, in the middle of the Age of Contempt defined by Isaacs, upper-class Westerners added to this contempt more general anxieties, particularly sexual anxieties, characteristic of such essentially racist views. In such a context it is not surprising that Marguerite's and Yentung's love affair caused an earthquake in the Denis family. The whole of the Denis clan were strongly against Marguerite's engagement to a Chinese young man, for they were convinced by their cultural instinct that "we" civilized and superior Europeans were fit to lead others, so that naturally "we" could not and should not lower and disgrace ourselves by marrying a pagan Chinese. As Han describes it:

The Denis family could not tolerate this. One uncle came down from Malines, another from Antwerp; a cousin arrived in a post-chaise from the water cure at Spa; someone else sped, also by horse carriage, all the way from a retreat in an abbey, a canon of the church. The aunts took to smelling salts, called on each other (what appetizingly interminable afternoons of talk), and rushed off to their surplus female relatives cloistered in convents to seek advice. On no account could a Denis possibly marry a Chinese (a Chinese!), and a heathen (a pagan!) (CT 203-4).

Han Suyin also shows the extent to which the particularities of their cultural background and their particular idiosyncrasies nurtured in their own social and moral limitations guaranteed that the Denis family would not approve the match. They clearly belonged to the great European tradition of privileged eccentricity; perhaps less extreme than that in which, for example, the Mitford daughters were raised, it was nevertheless



marked. Indeed as Han Suyin tells us, the entire family (except perhaps Marguerite's mother) were eccentric, stubborn and strong-willed, and unacquainted with the art of compromise. Above all, they did not have the talent to forgive others. Han Suyin comments of them:

The Denis lived and certainly died in a blissful state of battle, openly aired, pursued for decades by letter, unredeemed by decease. They were adepts at trenchant gestures of dismissal, slammed doors, curl of lip, abrupt walkaways. They competed at hurling epithets and concocting adhesive nicknames. They thrived on a perpetual crusade against each other (CT 202-03).

Their behaviour towards Yentung was thus defined by both their eccentricity and the larger frame of Orientalism that stood on the pillars of political power and economic strength. Han Suyin, noting both factors, comments that even the final result of the marriage brought about by the stubborn young couple, especially Marguerite, who deliberately got herself pregnant in order to force it, was not due to racial compromise but to the self-confident assumption that the Catholic Marguerite would bring Catholic enlightenment to Yentung's spiritually dark world of Sichuan province. The Bishop who gave advice to the family defined succinctly the differences between "them" and "us":

I believe that the Protestants are making some efforts in the young man's city, and have a hospital and a mission there; but so do we, so do we. It is time that more Catholic homes should be established in this utter darkness to bring the light of the Saviour to this province of many millions (CT 206).

Eccentric as they were, the Denis were in essence like many other white people who surface in Han Suyin's writing (for example, James Morrison, Otto Kurtens, and Mr. Bonami), who all claimed in one way or another that they were superior to other

peoples. All accepted an inter-related sequence of cultural beliefs. The first was that they were gifted politically and economically to lead or to dominate the other peoples who lacked the gifts of order, organization and self-government; as Lord Balfour neatly put it:

Western nations as soon as they emerge into history show the beginnings of those capacities for self-government .... You may look through the whole history of the Orientals in what is called, broadly speaking, the East, and you never find traces of self-government ... Is it a good thing for these great nations—I admit their greatness—that this absolute government should be exercised by us? I think it is a good thing.<sup>24</sup>

The second was that they had the tradition of democracy which the others had not developed, and thus were superior; as Said points out, "... the canonical view [is] that Orientals had no tradition of freedom."<sup>25</sup> Third they believed themselves to be morally and spiritually superior to the Chinese since they were civilized Christians while others were pagans and uncivilized barbarians. As many used to say: "They [the Chinese] have no souls because they are not Christians;"<sup>26</sup> they are "damned" or "lost." Finally, in terms of science, technology and philosophy, they were more talented than other peoples, who were inconsistent and illogical, and incapable of scientific thinking and advanced philosophies. Lord Cromer, for example, maintains that "the West [is] heavily charged

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<sup>24</sup> Arthur James Balfour, quoted by Said in Orientalism, 32, 33.

<sup>25</sup> Said, Orientalism, 241.

<sup>26</sup> Literary Digest, 12 March 1927, quoted by Rose Hum Lee in "Social Attitude Toward Chinese in the United States, Expressed in Periodical Literature from 1919 to 1944," Unpublished mss., 1944. Requoted by Issacs, 118.

with scientific thoughts"<sup>27</sup> while the Orient lacks, in Gustave von Grunebaum's words, "the later nineteenth century belief in mechanistic progress."<sup>28</sup>

The attitudes of both the Denis and the Chous towards each other's culture that Han Suyin has documented in The Crippled Tree and A Mortal Flower point to the inevitability of cultural hegemony in human society. It is always the culture with the stronger political, economic and military forces that attempts to impose its values on the weaker ones or the others. It was so in history and it is still so today. It never occurred to the Orientalists like George Morrison, Joseph Hers, Marian Manly, or Marguerite's father that they should change in order to come to terms with Chinese culture, for they believed that their culture was more advanced, and therefore should be the model for the Chinese to follow. As Han Suyin duly notes, even a good idea when forced on someone else causes resentment; and many of the Orientalist views were not in fact good at all. The Denis did not forgive and forget lightly. When Han Suyin went to Belgium to study at the University of Brussels she noted:

The whole subject of my parents' marriage, which had cost my Belgian family, as well as my Chinese Family [*sic*], much disruption and grief, had produced an aura of disapproval which clung to me, exuding from my mother's relatives to ooze over my nineteen-year-old abashed and timid self (CT 198).

Clearly her Belgian relatives intended to maintain their cultural "superiority" by maintaining their disapproval of the marriage between Han Suyin's parents, which "was

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<sup>27</sup> Said, Orientalism, 213.

<sup>28</sup> Gustave von Grunebaum, quoted by Said in Orientalism, 297.

still the live sore from which the Denis family had not recovered" (CT 201). By so doing they perhaps attempted to incorporate the young Han Suyin into their culture by showing her what she should do, and what her mother should not have done, according to their own cultural standards.

The lack of cultural comprehension and lack of the tolerance needed to acquire it, however, was not entirely one-sided. The Elders of Yentung's family were as opposed to the marriage as the Denis; it was not until many years later that Han Suyin's cousin Kuangyung told her that "many of the elder generation had been greatly upset and refused permission" to the marriage (CT 208). In the end, however, they relented, though with great reluctance, and in June 1908 sent Yentung a cable giving their assent. When Yentung returned to China with his new wife, his family could understand her no more than she them.

According to Han Suyin, however, the Chous tried their hardest to welcome Marguerite appreciatively as the wife of their son. Han's grandmother sold her last jewellery in order to give Marguerite a good reception and Han's Third Uncle bought a book on Western life styles and some Western-style furniture to prepare for Marguerite's coming. Yet hard as they tried to accept her as a member of their family, they were heirs to both the intense Chinese sense of self-importance that made China "the Middle Kingdom," the centre of the earth, and all other people foreign barbarians (*yang gui zi*). Hence they were not ready to give up their fundamental cultural principles to tolerate Marguerite's violation of such principles as reverence for the dead ancestors, including

the recently deceased grandfather of Yentung.

Such cultural barriers were here as elsewhere too high to be crossed by good will alone. The attempts of the Elders, for example, to teach Marguerite's son to follow their rituals to show "superstitious" respect to Yentung's dead grandfather were thwarted by Marguerite. This in turn caused gross offence. Yentung's elder brother came to talk to him about Marguerite's misconduct in refusing to let her son participate in the ritual worship for Yentung's grandfather. That finally led to the breakup between Yentung's family and Marguerite. Likewise their attempts to protect Marguerite on her outings in the traditional Chinese fashion, which insists that ladies from gentry families should be escorted whenever they go outside of the family, merely aroused her anger.

Both Yentung and Marguerite compromised a great deal for their love and both suffered tremendously from their own sacrifice of family tradition and cultural values, but neither totally gave up their own cultural heritages. Ironies abound. Han Suyin's thorough description of her parents in The Crippled Tree suggests that Marguerite, who had first been fascinated by the exotic Orientalist literature and wished to find an Oriental prince, was finally dragged into a miserable reality by her "prince" lover, Chou Yentung, when they went back to live in China. Even more ironically Marguerite, the Western woman, came more and more to resemble the stereotypical Orientalist male, dominating the submissive "other". Thus Yentung the Oriental man became more and more silent and passive and displayed the stereotypical "willingness" to be dominated. It is another version of cultural hegemony, in Said's terms, that permeated even the domestic life of

Yentung and Marguerite. Their marriage, therefore, reflects in this context a side of Orientalism sadder and darker than even Said suggests.

The cultural divide that divided Marguerite from the Chous has many dimensions. One is simply the idea of the family itself. Where the Denis relished their idiosyncrasies and their intolerance, the Chous, in traditional Chinese fashion, buried such qualities. Han Suyin's comments concerning the idiosyncrasy and intolerance of the Denis family have already been quoted. In the passage immediately preceding that in The Crippled Tree is the contrasting portrait of the Chous:

If, on the Chinese side, the family seems to lack cranks, whereas on the Flemish side they abound, it is not they did not exist; certainly Great-Grand father had much character and enterprise. But their quirks were not recorded, their foibles were withdrawn from discussion, no nicknames were bestowed upon them in family annals. No such reverently effacing sponge, turning characters into decorous ancestors, occurred to the Belgian side (CT 202).

Part of the problem was historical. When the chauvinism of the Chinese was shattered by the gunboats of the West, they developed a hatred of the "foreign devils" and a deep and horrifying xenophobia. The oath to kill any Chinese descendants who became Christians pronounced by Han Suyin's great-grandfather after the tragedy of the Lee and Hung families clearly shows the point, as does the Chinese hostility against Western cultures in some historical events such as the Boxer Rebellion.

The contrast between the Chous and the Denis reflects in part Han Suyin's attempt to show that the ideal of Chinese culture is harmony which requires forbearance and self-discipline: in Third Uncle's words, "forbearance among members of a household, to

remember one's responsibilities, to strengthen the clan and the breed, to inspire sacrifice of self for the common good" (CT 31). Set against this is the basic principle of Western culture, namely the sacred right of the self to self-definition. The Denis and the Chous each represented their own cultural values to an exemplary degree; the resulting conflicts offer a particularly poignant example of Eastern and Western misunderstandings.

### III

#### **Problems of Cultural Exchange: The Case of Yentung and Marguerite**

The centre of the cultural exchange, conflicts and compromises in Han Suyin's autobiographical works as described in the preceding section is of course the love and marriage of her parents. As she tells us, "China to me was of course my father and mother, and all I myself knew of China. To separate them would be to denude my story" (CT 17). From the very beginning Han's father's life had been marked by the impact of Western culture on China. As mentioned earlier, his premature birth was caused by the conflict between the Hung clan to which his mother had belonged, the Lee family and the Christian convert, Middleman Tu. His study trip to Belgium was part of the national plan to learn advanced science and technology from the West as well as the family plan to recover or revive its fortune and honour. The trip in fact redirected his fate, which would be bound to Western culture because of his marriage with Marguerite.

As Han Suyin shows in the course of her autobiography, the family decision did not work out as the elders had planned, just as the national reforms did not work out as

expected. Rather than preserving the integrity of his family, Han Suyin's father violated one of its strongest taboos. The offence was deeper than merely marrying a foreigner; by the nature of his life and work no less than by his marriage, Yentung was irrevocably marked by his contact with the West. The process started early. Stopping over in Singapore while on his way to Belgium to study, he cut off both literally and figuratively part of his traditional identity by cutting off his queue, a symbol of the Chinese identity endorsed by the Manchu Qing Dynasty:

On the morning of his second day in Singapore, a few hours before returning on board, Yentung went to a Chinese barber in Cross Street, and had his queue cut off. Perhaps this act was due to the feverish, almost tranced patriotic consciousness awakened in him .... [This marked] his first disobedience and explicit rebellion (and revolt against the Family too, for his mother had warned him that to cut of his queue was to cut off his life, which was true since heads were lost when queues were cut) (CT 172).

In Brussels he attempted to erase more of his traditional culture by locking up his traditional Chinese clothes in his suitcase and adopting Western dress.

Sent by his country, Yentung was in a sense both a student and pilgrim like Tang Sanzang in Wu Chengen's classic Journey To the West,<sup>29</sup> hoping to learn Western advanced science and technology as his ancestors expected him to do. Yet in the end, entirely unlike Tang Sanzang in a moral sense, Yentung succumbed to the temptations of the West in the most dramatic of all fashions. Casting away his grandfather's warning

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<sup>29</sup> This beloved novel was first published in China in the 1590s. Tang Sanzang in the novel was a famous Monk in the early Tang Dynasty (618-908 A.D.), sent by the Emperor to go to India in search of Buddhist scriptures. He is a symbol of a moral model who is absolutely beyond temptation and corruption.



of not having anything to do with Christianity, ignoring the strict traditional custom of taking a bride chosen by parents and grandparents, in a very Western way Yentung passionately fell in love with a Catholic girl, actively wooed her and finally married her without thinking about his family's moral bounds.

Although Yentung did ask for his family's permission to marry Marguerite, his request was largely a meaningless formality, for he must have been aware that his family could do nothing to prevent him from marrying the girl in a different part of the world in which it was impossible for them to intervene or interfere. His elders, correspondingly, were not so stupid as to forbid him to marry a girl of his own choice, for they must have known too well that it would have been futile had they done so.

Rather than contribute to the family's glory and honour, he subsequently brought disgrace on the family name by freely loving, wooing and marrying a girl by himself. Moreover he brought back distress to the family because his European wife would later defy their culture and tradition and he himself finally gave up the family tradition and honour for his love of his wife. Yentung's case, among other things, points to the degree that traditional Chinese culture had lost some of its hold over Chinese youth, especially those young students who had studied in the West. In this sense the West's grand plan to incorporate into its own culture young Chinese students was at least a partial success, for the students not only brought back advanced science and technology but also cultural influence. Such students naturally picked up some Western philosophical and cultural values during their stay in the West and some of these values were more attractive to the

young people than their own, especially in terms of the more liberal relationship between male and female, and the high value of romantic love sanctioned by the West. This perhaps again points to the fact that Yentung's case demonstrated that in a direct confrontation between traditional Chinese family values and the Western celebration of "true love," love can easily prevail over the Confucian doctrines which in a sense manacle personal feelings for the sake of abstract moral virtues.

Han Suyin's autobiographical works show that Yentung was not only influenced by Western culture but also in some sense warped by it. From the very beginning of his study trip to Europe he was treated as a ignorant Oriental and was openly exposed to the contempt for his country and his people felt by some Europeans. In such a situation he was forced into an isolated world in which he could find no one to talk to because no one except his compatriots could understand his feelings, his state of mind and the sufferings of his people. Thus he became a silent and quiet alien, a tightly closed and self-protecting shellfish, who could not naturally speak his mind to any European, except perhaps Marguerite.

When Yentung went back to China he increasingly seldom spoke even to Marguerite; she complained that it was easier to get water out of a rock than to make him talk. In a variety of contexts, Yentung, rejecting part of his own culture to marry a European woman, ironically became a model of the typical Chinese victim of European Orientalist discourse. Thus like most Chinese men and women whose silent protests were tightly locked in their minds until their very survival hung in the balance, he remained

trapped within himself. Similarly he personally became more and more passive, a passiveness which was a mirror of many broken Chinese people whose apathy the Orientalists would call "dumbness." It is not surprising that Marguerite nicknamed him "Dumb One". Unlike millions of young people whose apathy would be stirred up into enthusiastic patriotism by radical propaganda later, he never became radical in any political sense, both because his traditional cultural background and Confucian education prevented him from such behaviour and also perhaps because he was paralysed by his own betrayal of his family.

The distortion of Yentung's personality by the confrontation of Chinese and Western culture deprived him of many things which his own background could have offered him, most notably communication with others. What was left to him seemed only his love of Marguerite and his underpaid job as a railway engineer. Thus, whatever the cost, he desperately clung to his love; when a choice between traditional values such as family honour on one side and love on the other occurred in his life, Yentung chose love. When the conflict between his family and Marguerite could no longer be avoided after they returned to China Yentung resolutely took Marguerite and left his family, although this time the cost was very high. He fully realized the shame, the insult that his leaving would bring to the family and that, in his own terms, and for himself, "The manner of our leaving was shaming ... And this leaving was a true death" (CT 187).

Yet he did leave his family and never returned. It was a tragic event for Yentung's whole family, but a triumph for Marguerite in her long battle against

traditional Chinese culture with her most efficient weapon——love, sharpened by both her Western culture and her stubborn and strong will. Yentung's betrayal of the family honour in this instance was perhaps the most telling result of the influence of Western culture on him.

Thus paradoxically Yentung was, like Marguerite, on the one hand a rebel against the outworn traditional values of his culture, and an agent of radical changes in terms of love and marriage; yet on the other, he became the archetypal victim of family expectations, his wife's frustration, and racial and Orientalist prejudice. Perhaps because of the latter, Yentung was also associated with conservative values with respect to his attitudes to his children, particularly to Han Suyin, and this will be further discussed in Chapter Four.

Marguerite's victory was a short-lived one and they both had to pay a dear price for it in their subsequent lives, for there were a multitude of hardships and sufferings lying ahead of them, especially for Marguerite.

Marguerite represented the European equivalent of her husband's Chinese upper-class background. Although like Yentung, she also rebelled against her family tradition by falling in love with a partner from a foreign culture, whom her entire family opposed, she was certainly more radical in becoming pregnant before marriage in order to force her family to agree with her own choice in love and marriage. In this respect she perhaps also represented the individualistic and self-assertive aspects of her family tradition, a tradition which perhaps explains her extraordinary decision to follow Yentung to China

against the advice of her family and friends.

The cultural shock, the prejudice and the xenophobic hatred of foreigners must have been hard enough for her to accept in China, but the horrifying reality of wars, famines, poverty, starvation, filthiness and diseases around her in China was much more than she could take. Her foreignness always attracted the attention of the forever-curious Chinese, especially children, who would always laugh at her big nose and big feet. Wherever she went there would be a crowd of children after her, calling names, as Yentung noted:

Alas, poor Marguerite. Not only was she, once in China, only the wife of a Chinese, and therefore rejected by her own people; but to us she was, she remained always, a European, the white woman, to be followed everywhere by crowds, to be stared at, to be called names: 'Big nose! Western devil!' (CT 280).

The Chinese in this context were certainly as prejudiced against "others" in cultural and ethical terms as Westerners, for consciously or unconsciously they also distinguished "others" from "us" because they were different from "us" and they were strange and funny. Of course the fundamental difference here between the Chinese and the Orientalists is that the Chinese at this time could not afford to feel superior to the Westerners as the Orientalists did because they were, in reality, in a inferior position in political, economic and military terms.

Yet the cultural prejudice of the Chinese indeed made Marguerite's life in China miserable. Early in the first volume of Han's autobiography, The Crippled Tree, comes the macabre incident in which Han's mother looked out of her window to see the family

cook's head hanging on the pole in her backyard. A crowd of Chinese were there to look both at the head and Marguerite. Some were merely cold and indifferent; most, however, were gloating at the "foreign devil" being caught in such a horrifying situation, while all the children there were laughing and making fun of her:

Outside, beyond the pickets of the fence surrounding the small garden where now the sentinel head watched, the usual crowd was standing, laughing, pointing at the house where lived the foreign woman ... all laughing, pointing at the head like a standard above the tomatoes [grown by Han's father], at the house where the foreign woman lived, and now that she appeared laughter rose like an explosion....

'Brutes. Brutes.' She started shouting, holding on to the door she opened. 'Brutes, imbeciles, you'll all have your heads cut off. Idiots.' She made the gesture of a head being chopped off, slammed the door shut .... Outside the laughter, stopped while she shouted, resounded again, this time directed towards her, no longer shared by the cauliflower head on its pike. 'Foreign devil, foreign devil, foreign devil' (CT 12).

Other such events were the beggar boy, who hated foreigners, trying to urinate upon her skirt, (CT 288-9) and another beggar boy with leprosy who held up his stumps of hands and chased her, asking for money (CT 376-7). All were nightmares for her. Han Suyin records that sick and blind "children with white stones for eyes turned heavenwards" were everywhere: "They smelt the worst, rancid pus, they moaned the loudest, their trousers were shreds, showing their legs and their private parts even in winter" (CT 355).

Even worse was the fact that she was looked down upon by some of her fellow Europeans, and especially by the women, because she was married to a Chinese man. For this her children were called "half-castes" and "half-brats." Her method of dealing with such racial prejudice was to reassure herself and her children that she came from

an upper-class family background, much superior to that of those who looked down upon her, and to tell her children, "You look European, my children, you look like me" (CT 253). Of course in the racists' eyes neither fact changed anything about her marriage to a Chinese man, or about the Eurasian status of her children. Her most bitter experience was indeed with another European woman, the French doctor's wife, who did not allow her husband to examine the dying baby, Sea Orchid; in such a context it is scarcely surprising that the experience almost made her insane (CT 312-6).

She felt deceived by Yentung who had nourished her imagination with glamorous tales of traditional Chinese culture rather than the horrifying Chinese reality to which Yentung himself, as noted earlier, had never been exposed. Before he went to Belgium he had lived in an entirely different world protected by his gentry family. Hence it was not surprising that Marguerite kept saying that her life was wasted in China, and often threatened to go back to Europe, although she did not in fact do so until just two months before the Communists took Beijing in early 1949. The reason that she stayed with Yentung for so long was, according to Han Suyin, her love for him and her tangled relations with her children.

Although love bound Yentung and Marguerite together, their relationship contained cultural conflicts and misunderstandings in which hegemony always had a part. Several times Yentung complained to Marguerite, "It is due to the foreigners, Marguerite, to the white men. They came and made war with us"; "If your people had

not done evil to us, we would not be thus" (CT 281, 289).<sup>30</sup> But Marguerite was never convinced; what she finally believed was that the Chinese were poor, filthy, weak and backward.

Marguerite's attitude towards Chinese culture suggests most obviously the double side of Orientalist discourse. The Chinese were different; their customs were strange. "Everything is the other way round in China. Everything, from buttoning your clothes to greeting people, is upside down .... white for mourning, they don't look at you when they respect you, and when they want to insult you they are so polite you think they like you" (CT 296-298). Her comments on the Chinese reflect in this context ideas about the Chinese common among Europeans and Americans at that time. The observations Rose Hum Lee collected from American periodicals from 1919 to 1944 express the same point: "The Chinese say yes for no and vice versa.... They never say what they mean and abhor straight lines.... They are a mysterious and inscrutable race and that [*sic*] they do everything backwards."<sup>31</sup>

Although Marguerite promised with good will to learn the Chinese way of life she actually gave up trying a short time after she arrived; thereafter, she never really attempted to understand the Chinese. After the cinema incident,<sup>32</sup> her husband told her, "It's your fault. You don't understand. You are a white woman. You cannot insult us all

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<sup>30</sup> For the same point see also CT, 296, 397.

<sup>31</sup> Isaacs, 118-19.

<sup>32</sup> See p.41, footnote.



the time." Yet she retorted, "Just try, just touch me. My government will send an army with guns and kill you all off. Remember the Boxers ... I will go back, I don't want anything to do with this vermin, these yellow vermin of yours" (CT 379).

Marguerite's words were spoken in anger, but nevertheless point with chilling clarity to the larger assumptions of a Western culture backed by strong economic and political powers. As with many Westerners it obviously did not occur to Marguerite that there might be anything wrong with her own behaviour because she was convinced that everything Chinese was strange and wrong; therefore, it should be changed to accord with Western standards. Thus it was for Marguerite, who finally broke up with Yentung's family.

True, there were many social and political reasons that drove her into herself, into a self-enclosed world that isolated her from the Chinese, who were themselves hostile towards her not as an individual woman but as one of the white people who humiliated and exploited them. As Yentung later observed:

She was alone, against all history, alone against a century of accumulated dislike, against all the unconscious hostilities, assumptions, which saw in her only a representative of the Whites; and all the harm they had done militated against her being accepted (CT 288).

It is also true that it was extremely difficult for Marguerite to learn the Confucian feudal rites required to fit into a feudal family like Yentung's. Even Yentung himself disagreed with some of them, let alone Marguerite who came from an entirely different world. Some of the so-called Confucian values were extremely restrictive, especially for women. Although Yentung's family tried to be tolerant to her there were traditional

taboos concerning such things as insulting ancestors and elders in Chinese culture that could not be ignored and the elders did not forgive her for her violation of them.

Moreover the gossip about Marguerite's foreignness by the women around her and her suspicions that she was talked about and despised also contributed to the deterioration of her relationship with Yentung's family. One of the major obstacles that prevented her from understanding the Chinese was of course the language problem. She never tried hard enough to learn Chinese, and thus she did not have the most important tool for communication and understanding. Her eccentricity and her stubborn personality also prevented her from mixing with people and from understanding Chinese culture. All these factors contributed to Marguerite's breakup with Yentung's family and the breakup consequently led to her self-isolation from the Chinese. This self-created isolation and the lack of understanding led her in turn into yet more misunderstandings. In many cases she was doomed by misunderstandings that she herself unconsciously created and so she got enmeshed in a web of her own spinning. Yet her Western cultural heritage made her believe that it was not her fault that she misunderstood or was misunderstood in a life that was so hard for her, but rather the fault of the Chinese who were so backward and dumb that they made everything upside down; therefore, it was simply impossible to understand them and be understood by them.

Misunderstanding began from the very start, when she met Yentung's younger brother who went to meet them in Chongqing. Until well into the middle of the twentieth century, to show respect to a lady the Chinese custom required a gentleman not to look

directly at her face while talking to her. Yet because of cultural differences Marguerite misunderstood it, believing that Yentung's brother was insulting her by avoiding looking at her and insisted on believing so, even though her husband told her that it was respect. Clearly Marguerite was not prepared to recognize the forms of any culture other than her own and subsequently she refused to accept their values. In this sense, like many Westerners in China, Marguerite consciously or unconsciously judged Chinese culture by her own cultural standards. Her action illustrates Said's argument:

It is perfectly natural for the human mind to resist the assault on it of untreated strangeness; therefore cultures have always been inclined to impose complete transformations on other cultures, receiving these other cultures not as they are but as, for the benefit of the receiver, they ought to be.<sup>33</sup>

The greatest challenge to Marguerite, one that she never understood, lay in the fact that she had married into a family that had been bound by Confucian ritual for centuries. Such ritual required a daughter-in-law to be gentle, obedient, polite, never to openly show her emotions in public, to stay in the house most of the time and always show respect to the elders. The demands greatly confused and irritated Marguerite, as Han's father explains:

There were so many things that could not be explained, that were beyond explanation. Marguerite could do none of the things that a daughter-in-law should do or could do. And she could not imagine spending the day shut up in a house, only going as far as the first courtyard, twenty steps there, twenty steps back. The most conservative ritual was put in practice, not to spite her, but to protect her, and it was disastrous. When she wanted to go out, it was a mobilization; the whole household would anxiously

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<sup>33</sup> Said, Orientalism, 67.

consult the weather, then someone or other would remark that this was not an auspicious day for going out. When she insisted nevertheless, an aunt, two sisters-in-law, perhaps some cousins, would go with her; but first some younger male cousins would have to be recruited to protect the women, not because any real harm would happen to them, but because it was so unusual. [No young woman from such a family went out alone at that time.] .... Marguerite was to be looked after, and look after her they did until she screamed with irritation (CT 285).

Of course the confused and irritated Marguerite was unwilling or unable to accept all these alien customs and in the end they would help to undermine the relationship between her and Yentung's family and to make her hostile to the Chinese.

The most serious cultural clash between Marguerite and Yentung's family came from the Confucian ritual of showing respect to the dead ancestors. Yentung came back with Marguerite and their son for his grandfather's funeral, one that had been postponed for several months for their coming. They were required to do many ritual acts of respect to the ancestors, and in particular to Yentung's grandfather, and these rituals were considered as superstition by the Catholic priest to whom Marguerite confessed. She not only stopped performing such ritual herself but also prevented her son from doing them; as she herself told Han:

But the priest said it was very wrong, it was idolatry. And when I went to confession he said if I did not give up bowing to the ancestors he would refuse me absolution .... And he said my son must be brought up as a Catholic, and he must not come near any idols. And it made me very frightened, as I did not want your brother to go to hell, or to be refused at his first communion. A child's soul is so important (CT 298).

I couldn't let my son become a pagan, so I went and took all the [incense] sticks and threw them on the floor and picked up Son of Spring and carried him into our room (CT 299).

Marguerite faithfully followed the instructions given by the Catholic priest in the city by not showing "superstitious" respect to "idols" such as dead ancestors. The missionaries, attempting to prevent their converts from following Chinese ritual, showed another form of Orientalism in which Orientals were now defined not merely as backward, but as superstitious idol worshippers. The missionaries' attempt to help and sometimes lure the Chinese to change their traditional culture and accept Christian values was always based on the Orientalist assurance that Christian culture was superior to the Chinese pagan one. Yet the priest and his colleagues failed to see or ignored the resentment and the anger of the Chinese that were caused by the missionaries' rigid attitudes towards the traditional Chinese culture. It was this failure to accept Chinese culture which had already led to the Boxer Rebellion of 1900.

Marguerite's acceptance of her priest's instructions was the starting point of the breakdown of the relation between herself and Yentung's elders, who were greatly hurt by her behaviour. When Marguerite grabbed the incense sticks from her son and threw them on the ground she did the greatest possible insult to the family, for the burning of incense sticks was the most sacred ceremony to show respect to the ancestors and gods. Yentung's elder brother had to talk to him about it. Such incidents show the larger cultural context of the problems that bedeviled the relationship between Marguerite and Yentung's family.

The irony is that both Yentung's family and Marguerite had tried hard to cope with each other at the beginning, yet both failed and both endured great misery and

bitterness at the end. It is scarcely surprising that because of the cultural conflicts caused by misunderstandings between Marguerite and Yentung's family, such issues of how to look at, how to be tolerant of, how to deal with, and how to accept the hybrid forms of cultures different from one's own become permanent themes in both Han Suyin's autobiographical works and novels.<sup>34</sup>

The wars, exploitation, poverty and backwardness of China swiftly brought Marguerite to realize that because she was married to a Chinese, she herself had become a victim of racism and prejudice, and so had her children. Yet her own cultural background did not bring her to sympathize with the poor, sick and suffering in China, but rather drove her back to her Western or Orientalist roots. Facing the hard, confusing and miserable conditions around her, she gradually began to show the prejudice of Orientalism common to many white people in China at that time: self-assumed superiority in race, morality, religion, philosophy, education, science, technology, economics, and ways of thinking.

Despite the very real difficulties Marguerite faced, it was, as Han Suyin shows, her mother's Western instincts that made her believe the Chinese were wretched and hopeless, that everything was wrong with them. Such a belief finally made her withdraw from the Chinese and despise them accordingly: "Look at them, look at the Chinese, they are as dumb as cattle" (CT 440). Marguerite herself thus became both a victim of

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<sup>34</sup> Perhaps her most extensive treatment of the subject is to be found in the love and marriage of Jen Yong and Stephanie Ryder in Till Morning Comes.

cultural conflicts to which she herself contributed much, and a victimizer, one who wounded many, including her daughter, Han Suyin. All her cultural prejudices and misunderstandings trapped her in a narrow prison from which she could not escape; therefore, she became a stranger not only to the Chinese, including Yentung's family, but to herself; as Han sees it:

They [Yentung, Marguerite and their son] stayed from June to October with the family in Chengtu, five months in which my mother became the person that she would remain all through her next thirty-five years in China: a dislocated, hectic, suspicious woman, doomed to misunderstanding, to fits of rages and tears, and at all times victim of situations even when self-engendered, and sometimes a willing victim because helplessness was in itself a power, a power to exert oneself in active emotion, emotion pointless but satisfying in its own impotence, in the large exhibition of physical activity which she needed ... which procured relief, left one spent, tired and at peace through exhaustion. It was a way of smashing what could not, would not, be held in the hand, yield, of breaking the unbreakable cage in which she felt immured and which would never give way, never open. She developed a lifelong addiction to anger, to a flow of words which like a flood submerged those within reach (CT 304).

Han Suyin makes clear, Marguerite clung to the moral and cultural values of her own tradition, and instinctively defended them. Han Suyin repeatedly points out that the cultural process that transforms human awareness from an old set of beliefs to new is often slow and painful. At best it requires great tolerance and sacrifices; more commonly it generates suspicion and hostility. This is the case of the Chinese students abroad mentioned earlier; this is again the case of Yentung and this is also the case of Marguerite. For her part Marguerite stubbornly stuck to her Western cultural values except for her single-minded love of Yentung. Throughout her life she stuck to her

Catholicism and almost succeeded in converting Yentung. By the same token she was determined to put her children into missionary schools and make them become Catholics, although in the case of her daughter Han Suyin she failed.

Yet no matter how miserable life was for her in China, Marguerite stayed until just before the Communists took over Beijing. Faced with a choice between her family and Yentung, between her Belgian citizenship and Yentung, and even between her son and Yentung in extremely difficult situations, she unhesitatingly chose Yentung, although she would subsequently have very mixed feelings about her choices.

Of course it is understandable that the head-strong, individualistic and self-assertive Marguerite resisted Confucian values, as her daughter Han Suyin would do many years later, for indeed some of the Confucian virtues were "mind-manacles" in Blake's words. They tightly confined women in a moral cage, or a spiritual prison, without any personal freedom.

Moreover, as Han Suyin's account makes clear, the non-comprehension or miscomprehension was a two-way street. The members of Yentung's family equally contributed to the misunderstanding between themselves and Marguerite; as Marguerite never understood them, they never really understood her, although they tried their best to do so. All the things they did in their attempt to please, comfort and protect her according to their culture in fact disturbed, irritated and upset her until she could no longer stand it. They always wanted to accompany her for they worried that she might feel lonely; this of course intruded into her personal freedom and privacy. Everyone



wanted to see her and her son for that was the cultural and social tradition to show respect, concern and care; this again made her restless because many times she did not want to be disturbed. Every time she went out the family sent a team of its members to go with her, for that was the traditional custom followed by every gentry family, to show the protection of its own women; this greatly irritated her and finally made her furious. Yentung noted later that "Most terrible of all for Marguerite, prostrating her ultimately, was the noise, the continual human noise, the voices, the laughter. She was always sure they were laughing at her" (CT 306). Thus unconsciously they offended her while attempting to create a friendly atmosphere. Ultimately the failure of communication between Marguerite and Yentung's family was insurmountable, given their own personal and cultural roots. As Han Suyin points out:

It is a pity that never for a moment did the Family round her guess what they were doing to her. Their non-comprehension was equal to hers, their reactions were equally blinded, and perhaps in the final count even more ferocious because they were so absolutely righteous, even their slighting sanctioned by custom, propriety, tradition, her status in the family. A collective is a cruel thing because each member reinforces the other in a course of behaviour, like a pack of hounds pursuing a deer at bay to the last; and yet, they never knew that they were hounding her. They did try their best, forgiving her much (CT 304-5).

Han Suyin's account of her parents' marriage demonstrates, as clearly as any part of her works, her belief that cultural exchange and mutual understanding between different cultures are extremely difficult tasks which need generations of unremitting effort as well as tremendous patience and compromise, and that mainstream cultures generally, perhaps always, attempt to incorporate "others."

## VI

### **A Comparison Between Joseph Hers And Third Uncle**

Han Suyin clearly shows in her autobiography that cultural conflicts in Yentung's family life seriously affected him as a son, a husband and a father. As she tells the story of his life, it was because of his love of his wife that he abandoned his duty as a filial son in conventional terms by leaving his family and going away with his wife. He was no doubt a faithful husband; but one whose love and married life were based on cultural compromise, for he would lose both if he insisted on keeping some important values of his Chinese culture that his wife could not and would not follow. Also, she claims, it was because of his love of his wife, which was weighed above cultural conflicts, that he gradually withdrew his authority as a father and became silent in the family. Her father's influence consequently faded in the young Rosalie/Han Suyin's life and two other men assumed a far great importance then and after, Joseph Hers and Third Uncle. They became in a sense substitute fathers who filled the void left by her own.

Joseph Hers came to China from Belgium as a consular attaché in June 1905 when he was only 21. As a diplomat he had many powerful positions in China such as assessor at the International mixed court in Shanghai, representative of the Belgian financiers, president of the Belgian Chamber of Commerce and secretary-general of the Longhai railway. It is precisely because of his power that Hers greatly affected both Han Suyin's father's life and her own. As secretary-general of the Longhai railway he was able to offer a job to Han's father as railway engineer. It was at one of the stations of the

Longhai railway, Xinyang Station in Henan Province, that Han Suyin was born. Fifteen years later he would become Han Suyin's mentor as well as father figure, offering her a scholarship to study in the University of Brussels in 1935. Hers, to some extent, indeed changed Han's life.

The relationship between Han Suyin and Joseph Hers was complex. From the very beginning Hers, with the attitude of a school master derived from his absolute confidence in his superiority, especially in cultural terms, treated Han as a child. He took responsibility for educating her in the broadest sense, buying her many books, asking her to take part in conversations with learned scholars and historians, arranging for her to visit factories and the countryside.

Hers was not only Han's mentor, guardian and patron but also in some sense Han's lover, though in a platonic rather than sexual way.<sup>35</sup> Of course he was also aware that he was more a father to Han than a lover and every time he called Han a "baby" or a "child" his undertone was fatherly although sometimes slightly mocking. In 1938 when China was invaded by the Japanese and Han Suyin suddenly decided to go back to China despite the distinction she had achieved in her studies in the University of Brussels, Hers' anger, anxiety, deep concern and love for Han were reflected in his response to what he saw as her irrational decision. Han Suyin describes the event thus:

Hers took me to lunch at the Metropole, we walked all summer afternoon, across the forest of Soignes and back; arguing, shouting, screaming at each other.... In the end he said: 'Baby, you are mad.'

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<sup>35</sup> This point will be further discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

.... 'I don't know why I'm doing this but I have to go back.'

'You are mad, stark staring mad.' Hers strode furiously: 'No, absolutely not, you will not go back, I have to look after you. Your parents are in Tientsin under Japanese occupation.... I am responsible for you' (MF 407).

Ambiguity continued to define their relationship. Hers of course loved the old China over which he had been one of the lords for many years, while Han Suyin loved the new China that had broken the yoke of foreign oppression and became the master of its own house. Thus Han Suyin comments, "From that day [the first time they met] in 1932 until today [1965] Hers and I have been friends and enemies; quarrelled and argued, always about China, always about China" (MF 220).

Hers in this context illustrates Edward Said's observation that Orientalists treat the Orient, perceived as weakly feminine, with a male pride of control and command;<sup>36</sup> Orientals are not merely immature children but also soft and inviting women who welcome domination and penetration as mentioned in Chapter Two<sup>37</sup>. Like many Orientalists who fell in love with a China only when it was fascinatingly exotic, charmingly feminine but softly weak, Joseph Hers deeply "loved" the feminine, weak and docile China in his own imagination; this was reflected in turn with his relations with beautiful Chinese women. As Han Suyin observes:

Like so many Europeans in China, Joseph Hers began to 'love' China, a fierce, dominating, anxious, all-conquering possessiveness, characteristic

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<sup>36</sup> See Said's Orientalism, 206-208, 210-211, 219-220.

<sup>37</sup> Said repeats this point of view many times in Orientalism, 34, 36, 44, 48, 210, 211, 213, 219 and 294.

of the warped, twisted, and altogether vicious relationship miscalled 'love' between the dominating and the suppressed, the powerful and the weak; the spoiler and the cheated. Like many other foreigners he expressed his "love" in sexual imagery; to all of them, China was the WOMAN, the all-enveloping, soft, weak woman, who actually welcomed rape, welcomed being invaded.... A great part of this love for China was their attraction to Chinese women .... this sexual explanation, equating the violation of China to the defloration a woman undergoes in marriage, enhanced in them a feeling of superiority: The Great White Male seeding in the weak, moaning, submissive coloured female. And in this he was typical of nearly all Europeans in China who declared the Chinese 'forever unable to rule themselves, because they are weak, devious, volatile, timid' (MF 216-7).

The typical characteristic of Hers' and his fellow Orientalists' love of "their China," in both Han Suyin's and John K. Fairbank's words,<sup>38</sup> was their possessiveness, their conviction that China was theirs to define, not for the Chinese themselves. Yet those days disappeared forever; henceforth it became much more dangerous to be an old-style Orientalist, as Gallimard's case in David Henry Hwang's play M. Butterfly shows so brilliantly.<sup>39</sup> No wonder Hers and his fellow Orientalists felt cut off from the best part of their lives and abandoned by a China which they had loved and in Han's own words, "upon whose weakness they throve, becoming strong and independent" (MF 220).

It is true that in his capacity as one of the most powerful Belgian diplomats in

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<sup>38</sup> See Fairbank's comments on some sinologists in The United States and China, 451.

<sup>39</sup> David H. Hwang M. Butterfly in Miriam Gilbert, Carl H. Klaus, and Bradford S. Field, Jr. eds., Modern and Contemporary Drama (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 814-41. In the play, Gallimard, a French diplomat, falls in love with a Chinese actress, who eventually turns out to be not only a spy but unbelievably a man. Subsequently he is put into prison and commits suicide. Gallimard is portrayed as a stereotypical male Westerner who plays with the Orientalist idea that the Orient is feminine and likes to be dominated.

China, Joseph Hers gave Han Suyin the scholarship that she needed to study in Belgium, although it was ultimately funded with Chinese money from the indemnity of the Boxer Rebellion. It is also true that Han Suyin is famous today partly because of Hers' help in the past. But Hers liked Han and helped her so much not only because her father had studied in Belgium, her mother was a Belgian woman, and she herself was an outstanding student, but more importantly because she was a pretty and unseasoned girl whom he, with his domineering authority, could find pleasure in moulding to his own standards, and thus gratify his appetite for power and control. Sexuality itself was a minor matter, for he had no problem in finding stylish and fashionable Chinese beauties of cultivated background and good taste in Chinese classical culture.

Han Suyin's portrait of Joseph Hers in her autobiographical works illustrates the degree to which he came to represent for her the Western presence in China. Together Hers and his fellow Westerners in China had their "Golden days" when they lorded over the Chinese, and enjoyed the weakness of the country that made the process possible. The price, however, was high. When these days were gone, Hers, like other sinologists or "China hands" such as Marian Manly and Simon Leys,<sup>40</sup> bitterly wrapped himself in a self-indulgent fantasy of those "Golden days" when he could do anything with China

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<sup>40</sup> Marian Manly is the co-author of Destination Chungking. For this point see also Fairbank, The United States and China, 451, and also Leys's self-confession in his "Foreword" to his book, Chinese Shadows (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), ix-xi. Leys is so fascinated with this Western male image that he himself uses such a metaphor to describe the relationship between the United States and Taiwan in The Burning Forest, 136-7.

that he wanted. Psychologically Hers and the others could not accept the fact that they were denied permission to go back to China on their own terms, and that China was no longer the one they had loved and possessed with such a violence.<sup>41</sup> It is in the context of such bitterness that Han Suyin describes the sterile fury of Joseph Hers in his later years:

He read, collated and analyzed news on China, the love, the rage, the bafflement of his whole life. For he was angered and scurrilous about the new China and incessantly sought bad news to publish about her, picking out the mistakes, leaving out the achievements. And in this strenuous, almost morbid preoccupation, he was not alone; so many, in America, were busy doing exactly the same thing. None of them could get over 'their China', upon whose weakness they thrived, becoming strong and independent; yet, at the same time, Hers was dying to go back, felt cut off from the best part of his life, which had been in China (MF 220).

It seems unlikely that Joseph Hers ever understood why Han Suyin was, and remained, so preoccupied with China and why no matter how much she benefited from his help she still disagreed with him about China. He never understood, that is, that for Han Suyin anything that helped China to become strong and prosperous was good, regardless of principles or ideology.

Whatever else Han denies to Hers, knowledge of China is not one. Like other Orientalists described by her, such as Sir Robert Hart, the British Superintendent of Chinese Customs for about fifty years, James Morrison, the famous journalist in China for a long time, Marian Manly, the founder of the Midwifery Teaching Hospital in Chengdu and Han's co-author of Destination Chungking, Hers was indeed extremely

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<sup>41</sup> See especially MF, 216-17.

knowledgeable about the Chinese people, their culture and their politics. He had learned Chinese and studied much about China before he came to the country; he was very interested in Chinese archaeology, and he was "a very good botanist, and collected specimens all over China," as Han Suyin notes (MF 218).

Such knowledge, however, is a form not so much of understanding as control. As Said emphasizes, Orientalism first and foremost is an accumulated and systematic "knowledge about and knowledge of Orientals, their race, character, culture, history, traditions, society, and possibilities."<sup>42</sup> Possessors of that knowledge therefore know how to deal with and dominate the Orientals; as Said points out, "Knowledge means rising above immediacy, beyond self, into the foreign and distant .... To have such knowledge ... is to dominate [another civilization], to have authority over it."<sup>43</sup> It was in this manner that Hers and the others used their knowledge to exercise authority over the Orientals, in this case the Chinese. Thus it is that Han Suyin concludes of Hers: "He acted like a master, as did all the white men in China then" (CT 218). Han Suyin notes that Hers was an authority, one who had the power to influence or affect the fate of the entire country. By the order of the British Superintendent of Chinese Customs, Sir Robert Hart, Hers withheld all the money that came from the Chinese Customs from the Republic Revolutionaries led by Sun Yatsen and delivered it to the "strong man", the big warlord, Yuan Shikai in 1911. Thus knowledge turns into power; power changes into

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<sup>42</sup> Said, Orientalism, 38.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.



domination; and domination makes huge profit, as Said again points out:

Once again, knowledge of subject races or Orientals is what makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialect of information and control.<sup>44</sup>

At the very opposite pole from Joseph Hers was the other dominant male figure in Han's development, her Third Uncle, Chou Kiensan. If Joseph Hers was an embodiment of the Western cultural, political and economic presence in China, and if he became Han Suyin's father figure and mentor for her adolescence, then her Third Uncle was not only her father figure for her mature life but also the symbol of the essence of Chinese wisdom and cultural survival for generation after generation. The pairing is of course symbolic; Hers represented the foreign domination of China and Third Uncle was one of the representatives who were affected and sometimes hurt by that domination. Like Third Uncle, Han Suyin resented the foreign aggression in and exploitation of China, yet unlike him, she has never detached herself from the Western culture and values that Third Uncle rejected throughout his life.

In certain respects, Third Uncle's relation to Han Suyin is more paradoxical than is that of Joseph Hers. He was both part of the old feudal system based on Confucianism that Han Suyin would later relentlessly attack in her works and at the same time a typical representative of the civilized manners and behaviour that she holds in esteem. Her dual cultural heritage provides one key to this paradox; a Western-educated woman, she

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 36.

deeply resented the prejudice of Confucian feudalism against women, including herself, yet as a Chinese patriot she takes pride in Third Uncle's values and accomplishment.

Like Joseph Hers, Third Uncle was a capable administrator with a wide range of knowledge of history and economics. If Hers altered Han's life in a material, social and professional sense Third Uncle perhaps fundamentally influenced her life in cultural, spiritual and moral terms. He had the harmonious nature of Confucianism, the tolerance of Buddhism, but also the dialectic flexibility of Taoism. It is perhaps the combination of harmony and flexibility in Third Uncle that has influenced Han most in both her life and career. His wisdom based on compromise, tolerance and harmony is reflected in her novels such as Cast But One Shadow, The Enchantress and Till Morning Comes, especially in senior characters like Ulong Serap in The Four Faces. Ulong Serap's philosophy of taking the middle road is an important aspect of Confucianism in which Third Uncle faithfully believed in his life.

Third Uncle's interest in history and economics certainly nurtured Han's own interest in both fields, and thus was in part responsible for the direction of much of her writing. More importantly Third Uncle also became a cultural and spiritual icon who greatly influenced Han Suyin as a professional writer:

Of all my family, including my own father, Third Uncle and I resemble each other most in this matter of inquisitiveness. I share with him this curiosity, this wonder for understanding, the hall-mark of the writer, God's spy (CT 31).

Indeed his inquisitiveness and curiosity for knowing the causes of everything and his wonder at understanding the reasons for anything fundamentally shaped Han's personality

and writing.

Throughout his life Third Uncle was devoted to his family, trying all the time to revive the family honour and prosperity, searching and researching the family heritage and keeping the Family Book of Generations. To some extent, he represented the centripetal force of the family which has been the corner stone of Chinese society for more than three millennia. It is perhaps because of Third Uncle that Han Suyin is so close to her Chinese family and deeply influenced by Chinese culture. She writes about him in several of her books, always with affection and respect:

In Third Uncle all is collected, retained and classified, in a tradition of verbal and written handing down, punctilious and learned. Third Uncle is the story-teller, the family bard, reciter of ancestral saga, resuscitator of dead bones to make them live in words. But he is also an exact keeper of duly labelled letters, photographs and files. He possesses a veritable frenzy for exact knowledge on all subjects, and an astonishing memory (CT 78).

Our affection, clear-sighted and enduring, dated from our first meeting and has never changed (BS 94).

Third Uncle embodied traditional Chinese culture by carrying on his family tradition and heritage; more importantly he was a wise man who understood the times and knew how to steer his boat through the swift and turbulent current and dangerous whirlpools of twentieth century Chinese history. It was precisely his Taoist flexibility that enabled him to achieve what his family had planned long ago and what his brothers had failed to achieve. It was he rather than anyone else in the family who was loyal to the Family honour to which he contributed most by taking advantage of the endless fighting among the warlords. He was also fully aware of the danger of the Western cultural,

political and economic invasion deep into China's hinterland; therefore, he also showed the typical distrust of any foreign presence in China. He said to Han: "All of them are the same. All foreigners, ghouls, vampires, waiting to suck our blood" (CT 82).

Although a capitalist, Third Uncle clearly saw the inevitability of the collapse of the Jiang Jieshi regime because of hopeless corruption and self-interest of the Guomindang government. He did not run away as many capitalists did, for he believed that any government would be better than the Jiang Jieshi regime, and so he waited to see the triumph of the Communists without panic. He acknowledged and accepted the Revolution, for he realized, "If you get to the point where you have nothing to lose, then you get up and make a revolution" (CT 85); "We needed a revolution. Now at last our country is our own, we have thrown out all exploiters. No one will shit on our heads any more" (CT 80).

As a capitalist, Third Uncle almost certainly did not agree with communist ideology, but he was also a patriot who had wished his country to be independent, prosperous and equal to any country in the world. Like Han Suyin herself, he saw the hope of the country through the new and inevitable changes of the Communists to whom he showed no hostility. With his Taoist philosophy he saw the world as it necessarily was; with his flexibility he was able to take advantage of situations which were favourable to him but also to adapt himself to less favourable circumstances. It was such qualities and values as these that made Third Uncle so central a figure in both Han Suyin's life and writing. Where her father was silent and passive, never openly

expressing his love for his daughter and never paying enough attention to her talents during her childhood, Third Uncle was thoughtful and loquacious, both consciously and unconsciously nurturing her abilities. Han acknowledges her debt thus:

How much this nourishing, kindly Great River of words, questioning, weighing, philosophizing, groping for knowledge, imparted solace, repaired the so deep maim to my emotions of Father's taciturnity, how much it did to heal me, Third Uncle will never know (CT 79).

To Han Suyin, both Joseph Hers and Third Uncle were important in sharpening and nurturing her intelligence and temperament although in entirely different ways and both, consciously or unconsciously, tried to influence or win her over in cultural terms. The moral winner was of course Third Uncle. Their cultural battles not only mirror the conflicts between China and the West recreated in Han Suyin's writing but also reflect the moral or spiritual balance among Han's multiple selves.

## V

### Inequality, Racism and Prejudice

Not the least important function of Han Suyin's writing of her own family is her use of them as specific illustrations of larger issues that have shaped China over the last 150 years. Racism is one such. It is of course easy to attack Han Suyin, like other post-colonial writers, for displaying a "pathetic obsession with racial-cultural confrontation."<sup>45</sup> Yet as Chinua Achebe, himself often accused of just such an

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<sup>45</sup> Quoted by Achebe in Morning Yet on Creation Day (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 11.

obsession, observes, "in the face of continuing atrocities committed against millions of Africans in their own land by racist minority regimes, [an African] deserves a lot of pity."<sup>46</sup>

It is in this post-colonial context that Han Suyin likewise insists that it is necessary to explore such issues in the cultural confrontation between China and the West at considerable length. She may take the risk of falling into the "pathetic obsession" of clichés; however, she shows in her writing that it would be dishonest to talk about the history and culture of modern China without discussing such issues as racism and injustice.<sup>47</sup>

For Han Suyin's family, the reality of racism first manifested itself in its most direct form as soon as Yentung and Marguerite began their trip back to China. Yentung was denied a first-class boat ticket to go back to China with his wife and their son in January 1913; Marguerite of course could, for she was Belgian. Yentung himself recalls:

In Shanghai it was agony, for there it was only too plain that in my own

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<sup>46</sup> Achebe, 11.

<sup>47</sup> See the comment of Said, who argues in Culture and Imperialism that:

... one cannot postpone discussions of slavery, colonialism, racism in any serious investigations of modern Indian, African, Latin and North American, Arabic, Caribbean, and Commonwealth literature. Nor is it intellectually responsible to discuss them without referring to their embattled circumstances either in post-colonial societies or as marginalized and/or subjugated subjects confined to secondary spots in the curricula in metropolitan centers ... (p.316).

country I was nothing but an inferior, despised being. There were parks and restaurants and hotels I could not enter, although she [his wife] could. I had no rights on the soil of a Chinese city which did not belong to the Chinese; she had rights, by reason of something called skin.

We boarded the English steamer from Shanghai to Hankow; the first class was for Europeans only, and there was no other steamer. Marguerite leaned her arms on the railings and stared at the river. She was in first class, with our son. I went second class (CT 280).<sup>48</sup>

Han's father had a good university education and "was a good, and experienced engineer, [but] some lordly White, much younger and without a diploma, earned ten times his salary and ordered him about ..." (CT 426). Because he was Chinese, he could not compare with his Belgian colleagues in salary, welfare and health care, his Belgian wife was looked down upon by her own fellow Europeans, and his children were called "half-castes" and "half-brats." Also because he was Chinese his son died, refused treatment by a European doctor. As the death of the child suggests, the plight of Eurasians such as Han Suyin and her siblings was certainly a difficult one.

Being a Eurasian then meant being denied by both Western and Eastern cultures, being pushed into a cultural waste land, isolated and despised. Whatever their qualifications and abilities, they could get only inferior jobs with much less pay than a white. Even if they held the same job as a white did, their salary could only be a small portion of the salary of the white; as Han Suyin says about her Elder Brother's job and salary:

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<sup>48</sup> The "parks" Yentung mentioned here perhaps seem to include the park in the former concessions in Shanghai. It has entered Chinese folk lore that the park used to have a sign on the gate, saying "NO CHINESE AND DOGS ARE ALLOWED!"

And so, in November, he entered the German bank of Peking, as a Eurasian bank clerk, at a salary ... only one-fifth the salary of the young German boy straight from Germany, who was supposed to 'oversee' the work of native staff (including Elder Brother's work), though he knew nothing at all about banking. 'He cannot even spell German properly,' said Elder Brother bitterly (CT 427).

In other respects, however, Eurasians had certain advantages in the racist hierarchy, for Eurasians have at least half white blood and half European heritage. When Han Suyin started her first job as a fifteen-year old secretary, she was paid the same salary as Mr. Yeh, a Chinese man with six children, who had worked for more than ten years. As a Eurasian Han Suyin was in Orientalist terms higher on the rung of the ladder than a mere Chinese. This was perhaps the starting point where Han Suyin's Elder Brother began to abandon his idea of being Chinese, turning to European culture and acquiring European behaviour towards the Chinese.

Han's Elder Brother was perhaps the first direct victim of his parents' problematic intermarriage. When his parents returned to China with him and found how dangerous and precarious the situation was because of wars and famine, he was sent back to Europe alone. Thus he mainly grew up without his parents until he was sixteen, and the resulting damage could not be repaired; as Han Suyin puts it:

Elder Brother had shown courage and tenacity in England, but he had grievously injured himself: he had loved in absence, loved Mama and Papa with the fierceness of a lonely little boy's heart. Now he was here, with Papa and Mama, dangerously, witheringly unlike what he had loved. He did not recover from this self-induced attachment. It really killed a good deal of him (CT 421-2).

When he was reunited with his parents in 1924 and wanted very much to go to



the Chinese university in Beijing to study, he could not do it. His mother wanted him to work, for his father, who earned only a pittance from his Belgian employers, did not have enough money to offer him a college education.

He suffered from other forms of trauma, too. Some of them are in present terms absurd. He was myopic, and to Marguerite this was a curse, as Han Suyin point out:

This discovery of Elder Brother's myopia ... immediately became with Mama drama, tragedy, a fatal defect. How could her son, *her* son, be short-sighted? Elder Brother looked drained as her mournful, tragic phraseology poured itself, filling the house and the courtyard.... Elder Brother's myopia being of course willed by the Malignancy that had pursued her through the years. 'Your son, at seventeen, can scarcely see. He is purblind. He will be blind at twenty-one,' cried Mama. Because he was myopic, Elder Brother was now Papa's son (CT 423).

As Han Suyin tells us, her mother's reaction to her brother's myopia drove him deeper into a dysfunctional world in which he was psychologically paralysed. He no longer loved his mother; as Han points out: "he then began to hate her. He never got over this hatred of Mama" (CT 423). His mother's uncomprehending attitude toward his myopia in a sense predestined his tragic future in which he was isolated, lonely and helpless, fighting for his own life single-handedly.

Above all, however, Han Suyin suggests that it was his Eurasian identity that poisoned his soul. He became obsessed with the unavoidable horrors of the reality of China, "the beggars, the misery, the filth, the hopelessness, the strikes, the warlords and chiefly the dying, the dying ... And gradually he found it impossible to *be* Chinese. And nothing else was left to him, but to cling to the small world of Eurasians in China that Mama offered to him" (CT 425). Further, as a Eurasian, the racial prejudice he himself

experienced in both Chinese and Western society certainly warped his outlook even more. His much lower salary than his white colleagues in the German bank, the rejection of his love and offer of marriage to a Belgian girl because he was a Eurasian,<sup>49</sup> and the unexpected sufferings he had both at home and in society at large made him not only finally break with his family but also begin to dismiss the Chinese much as his mother did.

Han Suyin's account suggests some surprising similarities between her Elder Brother's experience and that of Marguerite. Both were fascinated by the Orientalist exotic views of the old Chinese culture, and so both wanted to learn the Chinese way of life at first. Yet both suffered from the hardships in China tremendously, and so both withdrew from Chinese society and went into a self-protecting but isolated world in which they became perpetual strangers or aliens whom no one really understood, for they never really tried to understand others; both were equally disgusted by the poor and wretched Chinese and finally both despised them. Their reactions towards the Chinese were essentially shaped by the Orientalist conviction that the Orientals were incapable of order, organization and self-government. They were irrational, indifferent, degenerate and their great moments were in the past; therefore, it was the duty of the West to govern the Orient and to regenerate the Orientals by injecting some fresh blood into the aging and

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<sup>49</sup> He fell in love with Liza Boisvaux whose father had been a station master on a railway in Belgium. But now Mr. Boisvaux was supposed to be a railway engineer in China and received a salary five times that of Han's father. Han's mother formally discussed with Mrs. Boisvaux the possibility of an engagement between Elder Brother and Liza but it was politely declined, obviously because Elder Brother was a Eurasian.

paralysed Oriental culture. Influenced by such Orientalist ideas Elder Brother told Han:

In the mass they are incapable of order, organization. Here and there a few bright ones, but so lamentably few. Never will they amount to anything. The only way for China is for someone, Japan or preferably Germany, to *drill* them .... look at them, all flocking about, cackling like fools and understanding nothing. During the troubles I saw some executions. They catch them by the dozen and take them out to kill them. But even those who are going to die laugh, laugh, the idiots (MF 36).<sup>50</sup>

Finally he "reviled and hated the Chinese and said many things against them. How stupid they were, how cowardly, how ignoble, how lazy [they were]" (MF 36). Then he enlisted in the Volunteer Corps, helping the British police in the foreign concessions in Tianjin, beating Chinese and saying, 'You've got to teach them their place'" (MF 34).<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Elder Brother's views on the Chinese are well glossed by Said in Orientalism thus:

Along with all other people as backward, degenerate, uncivilized, and retarded, the Orientals were viewed in a framework constructed out of biological determinism and moral-political admonishment. The Oriental was linked thus to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien. Orientals were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined or—as the colonial powers openly coveted their territory—taken over. (207)

Such views as well as the Orientals' incapability of organization and self government echo those of the Orientalists such as Balfour and Lord Cromer, which are extensively explored in Orientalism, 31-45.

<sup>51</sup> Han Suyin witnessed one example of "teaching them their place" in which her brother beat up a Chinese rickshaw man and broke his rickshaw for no reason (MF 37).

Han Suyin suggests that her Elder Brother's talents and life were wasted, partly because of her parents, especially her mother, partly because of the hardships of China, but mostly because of the effect of the historical reality of inequality and racism. All these, according to Han Suyin, perhaps drove him from anything Chinese, searching for European values that he could hang on to, including his love. The embarrassing refusal by the Boisvaux was perhaps another reason that prompted him to marry another Belgian girl, Hélène, who in fact was also the choice of his Belgian grandfather. For Han Suyin, however, he was totally lost, and his life in and out of China was rather pathetic:

he belonged nowhere, whatever he tried to do, whether he loved or hated, whether he did one thing or nothing, always, always, he was an outcast, always there would be this great black hole in him, and he was a young man, only twenty-one, all alone and there was no one to care (MF 37).

Nevertheless he hung onto the life of his own choice with a stubborn tenacity entirely characteristic of his family, and a rare love of his wife like that of his parents.

Perhaps the saddest and bitterest example of racial discrimination Han's family faced was the death of her brother, Sea Orchid, earlier mentioned; it was an event that scarred the relationship between her mother and herself. Sea Orchid was Messenger from Heaven to Han's mother, who gave him the name of Gabriel. He was very sick one night when Han's father was out, working on the railway. Seeing her lovely boy dying in the middle of the night, she took him to see the French doctor who was in charge of medical care for the Belgian personnel on the railway; but the doctor's half-mad wife not only refused to let them in and forbade her husband to see the little dying boy but also called the boy names such as "halfcaste brat" and "halfcaste throwdown" (CT 315).

Consequently the boy died and Han's mother very nearly lost her sanity. When Han was born she refused to nurse her, for she still remembered the tragic death of her son, Gabriel Sea Orchid. His death, arising from racism as it did, persuaded her that no children of hers would have a reasonable future, and that they would be despised and cursed. She told her husband, "We must not have any more children, Yentung. God knows what the future may be for them" (CT 290).

The doctor's wife was in certain respects an uncharacteristic case. Because she had never got along well with Marguerite, because she had had a nervous breakdown, because of her own sufferings from the hard conditions in China, she herself was isolated and desolated. In such an environment she, who was a victim of the hard circumstances herself, could easily in turn victimize Marguerite, and thus settle some personal grudges against Marguerite who she considered was inferior because Marguerite married a Chinese while she was the wife of a French doctor. This tragic incident obviously had serious consequences for Han's family, particularly for Han herself:

And so, as in a dreadful nightmare sequence, my mother's preference of Tiza, her resentment of me, not due to anything I had done, but a reaction to the mad gesture of a doctor's wife, closing her door to my mother and her dying child, warped all of us. Such frivolous pain, all the more horrible for its triviality (MF 148).

In a more fundamental sense, however, the woman's contemptuous attitude toward Eurasians and Chinese mirrored the Orientalist and racist prejudices common in the early twentieth century. To her, as to many others, Eurasians were second-class human beings who did not deserve any better than they got. Her personal grudge against Marguerite

was clearly more important to her than the life of a Eurasian child. Of the doctor himself one could only assume that his overcautious care for his wife prevailed over his professional morality, for he did not effectively protest against his wife's interference but finally agreed with her not to come out to examine the dying boy. No matter why the doctor let the boy die, racial prejudice was certainly the main factor in the death of the poor child.

Even as a child before she could understand the meaning of the term, Han Suyin was called a half-caste, and was never allowed to forget her racial status by the many Western racists in China.<sup>52</sup> One early and illuminating example both of the phenomenon and Han Suyin's characteristic response is illustrated by an incident that occurred at Beidaihe where her family went for a holiday. A white woman "casually usurped" Han's family bathing hut, and was exceedingly indignant when Han Suyin demanded it back. She responded with ugly racial insults, but nevertheless was thrown out by Han (MF 24). Of course if Han had not demanded to have the hut back, not thrown the white woman out of it, there would have been no disturbance. But the price for such peace would have been a surrender of Han's rights. This, then as later, she refused to do. To the woman, Han was a "Yellow-bellied bastard, half-caste, stinking Chinese" (MF 24), a Eurasian. Verbal abuse here, or if necessary physical violence in a political context, were always the inevitable result of such protest.

Eurasians like Han Suyin and her siblings were not only looked down upon by

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<sup>52</sup> See for example CT, 354-55; MF, 24, 144, 152, 291, 343.

many white people in the early twentieth century, but also by many Chinese, whose xenophobia was released particularly when such a Eurasian had some social intercourse with a white. The reasons for such prejudice were very complicated, yet it was obvious that the most important of them were traditional Chinese chauvinism and arrogance, now warped by Western political, economic and military domination. To some Chinese a Eurasian was a mixed-race person who had one European parent who was their enemy, having perhaps demonstrably invaded their country and exploited their people. This kind of attitude towards Eurasians was especially common among young students who were more radical against foreign aggression in the early twentieth century in China than the older generation.

One consequence was to make Eurasians despise themselves, as Elder Brother by the end did. Another example of the same phenomenon is offered by Robert Pang, a fellow student of Han Suyin at Yanjing University. Pang, a Eurasian himself, had been betrayed by a Eurasian girl; as a result he came to hate himself and all other Eurasians. To punish Han Suyin for her status, he made up slanderous tales about her.<sup>53</sup> Later he confessed that he had done it because "... I hate Eurasians, hate them, hate them ... because in my family too, we've got mixed blood, and I can't stand it.... once I was in love with a girl, and she was Eurasian, and she did something, and I guess I just wanted

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<sup>53</sup> When she was a student at Yanjing University, Han Suyin was once invited to a movie then to the Y.M.C.A. Club for hamburgers by her sister's fiancé and his friend Ted (both were American marines). Robert Pang wrote about the event in the Students' Weekly, saying that Han went to a private hotel with an American soldier after the movie and the Club (MF 274-282).

to revenge myself ..." (MF 281). Thus Han Suyin became the scapegoat of his prejudice. Pang's case was by no means an isolated one; it reflected the Chinese prejudice then. Even the Dean of Women in Yanjing University, "a thin, Christian Chinese woman," betrayed that psychological prejudice against Eurasians of many Chinese: "Well, of course your background is a little different ..." she said to Han (MF 279).

It was precisely for the difference in her Eurasian background, in a context that made such a difference seem a source of shame among many Chinese, that her first husband never really forgave her. His love-hate relationship with Han, chronicled in Birdless Summer, demonstrates that his cultural prejudice against Eurasians was one of the reasons that he often treated her badly, especially when his colleagues joked with him about his Eurasian wife or when he overheard them talking about her difference or strangeness in terms of sexuality. Like Othello, he loved his wife because of her exotic charm, but could not stand the fact that it attracted other men's attention as well. Han's husband suffered from his own Chinese male schizophrenic chauvinism; he despised Eurasian women who did not follow Chinese tradition in terms of moral attitudes toward sexual behaviour, but was simultaneously obsessed with them. He was never courageous enough to abandon his own hypocritical morality about sexual behaviour, avoiding the fact that although he hated the history of Han's sexual life, he really loved her in a perverse way. Both his own and his colleagues' attitude toward Eurasians obviously defines one aspect of their xenophobia; it also points to the limbo in which Han Suyin and her siblings lived.



Of course because of the deep influence of the long feudal tradition of Confucianism, Chinese like Han Suyin's first husband were also deeply prejudiced against women *per se*. They considered women as their personal belongings; therefore, they believed that they had the absolute right over women whose primary duty was to be obedient to them; as Han's Chinese husband often told her, "Obedience is virtue. Filial piety above all" (BS 31).<sup>54</sup> He failed to break her, but the cost, in terms of physical and mental cruelty, was high. As mentioned earlier, even Han Suyin's mild and passive father was influenced by the traditional Chinese prejudice against female children and never fully recognized Han's potential and talents and never pushed hard to give her a better education.

The racial discrimination against the Chinese by some Westerners combined with the prejudice against Eurasians in both the West and the East made life very hard for Eurasians. Consequently many abandoned their Chinese heritage and turned to the West. That was exactly what Han's siblings did after the Revolution in 1949; all her sisters and her brother left China and settled in the West and all had bitter recollections of their life in China. None of them had a smooth, easy and happy life, for none of them found any real niche in which they belonged. Moreover, Han Suyin makes it clear that they had never really had the affection from their parents, especially from their mother, except Tiza who alone had her mother's love and attention in their family. Both Han and her

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<sup>54</sup> The word "filial" used by her husband in the Chinese context here means loyalty to husband. For other so-called moral teachings to Han by her husband see also MF, 49, 56.

Elder Brother complained,

I knew how unfair Mother had been, not only to him but also to me; in the end my brother and I always agreed. 'She only loves Tiza. No one else exists for her. No one else' (MF 318).

Both Tiza and Marianne finally settled in the United States. Tiza, who was beautiful, gentle and feminine, represented the opposite pole to Han Suyin, at least in conventional terms. She was one of many Eurasian women who were raised to be married to promising, wealthy or well-established men, most likely white men who could guarantee "the happy security of that most ubiquitous and legal of all benefits" (MF 276). But at the same time, very characteristic of the family, she also put love and passion before money. Thus she had many love affairs and married at least twice; however, none of her love affairs had a really happy ending.

Her first lover, the American marine, Shawn, conveniently stopped writing to her after he returned to the United States, although she had a child by him. One can imagine how hard it was for Tiza to have the child out of marriage in a society that did not treat such a matter kindly. She then married a Chinese man who was involved in black market business, selling American discarded military supplies, and later paid him to get a divorce. She once also had an Italian lover, who seemed to be a Mussolini supporter, and who believed, "Woman are for beauty, they should not try to understand all these men's things [politics]" (MF 314). It seemed that nothing came out of Tiza's love affair with her Italian beau, except that it could be one of the reasons why she went to Italy with her mother after they got out of China in 1949 and stayed there until 1956 .

As a Eurasian girl who was spoiled by her mother, Tiza certainly faced many difficulties in China. At home, because she was her mother's favourite child, she naturally became the target of Rosalie/Han Suyin's jealousy. Unlike the professional woman Han Suyin, who was strong-willed, aggressive and independent, Tiza seemed never to be able to free herself from the protecting or rather controlling umbrella of her mother's moral influence. Indeed she became her mother's shadow, accompanying her all her life. By contrast she could not get along with her father's family, with whom she and her mother stayed for a short while in Chongqing in 1949, just before the Communists took the city. In the end they had to move out of her father's family. When they attempted to get out of China, they had some problems to find sponsors. Tiza wrote to Han Suyin for help with which they finally got out of the country but not without difficulties.

Tiza was trained by her parents to be quiet, kind, polite, soft and passive. She was just the opposite to young Rosalie/Han Suyin who was quarrelsome, quick-tempered, stubborn, and in her father's words, "shallow and easily temperamental, always changing her mind" (MF 44). The grand plan for Tiza's destiny was of course made for her by her parents, especially her mother. Although her beauty attracted quite a few men, including powerful and wealthy ones and she was raised for marriage, she did not get a happy one until perhaps very late. Neither did she get along well with her siblings because of her mother's partiality towards her. After Tiza and her mother moved to the United States from Italy in 1956, they stayed with Marianne's family. But things did not

go well between Marianne and Tiza and Tiza and her mother finally moved out. Han Suyin maintains that all the trouble was stirred up by their mother, and that Tiza became a humorous and pleasant companion only after she was married again sometime after the death of their mother in 1966.

Han Suyin points out several times that her little sister Marianne was neglected not only by their parents but also by her siblings. No one paid attention to the active and always laughing girl who enjoyed tennis, swimming and dancing. Although no one paid attention to her, all the family members, especially her mother and her siblings, in one way or another influenced her. All her hobbies mentioned above were in the early twentieth century European rather than Chinese, and like Elder Brother and Tiza, what she was after was a European lifestyle and its values, for her mother made sure that her children should reject anything Chinese. The result was that she married an American, left China in 1948, earlier than Tiza and their mother, and settled down in Arizona, U.S.A. But her real trouble started when Tiza and their mother moved out. Tiza refused to let her in when she visited Tiza and their mother. Finally she had a mental breakdown, apparently because of troubles caused by her mother who seemed indifferent to her. She was hospitalized from 1960 to 1961. Like both Han Suyin and Elder Brother,<sup>55</sup> Marianne also blamed their mother for her unhappiness: "If I'm crazy, it all started there, right in Mama's lap" (HTD 26).

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<sup>55</sup> In her autobiography Han Suyin has repeatedly complained about her mother and also recorded her Elder Brother's complaints such as the following one: "If I am what I am, it is because of Mama, the way she spoke about my being short-sighted" (CT 423).

Han Suyin's autobiography clearly demonstrates that the fundamental reason why Han's siblings abandoned their Chinese cultural heritage was inequality and racial discrimination against both Chinese and Eurasians. The tragedy of their mother who caused all kinds of trouble between them could also be traced back to inequality. To some extent all of them were victims of a historical phenomenon which was far beyond their power to alter but which indeed altered their destinies. It is not difficult to see in Han's autobiography that, unlike Han Suyin herself, who has taken her own fate in her own hands, Han's siblings let their fate decide for them. Half-Western, Half-Chinese, they followed the West, but with consequences they could not have foreseen.

Their father in one way or another also failed to make his children happy, never giving enough love and care to his children when they needed them; as Han Suyin demonstrates, he was preoccupied with two things in his life: his love of Marguerite and his job as a railway engineer. It was in terms of the latter that Elder Brother complained to Han Suyin many years later:

Remember how worried Father was about his trains? Father must have been happy these last few years. His whole life was the railways, the iron road as it is called in Chinese, is it not? Sometimes I felt the iron road came first with him, before any of us, certainly before me, his son. He never had time for anything else, did he? (CT 15)

Indeed Han's father was preoccupied with his job not only because he was committed to it but also because he had to work hard to keep it and support his family. He was happy about the railways after the Revolution in 1949, for gone were the days when he had to face all kinds of harassment and trouble from the bandits, the armed

gangs of robbers, the warlords on the railways. Moreover the railway in his home province Sichuan, which had been the dream of the people in the province for more than half a century, finally became true at the beginning of 1950s.

The reasons for the unusual relations between parent and parent, parents and children, and children and children here are perhaps Marguerite's idiosyncratic family tradition, Yentung's own traditions, the hardship of their life and the environment in terms of both the family and Chinese society more generally, the difficulties of interracial marriage in cultural terms, and the special problems of social and racial inequality. All these contributed much to the problematic relations between every member of the family.

Han Suyin's commitment to China, despite the privileges she has enjoyed in the West, reflects above all the complexity of her attitude toward her parents and relatives in cultural terms. Although her father was brought up in a traditional Chinese culture, which was prejudiced against girls, and unconsciously neglected her worth in her early years, she still finally loved him and his family more than she did her mother and her family. Her critical attitude towards her mother is not in this matter merely personal; or rather, the personal here expands to include the political and cultural. Marguerite's hostility to, and contempt for, all things Chinese became for Han Suyin a model of Western hegemonic attitudes. Her love for her Chinese relatives points to her rejection of such attitudes, and to her commitment to the Chinese people and Chinese culture in its broadest sense.

Han Suyin's writing of her family is tested most severely by events after the

Revolution. As a Chinese patriot, she believes that the Revolution in new China is good for the masses, especially for the hundreds of millions of the poor workers and peasants, for their human dignity, their emancipation, their justice and their lives:

For China was ... not the cruelty I had witnessed and endured, not the vile regime of Chiang and his administration. China was much more than this; it was the people I had seen, carrying their loads, sweating, starving, fighting, dying, the millions and the millions —— the Revolution was for them ... (BS 347).

A bourgeois, land-owning and gentry family such as her own in the Revolution certainly endured hardships in the various political movements, and she does not deny them. Her Second Great-Grandfather, a land owner, committed suicide during the Land Reform in 1951 "because he could not bear to face his peasant tenants", "could not bear the loss of face, could not submit to criticism and blame" (CT 80). Her Sixth Uncle was labelled a "Rightist" during the anti-rightist campaign right after the Hundred Flower Movement in 1957. Perhaps most sadly, she records that Third Uncle died, uncared for by doctors during the terrible, frightening turmoil of the Cultural Revolution in 1968. Because he was a capitalist, no doctors dared to look after him.

Han Suyin's account of her parents' separation and their life after the Revolution is particularly poignant. Marguerite left through fear of the Communists; the loss was devastating to Yentung. When she left with Tiza, Yentung was having a stroke, lying in bed watching them packing and leaving. After they left he lived alone; not one of his children visited him until Han Suyin did in 1956. He felt lonely, as he confessed in his biography: "my mind cries: Oh, come back, come back, Marguerite. I am so alone, so

alone ..." (CT 310).

Although in his last years Han's father had the job he liked and enjoyed, was well cared for and respected by his colleagues and employers, and finally was again loved by his daughter Han Suyin, he also had some unpleasant experiences in the post-Revolution era. With strict control almost everywhere in the social system, he could not ask the government to allow his daughter Han Suyin to stay with him at home during her visit. He must have deeply regretted that he could not be reunited with his wife Marguerite, for he was unable to go out of the country because he was told that he was "too old to travel" (HTD 205) by his employers. As a non-political person he perhaps did not understand the political reasons why he could not meet his wife in the United States; as a highly-educated and Western-trained engineer he was too valuable to the new government to risk losing. Moreover, if he were permitted by the Chinese government to go to the United States, the latter, in Han's own word, "would not allow him to enter unless he pretended to be a refugee and against the present government, and this Papa would of course not do" (HTD 154-55). Further Marguerite would never have wanted to go back to Communist China and certainly she could not have got permission from the American government even if she had wanted to. In the end their separation was not only a personal tragedy but part of a historical and political tragedy, in the sense that the isolation of China was an unfortunate historical and political event caused by misunderstanding and non-comprehension, which left spiritual scars on many people besides Han Suyin's parents.



Yentung worked hard until the last day of his life and he seemed even to come out of his long-established cocoon of silence and became active in political life, participating in "all the debates" at political meetings, writing "so many wall posters," and giving advice and criticism to the government (HTD 207). He died of a heart attack on March 8 1956 and was honoured by the government for his contribution (HTD 208).<sup>56</sup> Yet in his work as in his marriage, his life was a paradox. It was the technology that he had learned from the West that made him a hero in China after the Revolution. Even after his death, he could not escape such paradoxes. Certain Red Guards defaced his tombstone during the Cultural Revolution because they believed that Han's father had been a bourgeois intellectual who did not deserve a place among the great revolutionaries in that revolutionary shrine. Like so many terrible mistakes and crimes it would be corrected later but the damage had been done.

A number of Han Suyin's Chinese relatives, who might not have agreed with all the ideological and political jargon, but who did not wish to challenge the political system of the country, suffered after the Revolution. Han's cousin, Third Brother, a professor of physics, was sent to "a 'branch' of Peking University in Hanchung district, on the borders of Shensi, Szechuan and Kansu provinces" as a cook's helper for more than three

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<sup>56</sup> Although he was "an old 'intellectual' with a bourgeois background," he was buried on "Babaoshan, the hill where revolutionary heroes and important people who have rendered great service to their country are buried" (HTD 208). In a sense Babaoshan is like Westminster Abbey in London, for only famous and important people can be buried in that "revolutionary shrine". The fact that his death was even mentioned in the People's Daily indicates that he was indeed greatly honoured by the government for his contribution to the reconstruction of the country after the Revolution in 1949.

years during the Cultural Revolution (HTD 493), for he was a bourgeois intellectual. Because of his landowner family background his wife had to undergo many trials for a long time (more than eight months) in the people's court by the peasant tenants in 1950 while he was studying in the United States. Yet all of them were patriots who loved their country and who sacrificed much for it.

Han Suyin's writing about her family, it has been suggested in the pages above, provides a microcosm of the various stages of Chinese culture and history over the last century and a half. The family's declining fortunes point in particular to the economic ruin, political turmoil, loss of self-sufficiency, and shrinking independence visited upon China during this period, and discussed in Chapter Two.

The central factor in this process was of course the growing intervention of and domination by the West in the affairs in China, and here again Han Suyin's writing about her family provides a model, from the affair of Middleman Tu to the sufferings of Marguerite and Yentung's children. The sending of Yentung and his brothers abroad to recover the Family's fortunes by the Elders offers a general example of the meeting of East and West. Of such consequences, the marriage of Yentung and Marguerite is a far more particular and literal example, and their Eurasian children the most particular and literal of all.

Writing China, Han Suyin is of course writing herself, but from a certain distance. Writing her family, the distance is narrowed considerably. We must now turn to the subject of such self-creation, which lies at the centre of all Han Suyin's work.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **The Forms of Identity: Han Suyin's Recreation of Herself**

The autobiographer always tells the story of a past and within that past, the linear development of one's 'own existence': what belongs to the author alone (or is 'owned' by him), his 'individual life' which translates into 'the history of his personality'—— a central core which is self-consistent throughout its history.<sup>1</sup>

"Women's autobiographies come alive as a literary tradition of self-creation when we approach these texts from a perspective based on the lives of women," ... [Susan Friedman] concludes. In consequence, as those lives change——the forms in which they choose to "inscribe" their sense of self may change and they are fast changing.<sup>2</sup>

Certain kinds of autobiographies have flourished and clustered around specific historical events.<sup>3</sup>

In Chapter Two we have seen mainly that Han Suyin defines her family and herself in terms of her recreation of, or rather engagement with, Chinese history in general; in Chapter Three we have concentrated on ways in which she defines herself in an account of her family history and the multiple cultural contexts such a history

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Elbaz, The Changing Nature of the Self (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Germaine Brée, "Autogynography," in Studies in Autobiography, ed. James Olney (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 174.

<sup>3</sup> Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos, "The Metaphysics of Matrilinearism in Women's Autobiography: Studies of Mead's Blackberry Winter, Hellman's Pentimento, Angelou's I Know why the Caged Bird Sings, and Kingston's The Woman Warrior in Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism, ed. Estelle C. Jelinek (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 181.

embraces. This Chapter will explore primarily the degree to which all her writing is an attempt to define herself in the largest possible number of contexts, to establish the multiple identities of the self that has been responsible for all the writing earlier discussed. All her writing, considered from this perspective, is part of her autobiographical creation of herself. In other words in all her writing, the writing of China and the writing of her family, she searches for her self-identity and fulfils her self-definition through the contemporary history of China, her direct relationship with her family members and friends in social, cultural and political terms.

More specifically, the task of this section is to explore how Han Suyin creates and recreates herself in her writing; in what historical, cultural and social contexts she writes and rewrites herself; how these historical, cultural and social factors help Han Suyin to shape her multiple identities; and why Han Suyin is often paradoxical in her life, her career, and above all, her attempt to define both through her writing. The structure of this section will be both thematic and chronological, though the former will dictate the uses of the latter.

Han Suyin was born, grew up and was nurtured in a dual, or rather a multi-cultural world with both an Eastern and Western heritage, which on the one hand enriched her life with more opportunities and benefits but on the other left her with more challenges and conflicts. Obviously in such a multi-cultural world, for Han Suyin, growing up meant to experience the complexity and conflicts of the multiple dimensions of the life in which she found herself; therefore, it is only natural that she in response

developed many different dimensions of herself, not all of them obviously consistent.

Being sandwiched between Chinese and Western cultures from the very beginning meant that she was both blessed and cursed with a double identity and divided psyche. From meals to schools, from tradition to religion, from morality to ways of thinking and from languages to life styles, almost anything in Han Suyin's young life reflected the reality of this dual world. Writing of her childhood, she comments:

**FROM THE START WAS DUALITY, an other life, a saving otherness which was also self. One could and did become someone else, at different hours of the day. And the exact, concrete imagination of the child, stretched by the knowledge of this identity of contraries, finds its own order and discipline among the materials of chaos (CT 364).**

Han Suyin attributes here and elsewhere a great deal of self-awareness to her younger incarnation. Even as a little girl named Rosalie Chou, she claims to have realized that the dual nature of her world and of herself was also a precious gift. She describes Rosalie's response to this duality thus:

**In Rosalie [childhood name of Han Suyin] a fragmentation of the total self occurred, each piece recreating from its own sum of facts a person, each person functioning separately, withholding itself from the other, yet throughout maintaining a secret vigilance, boneless coherence, fragile as the thread that guided Theseus in his labyrinth. Others born like her of two worlds, who chose not to accept this splitting, fragmentation of monolithic identity into several selves, found themselves later unable to face the contradictions latent in their own beings. Consistency left them crippled for the world's incoherence.**

**In Rosalie the necessity of knowing mutually contradictory truths without assuming any one of them to be the whole truth, became in childhood the only way to live on, to live and remain substantial. And she was astonished that others were unwilling to accept the discomfort of always being partly wrong, of never knowing a total answer; they became so sure, believing one thing only, preferring a cosy semi-blindness to the**

pricking clarity of doubts (CT 382).

While her dual cultural heritage created various difficulties and crises, it also helped her to survive these crises and pushed her on to new lives. The various kinds of friendship with both Chinese and Eurasian children, her friendship with some secretaries in Beijing Union Medical College, her love and marriages with both Chinese and foreign men, her careers as both a medical doctor and later a professional writer, all opened new ways of life for her but at the same time also caused her to go further, to leave behind the old and look for and discover even more different kinds of life. The process as shown by Han Suyin is one of self-creation and recreation, which in turn provides the context for the multiple forms of her self.

## I

### A Twisted Childhood

Han Suyin's description of her mother's refusal to nurse her when she was born not only points to the particular circumstances that she describes but also underlines her attempt to recreate at least one aspect of herself out of a particular historical and social background. Like her father's birth, which was itself marked by the Western interference in China, Han Suyin's birth also bears a mark of Western influence quite distinct from the nationality of her mother. Marguerite refused to nurse her because she was still suffering from the mental trauma that followed from the death of her little boy, Sea Orchid. Perhaps the curse of "halfcaste brat" by the doctor's wife was still echoing in

her mind; certainly Marguerite believed that all her children would be similarly cursed. In the end she was slapped by her husband for not nursing the baby and only then looked after it. Thus from the very beginning of her life Han Suyin was as a Eurasian not only marked as the physical embodiment of the union of two very different cultures, but also the site of the cultural conflicts both of East and West generally and her parents' marriage more particularly.

The question of Han Suyin's very name is important here. She was christened Matilda Rosalie Leenders Chou, an explicit statement of her divided heritage, both Western and Eastern. Names in all societies are of course important, a reflection of heritage and culture. In many colonial societies, children are given non-traditional "Christian" names as a mark of their absorption into the dominant invading Western power, and by the same token, the loss of their own cultural roots. Not surprisingly many have resisted this imposition; the Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, christened James Ngugi, is one of the more celebrated post-colonial examples of such resistance.

Han Suyin began the process early in her childhood. As a Eurasian her case is, however, more complex than that of Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Her early names, Matilda, Rosalie, Leenders, Chou, Meme, and Chou Moon Guest, mark her double identities of both Eastern and Western cultures. Rosalie's "long string of names, all the names of the Denis family" (CT 316), the names given to her by her mother when she was baptized shortly after her birth, identify her connection with the West, her biological heritage from her European mother's family; Chou, her father's family name, marks her Chinese

identity and blood relation with an ancient Chinese family. Her father "called her Meme, Little Sister, from the very beginning, for it was on the Harvest Festival day that she was born" (CT 316). For her father she was in Chinese tradition a little darling who would bring prosperity for having such an auspicious birthday. Of course the school or official name her father gave to her, Chou Kuang-hu, or Chou Moon Guest, follows an old Chinese tradition that puts the family name first, generation name second and personal name last. So Chou is Han Suyin's family name, Kuang (Guang) her generation name (all her cousins in her generation have this middle name) and "hu" her personal name.

In recreating her childhood, Han Suyin shows clearly that she resisted the names given by her mother and marked by Western culture when she was a young girl. Her reaction marks her resistance to the identities given to her by others rather than made by her own free choice. The fact that she resists that part of her childhood identity is perhaps the reason why she both calls her childhood-self "the baby", "the child" and uses the third person, "she" or "Rosalie," to identify her childhood self. It seems clear that Han Suyin not only wants to keep a distance from that part of her childhood, but indeed to deny the identity imposed by her mother, and the larger Western identity and culture that went with it. Many times she told people around her that she "did not want to be named Rosalie", "I don't like my name, Rosalie" (CT 331, 332).<sup>4</sup>

In childhood she picked other names for herself, one of which will be discussed below. Between 1952 and 1961 she was known as Elizabeth Comber because of her

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<sup>4</sup> For Han's dislike of her name see also CT 337, 419.



marriage with Leonard Comber, but such a name is never mentioned in any of her autobiographical writing. Clearly she chooses to ignore both the identity it suggests, and the Western cultural context that goes with it.

Most important of these in both life and writing is her last and final pseudonym, Han Suyin. It is above all else a means of defining herself in terms of her Chinese, rather than Western self. Han is the homophonic word that means the Han nationality in Chinese, the majority (more than 93%) of Chinese people, and Suyin literally means plain, or simple, or ordinary sound. Han Suyin herself explains that her name means "a common little voice, a little voice that never stops talking."<sup>5</sup> Obviously she attaches her identity above all to the majority of common Chinese people in whose interests she is willing to speak out loudly and persistently.

### **1. The Paradoxical Influence of Her Mother**

Throughout a child's life in the home, the mother's influence is stronger for a daughter than for a son.<sup>6</sup>

By convention, if not in fact, daughters are often assumed to be particularly close to their mothers. Han Suyin, here as elsewhere, defies convention. From the very beginning, she suggests, she had an intense love-hate relation with her mother, with the

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<sup>5</sup> Georgia Dullea, "Han Suyin's Many-Splendored World," The New York Times, 25 January 1985, sec. B, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Demetrakopoulos, 180.

emphasis upon the latter term. Although Marguerite's refusal to nurse her daughter was a passive protest against the social and racial prejudice against Eurasians at that time, her action pointed toward future irritation and hostility in her relation with her daughter. Rosalie was clearly never her mother's favourite daughter and she was aware of the fact even as a girl; she in turn rebelled against her mother from the beginning. Thus they began their life-long quarrels with complaints about, and sometimes screams at, each other until the death of Marguerite in 1965.<sup>7</sup> Such an ill start to their unusual relationship originated in, and was nurtured by, the historical phenomenon of the clash between the West and the East. The death of Sea Orchid as a result of the racial prejudice of the French doctor's wife was a personal and immediate manifestation of such a clash, one from which Marguerite never recovered, and which permanently soured her relationship with her daughter. In her essay on Han's autobiography, Helen Buss sums up the phenomenon:

Unfortunately, the mother's initial physical and emotional rejection, initiated by the loss of her boy child, because he was branded a "halfcaste," becomes a psychic feature of her personality... The rift is to last a lifetime, as to her death the mother refers to her oldest daughter as "that woman," refuses Han's charity even when she and a younger daughter need it very much, and eventually will not speak to her first-born daughter.<sup>8</sup>

Yet regardless of their hostility towards each other, Han Suyin inherited much

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<sup>7</sup> Her mother's death date in HTD is 1966 (p.26) but in MF 1965 (p.148).

<sup>8</sup> Helen M. Buss, "The Autobiographies of Han Suyin: A Female Postcolonial Subjectivity," Canadian Review of American Studies 23, no. 1 (Fall 1992): 114.

from her mother's character, and somewhat grudgingly acknowledges it: "But I carry something of my mother in me" (CT 203). She further acknowledges that it was her mother's hostility to her that in fact drove her into the life she has led, and of which her mother so disapproved: "My mother. That stubborn woman I hated with such utter love; and how beneficial and stimulating this hate proved, pushing me to do all the things she did not want me to do!" (HTD 651).

Her first attempt to change her name from Rosalie to Josephine is a good example of doing what her mother disapproved of. Rosalie was the name given to Han Suyin by her mother; it was Marguerite's own mother's name. Josephine was the name of Marguerite's maid in Brussels. Rosalie/Han Suyin's desire to change her name suggests the first of many attempts to rebel against her mother and to change her identity. Rosalie felt that her mother did not really love her in the way she wanted. The fact that she chose the name of her mother's maid suggests more specifically that Rosalie was here rejecting her mother's snobbery by choosing the name of her mother's maid who "was a 'found child', unwanted, guilty of birth" (CT 209), an inferior person on the low rung of the social hierarchy. It also points to a number of other issues. It suggests, for example, that Han Suyin felt herself, like Josephine, an unwanted child. The choice of the name of her mother's maid also indicates Rosalie/Han Suyin's sympathy with the poor, the weak and the unfortunate. Josephine, like Juliet's nurse, had carried messages back and forth between Marguerite and Yentung; it cost her dearly, for as Han Suyin reports, "Josephine was sacked, with wages to the end of the month, after twenty-four

years of service" (CT, 210). She was fired by Marguerite's father, George Denis and later "died at the Hospital of the Poor in Brussels" (CT, 210).

Marguerite favoured her second daughter Tiza who was pretty, gentle and neatly feminine, above her other children, especially Rosalie. Being psychologically hurt by her mother's partiality towards Tiza, Rosalie, against her mother's wish that all her daughters should be feminine, deliberately chose to be boylike, playing boy's games, trying to be physically tough, getting herself dirty, crying and screaming insults at her mother. One typical example is her response to her mother's complaint about dirtiness: "Dirt is clean ... Anyway, cleaner than you" (CT 333). It is scarcely surprising that little Rosalie earned herself the nickname, "The Wicked One" from her mother. Han Suyin, without any apparent sense of regret, declares: "All my childhood I battled against her [her mother], in typical Denis fashion, and finally we forswore each other, again in Denis fashion" (CT 203). In so doing Han Suyin, who throughout her life has defined herself in terms of her Chinese roots, also shows a self-identity with her mother's family tradition of tenacious stubbornness, stiffness and vehement passion.

Marguerite's plan for her daughters was marriage and she often repeated it in the family. It seems because of that the young Han Suyin several times declared that she wished to be a boy, a man; (CT 389, 404) and other times she swore that she did not want to be married for she hated men, all men (MF 132, 194). The irony or paradox here is that Marguerite, acting an essentially "masculine" role in her family life in terms of important family decision making, wanted her own daughters to be "feminine"; yet

with the rebellious Rosalie, she created another "masculine" daughter like herself. As Helen Buss notes, "the mother, traditionally patriarchal in her own definitions of what a daughter should be, wishes for a daughter who exhibits a fragile beauty as well as a fragile will, and her daughter is neither pretty nor malleable, but tough, intellectual, and full of questions and opinions."<sup>9</sup> Ironically it was precisely her mother's dislike of her that made Rosalie want to be masculine against her mother's will and it was of course also her mother's dislike of her that made her struggle to survive, to study and to be the best in everything.

Because of the appalling conditions of her life in China, Marguerite wanted her children to be European rather than Chinese; yet the rebelling Rosalie went again against her mother's wish and wanted to be Chinese rather than to be European. Thus she told her Elder Brother when he came from Europe in February 1925, "But I want to be Chinese, like you, like Papa" (CT 416). Of course by so doing she made her mother furious and her mother's anger exasperated the young Rosalie who would shout at her mother, "I hate you, I hate you. Why don't you go back, why don't you go away where you came from, and leave us in peace? I hope the Communists come and cut off your head" (CT 416). It is not without interest that Han Suyin, a woman who has pursued maternity in several different forms,<sup>10</sup> seems to feel only pride in such a rejection of her own mother. Such a rebellious spirit, inherited most obviously from her virulently

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<sup>9</sup> Buss, 114.

<sup>10</sup> See footnote 13, p.238.

anti-Chinese mother, perhaps helps to explain why she herself has never changed in her support for China despite all condemnation and criticism.

Han Suyin has also inherited from her mother stubbornness as well as rebelliousness; thus it was that Rosalie hung on to life for a week despite her mother's refusal to nurse her. One aspect of this strength of will was her obsession with being, even as a young girl, the best in everything. She was astonishingly successful in many ways. She was the best student many times in her primary schools, the best overseas Chinese student with highest distinction in the University of Brussels and later she received her L.R.C.P., M.R.C.S. and M.B.B.S. degrees from the School of Medicine, University of London, with Honours in surgery and pathology in 1948. Today she has a good claim to being among the best and most influential of Chinese writers writing in English; certainly she is the most prolific.<sup>11</sup>

As Han Suyin recreates herself, Rosalie possessed a passion to seek and maintain her version of the truth in everything, no matter how trivial; she would point out, for example, little differences in the same stories that her mother told her over and over again. Thus Rosalie would stubbornly argue with her mother about the colour of the roses on her mother's hat that she had worn when she was eighteen:

'White roses,' said Rosalie. 'You said white roses last time.'

'White or red, it doesn't matter, don't interrupt me,' said Mama, 'or I

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<sup>11</sup> Recently a number of other overseas Chinese writer writing in English have come into prominence, among them Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Jan Wong, David H. Hwang. Han Suyin's output and readership not only far exceeding theirs, but are to this date exerted far more influence in the public sphere.

shan't tell you stories any more. Why are you always so wicked?'  
 'I remember you said white roses.'  
 'My God,' said Mama, 'I could die, and you would still be arguing with me.'  
 'You said white' (CT 329).

Like her mother, Rosalie/Han Suyin never easily gave up on anything regardless of conventional thought. She wanted to be a doctor when she was twelve years old and she went to work as a secretary at the age of fifteen to earn the money to pay for the education that would make possible her future medical studies. In the pursuit of such an education, with her youthful charm and intelligence, she made use of Joseph Hers who finally offered her a scholarship to study in Belgium. She speaks with pride of the process. As she herself told her friend Vera: "Of course I made eyes at him, I wanted a scholarship. How do you think I could have got his attention if I had not made eyes at him?" (MF 224-25) When her parents wrote to Hers to decline the scholarship because they worried that they might have to repay the scholarship later, not trusting their precarious and unstable but stubborn daughter, Han Suyin threatened that if they did not let her have the scholarship she would become a prostitute. In the end she had her way and became a doctor, although the process was much interrupted.

Like her mother, Han Suyin has always seized the power to choose, to decide and to act according to her own will and instinct in the end. When as a student at the University of Brussels, she was involved in lecturing trips in Belgium to raise funds to support China against the Japanese invasion, she clearly demonstrated her strength of will in her confrontation with the powerful Isabelle Blum, "at that time an important member

of the Belgian Communist Party", "who could 'make rain or sun' for many people because she had close friends in the Ministry [of the Belgian government]" (MF, 392, 393). When Blum tried to dictate what Han Suyin should talk about in her lecture about the Japanese invasion of China, Han Suyin totally rejected it. Han Suyin comments of the incident that she had "never taken kindly to being ordered about" (MF 393); she of course does not add that it was a reaction in Marguerite's uncompromising style.

Like her mother, who chose to love, become pregnant by, and marry against the will of her family and clan, Han Suyin deliberately chose to have a life of her own by ignoring her mother's admonishment and disapproval. Yet though both mother and daughter shared strong wills, in their different attitudes and judgements they chose very different directions. The mother, after her early rebellion against conventional morality, not only embodied the traditional destiny of women, marriage and family, but also attempted to make her daughters follow the traditional pattern of life for woman. The daughter, however, has followed a more modern, and to some extent feminist agenda, choosing for herself both a professional career and her right to define herself in whatever terms she chooses. She comments of such self-definition: "It was in my power to choose ..." (MF 388).

Such a capacity for self-determination and self-definition regardless of conventional opinion or values, is everywhere demonstrated in Han Suyin's life. Everyone disagreed with her decision to go back to China in the middle of the anti-Japanese war in 1938 while she was doing brilliantly in her academic studies in



University of Brussels with a good scholarship, yet she did go back. To do so, she resolutely dropped her boy friend, Louis, abandoned her scholarship that she had tried very hard to get, shattered the hard-won love of her grandfather and her other relatives in Belgium, and gave up her dream of becoming a doctor without hesitation and regret.

Later in 1948, she repeated the process after she successfully completed her medical studies in England. She again gave up a good career and a safe and comfortable life to return as close to China as was practical, in this case Hong Kong. Again her sense of Chinese identity made her aware that she could not simply detach herself from her country and her people:

But I could not contemplate living 'in peace' in England while tremendous China, like the phoenix, was being reborn from the consuming pyres of this massive conflict. I could not. At least I would be at the gates, watching and seeing, I would not abdicate, give up, turn my back on China (BS 347).

To remain at the "gate" of one's country is an ambiguous act of commitment, and so accordingly is her second return, which ended in Hong Kong. She was far more cautious this time in making irrevocable decisions, largely it would seem because of the painful lessons she had learned from her feudalism husband. She comments of the decision to stay in Hong Kong: "this time I would play safe. I would not throw myself right into the boiling cauldron, but linger by the edge, and watch, and wait and see ..." (BS 346). She would "wait for the dust to settle" (HTD 12).

During the worst Cold War years, especially the McCarthy era, while everyone else followed the current of anti-communism, and when favourable words for China

could invite attack, or perhaps jeopardize a career, Han Suyin characteristically chose to defend China, to make herself the champion of that country, ignoring the risk of ruining her peaceful and comfortable life, and tarnishing the reputation she had already won. Again her mother's stubbornness seems a clear influence.

Another, less obvious but equally interesting aspect of her mother's influence is reflected in her autobiography where, though it is not clear that Han Suyin is herself aware of it, she reveals a romantic Cinderella complex, not at all unlike that of Marguerite. Consciously or unconsciously, that is, she seems to want a prince, to become a princess, to lead a glamorous and romantic life. This is true in its most literal sense in the young Rosalie. At very early age, Rosalie day-dreamed of being a princess, and longed for her "knight in armour, flashing gold, his sword one solid diamond" (CT 331) to rescue her from a dragon. It was just such a fantasy that haunted her mother when she was courted by her Chinese "prince" Chou Yentung. It was also such a romantic obsession that led the young Rosalie/Han Suyin to seek the friendship of Suchen, the adopted and crippled daughter of Princess Dan in Beijing. As she revealingly comments, "It was Suchen who remained longest as friend to Rosalie, the only one whose friendship did not end in a rending quarrel" (CT 398). The friendship between Rosalie and Suchen certainly pleased the princess-worshipper, Marguerite.

At the beginning of her first novel, Destination Chungking (like much of her fiction, a thinly covered fictionalized autobiography), Han Suyin's description of the magnificent residence of the young Pao, who will become her future husband in the

novel, reflects the structure of palaces of princes in Beijing:

Pao's house was very important, much the richest and most noble in our street. Great gates opened upon a vista through courtyard after courtyard, spacious imposing. Pillared pavilions supported wide roofs that swept in stately curves against the sky. Gold leaf and lacquer and deep-cut carving made splendid the doors and pillars (DC 7-8).

The fact that the house is close to the Forbidden City may also be not without relevance.

The activities of Pao's house before it goes bankrupt indicates a kind of palace life that only the Royal family or the high officials of the government could afford:

Most dazzling of all the glories of Pao's house ... were feast nights, when guests came riding to the gates in rickshaws and four-wheeled open carriages, all tinkling with bells on the harness, with footmen attending before and behind .... Here we could see and hear and even smell of things sumptuous, as gorgeously robed ladies passed us ... smelling of flowers and sandalwood and musk; and hurrying servants crossed and recrossed the courtyard bearing great bowls and platters that left on the air a trail of exquisite savour to make the mouth water.

Creeping still closer we would watch, enchanted, the actors brought to entertain the company, the best in Peking (and that meant the best in China!) (DC 9).

Her description of Pao's own palace in The Crippled Tree shows obvious similarities:

The Tang house was a palace of many courtyards, because Pao's father was a Big Official, at that moment working under the Big Overlord Wu Peifu. He ... had a carriage with horses, and a motor car with bodyguards on the sidesteps when he went on official business.

The main gate was bright red with knobs painted in brassy gold. Two stone lions on each side reared from pedestals (CT 374).<sup>12</sup>

Likewise in The Four Faces, Han Suyin seems to identify herself with Princess

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<sup>12</sup> Pao's childhood in DC is based on one of Rosalie/Han Suyin's classmates, whose name was also Pao, in her primary school in Beijing. I should make it clear that Pao in DC is Han's future husband in the novel, but Rosalie/Han Suyin's classmate Pao in CT has nothing to do with Han Suyin's first husband Tang Paohuang.

Sumipoon. Like Han Suyin, Sumipoon is a Eurasian, who is half Siamese, quarter Cambodian and quarter French, who is also an independent writer who engages herself in working for the prosperity for her own people, the benefit of humanity and the peace of the world. Here Han's romantic Cinderella complex goes beyond a mere obsession with princes and princesses; it reflects her attempt to portray larger political issues. Sumipoon's family heritage and her own happy family with a European husband and many adopted children of different races point to the fact that Han herself adopted two children and financially supported many others.<sup>13</sup> It also suggests the kind of harmonious international unification of East and West for which Han Suyin has struggled all her life. Likewise Princess Sumipoon's respect and admiration for Prince Sihanouk's vigorous energy and charismatic, amiable and easy-going personality in the physical labour scene (FF 158-171) reflects Han Suyin's own fascination with those characteristics of Prince Sihanouk, together with her affection towards him, revealed in My House Has Two Doors:

I had immensely enjoyed galloping around Cambodia with Prince Sihanouk, whose physical energy was astounding .... It delighted Sihanouk to know that I could not stand the pace of his excursions. After a whole day of travel, interviews, speech making, inspections we danced all night until six in the morning, when regretfully Sihanouk, who had danced, sung several songs of his own composition, played the clarinet, conducted the orchestra, announced we would have two hours' rest ... before going

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<sup>13</sup> Han Suyin officially adopted one daughter, Yungmei, in Chengdu, China in 1941 and in her own words, "semi-adopted another girl, Hueiying" in Singapore in 1953 (HTD 217-8). She put her through schools and helped her with other things as well. Financially she has supported many children including a group of physically-challenged young people in China (WS 109).

off to the beach for a swim, followed by a banquet and dancing .... After a week of following Sihanouk around, one was really *claquée* (HTD 330).

The Mountain Is Young presents another version of the same theme. Anne Ford, who again can be identified in part with Han Suyin herself, finally wins her Asian "prince" Unni Menon who is an embodiment of Lord Krishna, the incarnation of Life and Love, and whose life model seems to be Han's third husband, the Indian Colonel Vincent Ruthnaswamy. Their happy union seems again a reflection of Han's own passionate desire for understanding and cooperation between East and West. It is interesting to point out that the novel itself is the result of Han Suyin's trip to Katmandu for King Mahendra's coronation in May 1956.

As Han Suyin's autobiography makes clear, this trip is scarcely uncharacteristic. Han Suyin throughout her life shows an interest not merely in kings, queens, princes and princesses, but in all powerful political and world-famous figures. Beside her meeting with the ex-Emperor of China, Puyi, in the summer of 1960 and the British King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in the summer of 1943, Han's life is full of experiences with heads of states, premiers, ministers, ambassadors, generals and VIPs such as Premier Zhou Enlai, Prime Ministers Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Tunku Abdul Rahman, and David Marshal.

In Hongkong, she derived pleasure from her acquaintance with "H.E." and clearly enjoyed flaunting it in her not infrequent struggles with colonial bureaucracy. When the Medical Director of the Hongkong government accused her of writing a letter in red ink

in a complaint against a department professor in her hospital "for his bullying methods," the Director told her that she should not have written the letter in red ink, because "in Hongkong red ink is only to be used by His Excellency the Governor." Han merely responded, "Next time I see H.E. I'll ask him why" (HTD 43). Indeed she was often the guest of H.E. Alex Grantham; even her naturalization was "due to Alex Grantham's use of red ink," and of course the Granthams were among the many distinguished guests at her wedding ceremony on February 1, 1952. Such an enthusiasm for the company of the high born and powerful might seem paradoxical in the life of one as committed to the radical communism of post-revolutionary China as Han Suyin. It is a paradox, however, characteristic of her multiple selves, and one which in the self-creation of both her autobiography and her fiction she takes pains to give its full prominence.

One more point reflecting the impact that her mother left on her in Han Suyin's autobiography is her relationship with her own adopted daughter Yungmei. Here unhappy mother-daughter relationships, and Han Suyin's feelings of sympathy and responsibility for the dispossessed, both take a more personal turn. This is the case with Josephine discussed earlier, and this is also the case with Yungmei.

She bought and adopted Yungmei in 1941 when the selling of babies, especially girls, was common in China which was struggling to survive in poverty, famines, starvation and endemic diseases. By that time Yungmei had already been sold once, "for [her mother believed] it is better that she should live than die of starvation" (BS 229). Whatever the reasons why her mother sold her little daughter, the girl on her own part

must have felt that she was unwanted. Han Suyin knew this feeling well, and it was on the basis of such understanding that she fell in love with the baby at her first glance of it: "I was the lucky one," she writes, "for she was the most beautiful child I had ever seen ... This was more that [*sic*] I had ever wanted, this lovely little girl" (BS 229).

Throughout her autobiography, Han Suyin describes her love for Yungmei. The love between mother and daughter before Yungmei went to study in London in 1957 had been important in both of their lives and endured most difficult years, especially between 1945 and 1949, when Han Suyin struggled to support Yungmei and her own medical studies in London entirely. Han has always attempted to provide Yungmei with moral, spiritual and material support whenever she has needed it. For one thing, she never allowed anyone to hint that she was an unwanted child or that she had been adopted, until Joseph Hers told Yungmei out of jealousy in 1961.

Han Suyin frankly admits that there were difficulties in her relationship with Yungmei. But unlike her mother who broke up with her children except Tiza, Han Suyin (according to her own account) has been successful in handling her relationship with Yungmei:

Of course there were difficult years between us; but never was there a complete break; always, somehow, we gravitated back towards each other. And there were good periods too. And now, I think, a great clearness has come in our relations, and they are good. I love her and I know she loves me, although sometimes she still reacts to the nightmares of her young days (HTD 219).

## 2. The Paradoxical Influence of Her Father

As daughters, they tended to love and identify with whichever parent was an achiever, or with the one who was the kindest and most understanding of their temperament and aspirations. Often the father was both.<sup>14</sup>

If Han Suyin's father was not notably kinder or more understanding than her mother, he was certainly never as hostile and resentful of her. It was he who saved her life by slapping her mother when she refused to nurse her for a week after her birth. Although Yentung was too preoccupied with his love of his wife and too busy with his railways to spend much time with his children, he clearly did care for them, especially Rosalie/Han Suyin, in his own peculiar and silent way. Han Suyin describes how Rosalie used to go to her father's office to eat lunch and how they used to go home together after school, sometimes reading Chinese newspapers on their way home. During the days of his own loneliness because of the great divide between himself and Marguerite, Han's father indeed showed his affection, and often talked to her about her mother. Here at least the young Rosalie felt happy, Han Suyin allows:

In the days that followed there was happiness with Papa, because he took Rosalie out walking with him, going to look at things here and there, but chiefly to the flower and plant markets, staying out late in the afternoons. And all the time he talked about Mama (CT 380).

The multiple facets of Han Suyin, however, make such happiness ambiguous. Happy she might have been, but it did not stop her from telling her mother what her

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<sup>14</sup> Lynn Z. Bloom and Orlee Holder, "Anaïs Nin's Diary in Context" in Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism, ed Estelle C. Jelinek (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 209.



father had said about her. Emotionally Rosalie still clearly desired to win her mother's love. Although she betrayed her father by telling her mother what he had complained about, he still loved her, for he continued to take her to flower markets and whenever he had a day off work, he would take her to the parks to see the wisteria, plants and flowers. In Han Suyin's account, it was her father who in his silence taught her to examine and appreciate beauty, the beauty of flowers and plants, and the beauty of the city of Beijing. Thus her relationship with her father was an affectionate one, wrapped in silence, and lacking the violent passion she had towards her mother, positive or negative. They shared a tacit understanding of the nature of beauty in many things, both natural and human, and this inner connection between them opened a channel through which Han Suyin came to understand and approach Chinese culture much more easily, and which came to provide much of the soil in which her own work would grow.

One incident points to the complexity and ambiguity of Rosalie's relations with her father:

Papa one day caught a butterfly for Rosalie, a beautiful yellow-and-black butterfly, and stuck it with a pin through its middle on one of Mama's spools of thread. For hours it beat its wings slowly up and down. Rosalie was supposed to be pleased, and went to look at it several times, dying; she wanted to take out the pin and let the butterfly go but she thought Papa would scold her. The next day it was dead, which was good, it was no longer hurt. Rosalie buried it and then said she had lost it (CT 342).

Colourful butterflies are a symbol of beauty and love in Chinese culture<sup>15</sup> and it is fairly

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<sup>15</sup> There is a very famous folk story called Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai in Chinese folk literature which every Chinese knows. The tragic love story between Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai ends with the death of the two lovers who become a couple of beautiful

common for parents, especially fathers, to catch butterflies, dragonflies or grasshoppers for their children to make them happy. When Yentung caught and gave a butterfly to Rosalie, wishing to make her happy, the effect was just the opposite to what he had intended. Rosalie had always cared for "Other" lives, lives of animals and insects. The pinned butterfly therefore made her terribly sad; she did not keep it with the needle in its back on the spool but tenderly buried it when it died. Even at a very young age, Rosalie/Han Suyin showed a complex personality from her multi-cultural background that her father no less than her mother failed to understand properly.

Her father's love of her was also shown in his encouragement of learning both in school and at home. Like all Chinese fathers Yentung also had great expectations of his children in his heart, although his financial situation did not allow him to give them a good education. The traditional Chinese culture that makes fathers have high expectations from their children, especially their son(s) (*wang zi cheng long*) also affected Yentung. Yentung praised Rosalie's effort to learn Chinese and encouraged her progress in Chinese calligraphy; but unfortunately Rosalie's interest in it was nipped in the bud by her mother who disapproved of her interest in anything Chinese. When the opportunity to choose either a Chinese school or missionary school came, Yentung failed to insist on putting Rosalie into a Chinese school, since Marguerite opposed the idea. Nevertheless Yentung encouraged Rosalie to be first in her class by giving her a dollar every time she was the first. This was clearly very important in Rosalie's academic

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butterflies, flying into the sky of freedom and true love.

study.

Han Suyin later came to understand that it was not that her father was indifferent to her ambition of having a higher education but rather that he simply "could not guarantee a prolonged education for [her]" (MF 215) because of his precarious financial situation during the Japanese invasion. It was later still that she realized that in fact her father himself attempted to draw Hers' attention to her desire to study: "It now occurs to me that Father had sought out Hers precisely for the purpose of talking to him about my studies; in his uneffusive way ... he did not tell me this; whereas my mother would have said: 'I've dragged myself on my knees to get Hers to listen to me, for your sake'" (MF 215). What he in fact told her was to try to get Hers to listen to her:

'He [Joseph Hers] can help you with a scholarship, if you really want to study,' Father said. 'I have spoken to him about your wanting to study. Try to get him to listen to you' (MF 215).

Though her mother's inherited stubbornness provided one element in Han Suyin's self-fashioning, her account of her father makes it clear that his encouragement of her pursuit of higher education was another; certainly her mother offered none. He did not on the other hand oppose his wife's plan that their son should work and their daughters prepare for marriage. Because he rarely opposed Marguerite, this is scarcely surprising, as Han Suyin acknowledges; he always put his love of his wife before anything else in his family. He then did not oppose his wife's plan for their children's education. Han Suyin also acknowledges, however, that even if he had done so, he would have been unable to afford much of an education for his children.

Han Suyin portrays Rosalie's craving for love with some intensity, and details her failures to win such love from her mother by such means as buying good Christmas presents with her own hard-earned money, being the first in her class, drawing or colouring pictures for her mother's birthdays, and telling her mother what her father said about her. Han Suyin provides a poignant account of a trip to the beach Beidaihe (Peitaiho) for a summer vacation, during which Rosalie daydreamed that she could discover a diamond mine so that she could win her mother's love and solve her father's job problem:

Rosalie worries. While Papa is at the sea for two days, will something happen to his job? ... Unless one has Pull, or Money for gifts and banquets, it is easy to lose a job .... Papa has no money for banquets. Rosalie daydreams that she discovers a diamond mine in the garden of their house, and gives it to Papa and Mama, who become wealthy, and at last Mama loves Rosalie, because Rosalie was so clever; digging and digging for archaeological remains, and discovering a diamond mine! (MF 13).

Here the use of third person narrative seems to mark not merely the distance between Han Suyin and her earlier identity as Rosalie, but the emotional gulf between the longings of the child for approval and the independence of the mature woman who has defined herself in terms of her self-sufficiency.

Unsuccessful in winning her mother's love, she turned to her father and hoped to be loved by him. Han Suyin describes Rosalie and her father's afternoon trips home from the office taking place "in a renewed splurge of affection, surging like the tide, going and coming in forever renewed efforts" (CT 423). In her love for him, Rosalie was

concerned for her father's job, and wished that the sand on the beach of Peitaiho would turn into gold in the setting sunshine so that she could help her father to resolve his difficulties:

Many afternoons Rosalie slices away at that gold pellicle the sea has left on the thirsty sand. Gold is money and Papa needs money for Banquets and Gifts to keep his job (MF 18).

Yet Han Suyin shows that her father was never fully aware of her love; Yentung at that time did not pay much attention to Rosalie. She describes her feelings thus: "And Papa looked up, and Rosalie loved him strongly, with her eyes giving him her love. But he did not look at her, and never knew" (CT 341).

It is impossible to know exactly why Yentung, at least as perceived by Rosalie/Han Suyin, ignored his daughter's love; there are many possible explanations. One of them seems almost certainly related to long Chinese cultural traditions regarding girls. In Helen Buss's words, "his love was necessarily limited by her place as female child."<sup>16</sup> Yentung, that is, shared in the deep-seated Chinese prejudice against girl children. He once jokingly told Marguerite after her visit to the girl babies in the missionary orphanage in Beijing, "Yes, females. Nobody wants girl children. It costs too much and brings in too little" (CT 360).

Like most Chinese fathers, Yentung was not able to escape from the trap of the Chinese feudalist convention which favoured boys to girls. In his traditional Chinese way he believed that the destiny of girls was marriage and there was no future for girls except

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<sup>16</sup> Buss, 122.

to be married to good husbands in wealthy families. Their fate would depend on the fame, glory and good reputation of either their husbands or their sons. In this respect Yentung's prejudice echoes that of Han Suyin's future husband, Tang Paohuang, who was a typical male chauvinist full of feudalist conventions. Moreover Yentung's love of Marguerite dominated all else, and he had very limited interest in Rosalie's nature, abilities, or her need for love. Han Suyin comments of the situation:

Perhaps because I was a girl, a female, my father did abandon me to my mother. He did not fight her to put me in Chinese school, or perhaps he felt that a convent school was the best since I was only a girl. He abandoned me to my destiny as a female, which he thought of as marriage, and this was the great wrong that he did to us, his daughters. It took me twenty years to redeem a wasted childhood. I clung to him, loving him. He brushed me off, because my mother always came first with him. Always (MF 39).

It is in this context that Han Suyin names one specific incident as the catalyst that put an end to Rosalie's love for her father, not to be recovered until 1956 when both father and daughter rediscovered each other in Beijing. Rosalie's father was a plant and flower lover and often bought and grew flowers and plants in the gardens of his different houses. In 1929 in the garden of his house he planted a grape vine which bore some grapes and he watched the grapes every evening after work. The imaginative and creative Rosalie thought that it would be a great surprise to make her father a bottle of wine with the unripe grapes, so she and her sister Tiza picked the grapes, put them into a big wooden bucket, trampled on them with their bare feet, and finally squeezed the liquid into a winebottle according to the description of a picture book. When her father came

back and saw what had happened, he, who was always gentle, mild and silent and seldom lost his temper, became furious and broke the bottle on the garden wall. Of the incident Han Suyin writes: "I lost him as a presence potent to cleave to, as a yearning to love." "Papa ceased that night to be a need for me ... He no longer had the power to make me happy or sorrowful. Only in 1956, in the New Order, did I find him again, and knew my loving him was right, and knew my love restored" (MF 39, 40).

It is perhaps odd that one such incident could cause so deep a separation, but even as Rosalie, Han Suyin has always displayed a sometimes alarming ability to write people, and particularly her family, out of her life, or at least the autobiographical recreation of her life. Whatever the case, Han Suyin's account of this and subsequent events makes it clear that her father's inability to return Rosalie's love on her own terms wounded her deeply. Yet as with her mother her father's prejudice, neglect, and mindlessness drove her on to define herself as she chose, despite the opposition. Thus, in Han Suyin's account, the strong-willed Rosalie was not destroyed by her parents but rather used their denial of love to break her way through the limitations placed upon her. Exploiting the very qualities of her parents that drove her from them, her mother's toughness, strong will and tenacity and her father's flexibility and ability to survive, Han Suyin records Rosalie's transformation into the mature writer of the autobiography.

Han Suyin's account of her parents suggests another area of interest, namely the question of why Rosalie/Han Suyin wanted to be Chinese while other Eurasians tried hard to be European. A European had far more privileges, could earn ten or twenty times

more than any Chinese, and lead a much better life in China. The most obvious answer to the question lies in her mother. Because of the hostile relationship with her mother chronicled by Han Suyin, Rosalie rebelled against her, and did whatever her mother disapproved of. Since her mother did not approve of the Chinese, Rosalie wanted to be Chinese for the sake of showing her resentment against her mother. But her father's role was perhaps more important. He was Chinese; despite his inability to respond to her love, he exposed her to, and made her a part of, Chinese culture. It is he who, to a large extent, laid the foundation for her life-long commitment to the country and its people.

Although her father was not an outspoken nationalist with hot blood willing to fight for his country, he was an intellectual patriot like most educated Chinese. As Han says, "China is the religion of every educated Chinese" (CT 295). Her father's talks with his friend, Hua Nankuei, in his office where Rosalie often went to have lunch or wait for her father to go home seem in her account to have nurtured the seeds of patriotism and nationalism in the mind of young Rosalie.

One last point is of relevance here. Han Suyin's perhaps sentimental account of Rosalie's passion for animals' lives; her sympathy with the weak and helpless, her wish to provide an egg a day to each poor and sick child, her generous and brave decision to offer a rickshaw puller a dollar to take an old beggar home, and her grand plan to become a doctor to cure blind and sick children, all point indirectly to her father's influence in shaping the mature writer. It was only much later that Han Suyin was able to realize the larger significance of her father's influence:



But it is from Papa, from being born in China, from all my childhood and growing up there that I have this inescapable passion and obsession with China. In this I have been, all unknown to myself, a Chinese intellectual of my generation and of my time. All my reactions, everything I have done, has always been conditioned by this inner prompting of the heart, of which I am only now fully aware (HTD 651).

## II

### The Uneven Road of Love and Marriage

Han Suyin's account of her childhood as Rosalie portrays her earlier self in many different ways, as rebellious, strong-willed, passionate, masculine, yet imaginative, and to some extent even dreamy. Such apparently incompatible qualities are important aspects of the multiple selves even of the young Rosalie, and provide the foundations for the later development of the fully developed, but equally incompatible qualities of Han Suyin. They also suggest how the strong-headed Rosalie managed to stumble into her shaky adolescence and survive. Indeed without such qualities it is hard to imagine how Han Suyin could have successfully made it through the fragmented and confused labyrinth of her adolescence. It was an ordeal that Elder Brother, Tiza and Marianne did not face nearly as well, as Han Suyin repeatedly points out.

Unlike many teenagers, Han Suyin was driven by ambition to become a doctor. However sentimental Rosalie's wish to help the poor, sick, blind and lame of China, as recorded by Han Suyin, might seem, it was the dream of becoming a doctor that took on its own life. Her tremendous energy was mainly channelled into her studies and work for

money to support her own college education, preparing for her future medical studies. Added to the complexities of young Rosalie were the restlessness and disillusionment of many teen-agers; Han Suyin comments of those years thus: "In short I was a sum of contradictions and the only unbending resolve in me, holding me true, this urge to study, the fire in my heart in spite of the tacking waywardness, the confusion" (MF 151). These years also witnessed her sexual awakening and involvement with men.

In Han Suyin's account, the period from June 1931 to July 1933 perhaps witnessed the most turbulent and dramatic changes in her adolescent years in both the European and Chinese context in which she lived. During this time she was working in the Peking Union Medical College as a secretary.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand her multiple cultural heritage to some extent created a variety of crises in a social life where she was only a beginner and on the other it helped her to survive these crises and pushed her on to new lives. The feeling of being suffocated by the superficiality of the social life in which she was involved<sup>18</sup> together with her sexual awakening and experiences with both

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<sup>17</sup> During this period Han Suyin occasionally worked for the well-known Canadian archaeologist, Dr. Davidson Black, who presided over the most celebrated archaeological discovery in China at the beginning of this century, known as the Beijing (Peking) man. Han Suyin respected and praised Dr. Black. For details about Dr. Black and the discovery see MF (149, 152-3) and Rod Mickleburgh's "Chinese Museum Honors Canadian Archaeologist," The Globe and Mail 6 February 1996, sec. C, p. 9.

<sup>18</sup> The apparently glamorous social life of the White community in Beijing that first attracted Rosalie but later suffocated her is perhaps best illustrated in Han Suyin's account of her experience of the Christmas party at the Beijing Grand Hotel in 1932. The party showed all the glamour, the splendour with all the rich and powerful Europeans, Eurasians, and high profile Chinese, dancing, singing, laughing and drinking champagne but finally its superficiality together with its racism and sexism (again a white woman

Chinese and foreign men, marked dramatic changes and crises in a shaky and sometimes painful process of growing up. Such a process of growing up defined by Han Suyin is clearly one of self-creation and recreation, of discovering the multiple forms of her self.

She sums up the period in the following manner:

During those two years I became fragmented into many contradictory selves; and that was very good, that was survival. I resurrect these, incredulous that there should have been so many, so disparate, pulling in so many different directions, but this lack of cohesiveness undoubtedly saved me.... The young are imitative. The voracious I, clamorous, all-demanding, made of the pinpoint me a total universe. Yet at the same time there were other urges and demands, I was aware of other lives, other potential me's than the life I was leading and the me I was, and I reached for all I could guess at with savage ardour. The world was made into separate watertight compartments impenetrable to each other. But could not I penetrate them all? And which one would be more truly mine? When I seemed most adapted to that half-world, so cheerful and self-satisfied with small conceit, where the Eurasian lived, clinging to the arrogant white world whose dominion and privileges in Asia were never questioned (except by the Chinese, but they did not count in this small half-world of ours), I was already preparing myself to leave it (MF 150).

Her experiences during this time reflected her divided background with particular intensity. While Han Suyin notes that her father's encouragement, based on the Confucian doctrine that "only the learned rank high, all other trades are low," certainly helped Han Suyin to develop her interest in learning, her ambition to become a doctor was certainly more Western than Chinese; Chinese women could not become doctors at that time. Moreover, her relationship and affairs with men was absolutely non-Chinese,

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called her a "dirty half-breed" because her husband invited Rosalie to dance and then to have a drink) suffocated Rosalie who felt "like crying." For a detailed description, see MF 232-243.

for Chinese society in the early twentieth century did not tolerate open and free relationships between men and women. Like her mother, Han Suyin consciously or unconsciously chose to take the dominating or masculine role, while gradually becoming aware that she had the charm of feminine beauty that attracted men's attention. Thus as a woman Han Suyin rejected the conventional role of passive response to men, but chose the male role of active selection.

The point is important, for a significant part of Han Suyin's autobiography concerns her struggle, not unlike that of her mother, to avoid being dominated. The only real exception was the period in which she was emotionally blackmailed by her first husband Tang Paohuang who took advantage of her passionate patriotism. The process of achieving true independence while simultaneously finding love was a long and painful one, marked by many rejected lovers and husbands, and fully successful in only two instances.

The first experience with men recorded by Han Suyin was among Eurasians and some Whites in the social circle of her fellow secretaries, especially her Eurasian colleagues. For a certain period of time she lived a life that was apparently glamorous, attractive and tempting to many Eurasians and Whites; it was of course also expensive: "My efforts to imitate the glamorous world of whites, to which Eurasian secretaries like myself clung, were very costly, and I indulged in bursts of extravagance" (MF 232-3). Obviously she could not afford such a life on her own income which above all was for her study to become a doctor. Like other young Eurasian girls, she was dependent, at

least financially, on men, either wealthy and powerful Chinese or well-to-do European men.

Her first relationship was with Fredi Jung, a Eurasian of a German father and Chinese mother, a typist in the Account Office of Peking (Beijing) Union Medical College, who naively wanted to be morally and spiritually pure, and who thus insisted on an exclusively Platonic relationship. It was entirely unrealistic as such, and was accordingly brief. The passionless and casual affair did not, obviously, threaten Han Suyin with the loss of her freedom and independence.

With her own material and physical needs, Han Suyin easily got herself into her next love affair with a well-to-do German pilot, Otto Kurtens, who was shot down in Mongolia while flying for the Eurasia airline, a German company, and lost one leg. She had her first sexual experience with Otto. Since Otto did not want to marry her because of her Eurasian status, and since she did not seriously consider the possibility either, their affair, while satisfying their immediate physical and emotional needs, had no deep roots, and scarcely surprisingly did not last long. In a sense both made use of each other. Otto attempted to battle his loneliness and desolation caused by the loss of his leg with the naive, energetic young Eurasian Han Suyin; Han for her part obtained some financial and emotional support for her short-lived involvement in the materially glamorous but spiritually hollow life in that small world of Eurasians and Whites in Beijing. The mutual convenience of their physical and emotional needs did not affect each other's spiritual and moral independence.

Yet as Han Suyin insists, no matter how fragmenting and disillusioned the Eurasian life was in her adolescence, she never gave up her long-cherished intent to become a doctor; therefore, after two years hard work as a secretary at Peking Union Medical College, she earned enough money to go to study in Yanjing University. There she became a student again, already gradually leaving the small world of her fellow Eurasian secretaries and European friends. She entered into another love affair "with an overseas Chinese, Herbert Lee, who was attending Chinese classes with [her]" (MF 292) in Yanjing University. From her account, she seemed again to have exploited the relationship as a means of dealing with the suffering and loneliness that she later records.

Han Suyin's account of herself during this period makes painful reading. The relentless creation of her own identity, so triumphantly recorded by the autobiography as a whole, led in Yanjing University to isolation, loneliness and uncertainty, and made her an easy and vulnerable target for some narrow-minded people like Robert Pang (see Chapter Three) to gossip about and slander. The Robert Pang incident seriously injured her psychologically and made her even more isolated from her Chinese fellow students. Moreover, she was deeply shocked by the suicide of Donald Heyward, a Eurasian fellow student who failed in his examinations, who "was just unsure of himself ..." (MF 289), like Han Suyin at that particular time. During that time of psychological crisis, Han Suyin desperately tried to defend herself from being hurt with a different kind of self-creation, the assumption of an arrogant indifference that would turn away anyone who attempted to be friendly to her. As Han Suyin describes it, she did this like an awkward

performer; because she was frightened of her own uncertainty she desperately attempted to cover it with a façade of indifference and coldness,

Donald's suicide precipitated me into further alienation; into withdrawal, the only way I knew to solace my terrified heart; hardening my exterior, going out of all my way to shock, show that I did not care, I did not care (MF 289).

But I did all I could to hurt myself, thinking I was showing how little I cared for the others, and only, in the end, hurting myself (MF 290).

It was in this context Herbert Lee came into Han's life. In a sense Herbert was the one who became a convenient tool that helped to save her sanity and clearly in this affair as well as in the ones mentioned above, it was Han Suyin who either made use of her partners or took advantage of them for her own psychological or material needs. This was also the case of her relationship with Joseph Hers.

From the very start Han Suyin had intended to get a scholarship from him; what she had to offer was not only her physical beauty and youthful charm but her cleverness, intelligence and talent. Here the struggle to remain independent was harder. As she comments, "I knew he was a dominator; I must never be subdued" (MF 230). In the end she defeated Hers intelligently by frustrating his one sexual advance, and finally achieved what she had planned without losing her integrity, although their relationship subsequently caused much disapproving commentary among the small world of Eurasians and Whites.

In her relationship with Joseph Hers Han Suyin was again clearly the conqueror; the frustrated Hers was once driven to shout at her: "You want to dominate, you want

to rule, you will never do anything but break men" (MF 231). It would have been impossible for her to achieve what she wanted without losing her integrity if she had not had a strong will which became her armour and shield to protect her dignity and which nurtured her self-respect and independence. Thus she could maintain a non-sexual relationship with Hers and was never bothered by "the noises society makes" although in white society she "was reputed to be Hers's Eurasian mistress" (MF 222-23).

Han Suyin's next affair was with Louis, a senior student in the Law Faculty of University of Brussels, Belgium. This affair was yet again a contest in which freedom and independence were the key stakes. Throughout her autobiography Han Suyin makes it clear that love could not be separated from respect for her personal freedom and independence. Here the issues were more complex than in her earlier relationships. Louis seemed to have genuinely fallen in love with Han Suyin, but on so doing, he panicked in the face of her own freedom, and the loss of his, at least in his terms, that followed. He did not want, that is, to lose his own freedom, to be fettered and shackled by having to accept Han Suyin as she was, having to accept the burdens or responsibilities in the "besieged fortress" of marriage, to borrow an old French expression.<sup>19</sup> As Han Suyin reflects:

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<sup>19</sup> Scott, "The Truth Is Naked," 17.

Le mariage est comme une forteresse assiégée;  
ceux qui sont dehors veulent y entrer, et  
ceux qui sont dedans veulent en sortir.

The expression is used by the well-known Chinese writer, Qian Zhongshu as the title of his famous satirical novel Fortress Besieged.



The moment Louis felt himself in love, he wanted to break away brutally because he said he did not want to be dominated, to be "burdened." He told me so. He told me I had won.... I stored the information in my mind, and never really forgave him, for I had felt greatly hurt in my pride. 'Never, never,' I swore, 'will I allow myself to be let down. I'll always break first' (MF 353).

The last line is revealing, though Han Suyin provides no clue as to whether she realizes its full implications in terms of the cost of her self-creation.

Here as elsewhere, however, the issue is not simple. Like Joseph Hers, Louis wanted to dominate Han in his own way, for he believed that women were weaker beings, hesitating, indecisive, wayward, while he as a man was the one who was stronger, resolute, decisive and able to control, and dominate. Thus Louis, loving Han Suyin after his own fashion, destroyed their relationship by limiting the terms of such love, trying to draw her into a traditional, that is submissive, pattern of life. Yet here as later her interests were in large, social, cultural and human affairs rather than the small, domestic, daily and trivial issues that made up the conventional married women's life in traditional societies. Such things, she believed both then and now, were not living but "merely a diversion of living," in her own phrase (BS 125). In the end it was Louis who was hurt by his unfulfilled love; Han Suyin neither regretted her own actions nor pitied Louis but rather objectively analyzed both from her own perspective:

Louis treated me with a surface courtesy and deference which does not exist in Asia. But what was the use of opening doors for me or pulling out a chair, if in another way he did not respect my ideas? Why should I be ready to leave my study and do what he wanted to do, when I wanted to read, or talk with someone else? He could accept feminine caprice, but he could not accept intellectual absorption in something other than himself.

When he could regard me as a weaker being, subject to vacillations, not knowing my own mind, wayward, and possibly treacherous, he was all indulgence to me. That I was none of those things, but that I could forget his existence for a debate, a book, was to him a continued and irritable astonishment (MF 353-54).

The fact that Han Suyin records herself leaving Louis easily without much emotional suffering, guilt or compunction indicates not only the strength of her will, and her desire for independence, but also her rejection of Louis's attempt to dominate her in one way or another. She comments of herself: "Passion in me is prosaic; perhaps because I have never looked upon a man as an ideal human being, or an acquisition. Perhaps because I could not really begin to love until very much later" (MF 353). Louis could not cope with such coolness. Like Joseph Hers, Louis could not understand the depth and passion of Han Suyin's commitment to China, a commitment that caused her to abandon her medical studies to return to her war-ravaged country when it was invaded by Japan. He could not understand the degree, that is, to which China was, in her own words, "my very bones, breath of my spirit, life of me ..." (MF 387). Not understanding that, Han comments, "He could not understand what was happening, why so abruptly I changed, rose, walked away" (MF 387).

It was precisely such a deep passion for her country that became the catalyst that helped to start Han Suyin's love affair with Tang Paohuang while both were returning to China to serve their country, Han from Belgium and Pao from England. In one sense it seems odd that Han Suyin could fall in love with Pao after leaving Louis just a few days before. That she easily gave up her lover, Louis, in a surprisingly short time and

that she rashly and recklessly threw herself into Pao's arms she explains by the fact that her decision to accept Pao's hand was made on the basis of her passion for China. She was first and foremost a patriot and it was thus that Pao portrayed himself.

As the tale of their marriage unfolds in all its sordid detail in the autobiography, Han Suyin gives full weight to the implications of such rashness. She draws attention to the degree to which she had overlooked the influence of feudalism, rooted in Chinese culture for thousands of years, and her failure to realize that the prejudice against women in Chinese culture was intense and tenacious. The cost of such oversight makes up the bulk of this particular narrative of her married life with Pao. Because Han was not a virgin and because she had had affairs with foreigners, she was brutally and savagely treated by Pao who suffered from a variety of traditional cultural complexes not entirely of his own making. In a sense Pao was caught in a dilemma, torn between his love for Han Suyin and the forces of feudalist convention that had shackled women for more than two millennia. Pao's brutal treatment of Han Suyin certainly scarred her deeply, as Helen Buss notes: "For several years she takes on the psychology of the abused woman, believing it is indeed her fault that she is being beaten, since she can never be obedient enough to please her husband" (Buss, 118).

Not the least surprising thing about Han Suyin's autobiography is the questions it raises, but does not answer, as to why her younger self, already defined in term of her strength of will, independence, and hatred of the traditions of female submission, put up with Pao's brutal treatment for seven years. There are many clues, however. Chief

among them is the fact that Pao emotionally blackmailed her by taking advantage of the patriotism which bound her to him for so long. Han came back to serve her country; as she admits, at that time "Pao became the personification of China to me" (BS 23). With the noble idea of serving her country, in other words, Han Suyin for a period of time chose to believe what Pao repeatedly told her, accepting his boast of devotion and loyalty to China, his grand promise to heroically and courageously fight for China, and his hypocritical moral teaching that her duty was to help him and to help him was to make a contribution to the country.

It was out of such a desire to help, after all, that she as a child had wanted to be Chinese and wished to give every poor Chinese child an egg a day so that no one would become blind, and to become a doctor who could serve her people. Yet her experience of loneliness and isolation, as a Eurasian, at Yanjing University made it clear to her "that to many Chinese I was Eurasian, and not always acceptable" (BS 22). It is in this context that she acknowledges that when Pao came into her life, she finally felt redeemed: "Pao was Chinese; engaged to him, I was recognized at last (so I imagined) by China, and it was for China, not for a man, that I had left Europe" (BS 27). She goes on to comment on her sense of new identity: "There is no feeling more flattering than the feeling of belonging to a group, of being accepted" (BS 26).

Nevertheless the question remains largely unanswered by the autobiography as to why Han Suyin stayed with Pao even after discovering that Pao's feudalistic attitudes and male chauvinism were, in Blake's words, "mind-forged manacles"—mental fetters and

shackles, or that his patriotic rhetoric was hypocritical. Again her wish to regain her Chinese identity in a sense seems to have trapped her in the cage of so-called Chinese traditional virtues which were forced on her by Pao. For a long time, Han Suyin suggests, she believed that because China was at war everyone should sacrifice personal interests for the sake of the country. With Pao's relentless teaching of traditional virtues for women, such as "Obedience is virtue ..." "filial piety above all" and "resolution to be a virtuous, true Chinese woman" (BS 31,32), she did not resist Pao's request for help but accepted the status quo, although in her blood she must have felt that she was not made in the image that Pao attempted to force upon her. Han Suyin records her unease at Pao's moral lectures, yet she put up with them until Pao physically and brutally abused her. Perhaps she agreed with Pao at the beginning that one could be Chinese only by discarding everything foreign and by learning Chinese culture, tradition, morality and virtues and this might well be one of the reasons why she did not completely break with Pao for such a long time.

Han Suyin was bound to Pao, however, by more than patriotism or the desire to be accepted by the Chinese. It seems hard to believe that there was enough love and passion to bind them together as love and passion had helped to tie her parents together for so long, but Han Suyin suggests that these qualities too had a part, though mixed with cruelty and hatred.

The fundamental ambivalence of our relationship, its extremes of vehemence and hatred, passion and love and cruelty, its obsessional force, hobbled me for a long time. Of such contradictions compounded in

wholeness are all emotional ties, reflection of our own multiple selves, and any exact account, cannot tell where love leaves off and becomes hatred, nor where remorse turns resentment into devotion; nor how much tyranny and abnegation go into erecting a smooth surface of domestic content (BS 21).

Han Suyin of course records her resistance and rebellion against Pao's tyranny and domination. In fact she fought back inch by inch from the very beginning when Pao began to beat her, and did not stop doing so until Pao left England in 1945 after his term as acting military attaché expired. At first she resisted Pao's allegedly Confucian social morality by exposing the hypocrisy of his friends and their wives; then she forced Pao to let her work as a midwife in a missionary hospital by threatening him with her own death, as she had earlier threatened her parents with the horror of prostitution. Finally she wanted to separate from him after a nervous breakdown in London. In the end, as in all her earlier relationships, Han Suyin chose freedom and independence and to some extent won the rivalry for dominance. By the end Pao, in Han's words, "was too defeated, too discouraged" and "beaten" (BS 304, 305) to resist her will. Despite his every effort, she insisted on finishing her medical studies in London, and he returned to China alone. Revealingly, she wondered if her victory was not too complete; before he went back to China, Pao was so crushed that she feared he would be unable to do even this:

'Who knows but that one day I may have to work as a lecturer in a university,' said Pao suddenly .... His face was worn with the worry that he was no longer absolutely right in everything; doubt infected and eroded him (BS 307).

In the end he did die in battle, but for Han Suyin he had been dead in her mind long before that. As the autobiography makes clear, she did not really want to know the truth of his death; therefore, she never actively searched for the factual reality of it. What she tells us are four highly speculative versions of Pao's death. One was that he was killed by his own soldiers, another was that "Pao's soldiers, like so many of the Kuomintang troops, deserted en masse to the Red Armies ... he then killed himself in an unspecified manner." The Guomindang (Kuomintang) official version was of course "that Pao had been killed, heroically resisting to the last" (BS 315). Her friend, Yunling, a Guomindang loyalist in Taiwan, wrote her that Pao was savagely and barbarically killed by the Communists. Whatever the truth was, Pao's letter to Han, in which he complained that he was sent to the battlefield as a punishment by his superiors, certainly indicates that he did not die without bitterness. Pao's final defeat marks another of Han Suyin's spiritual and moral victories over traditional prejudice against not only herself but against women in general, but here the cost was high. As she records, for her the psychological scars were very deep, and took long to heal. For Pao, his epitaph is silence. Like others before and after him, he is simply written out of the narrative.

Han Suyin's most passionate love affair took place in late 1949, long after Pao had disappeared from her life, with Ian Morrison, a married man with children and an Australian journalist working for the London Times in Hongkong. In the entire progress of the autobiography, that part concerned with Ian Morrison stands apart by virtue of its intensely sensuous evocation of what seems to have been the most profoundly moving

emotional experience Han Suyin has had. Her description of their first encounter is revealing:

There were some guests [in her friends, the Andersons' house], and then in came a man with an auburn shock of hair and a Shan bag, not very tall, but who walked like a Siamese cat, with prehensile feet ....

I remember still with a catch of heart the topaz shimmer of that bright afternoon dissolving so reluctantly into night, the trees with great swathing movements of immobility gathering the night as we went to dinner. It is now [1980] thirty years ago; thirty years since I watched Ian come across the room on soft cat feet, and still my foolish heart leaps at the memory (HTD 22).

Ian Morrison in one sense haunts the autobiography; everything before leads up to him, and everything afterwards leads back to him. His death hit Han Suyin harder than any other experience in her life. When she heard the news, she writes, "... I did not feel well at all ... Mrs. Reynolds gave me a brew of something with opium in it; useful, for I had nervous diarrhoea" (HTD 43). Later when she was married to Leonard Comber, she repeatedly dreamed of Ian. She describes her dreams as follows:

He was alive; he had not died, but he was in a faraway inaccessible country, a movable Antarctica (distinctly, there was ice, ice that reached inside my chest and fingered my heart); or perhaps it was an unreachable African kingdom with no roads and only high mountains. I did not know how to reach him, and he, he had forgotten me. 'Oh, why then did you pretend to be dead?' I cried at him as an immense emptiness swallowed me whole and I woke sobbing and sore with the bruising inside my chest. Several times, at intervals of three or four years or so, the dream has recurred. It is always the same and always it hurts because I can never remember that it is a repetition of a dream. I know that whatever I did to exorcise Ian was futile (HTD 56).

It is scarcely surprising that he resurfaces in the final pages of My House Has Two Doors alongside Vincent: "And there came to me, at last, love, Ian Morrison. He will



be with me always. I knew then the great marvel and enchantment of love ..." (HTD, 654). Alone among her lovers and husbands before Vincent, he is not written out of the text.

This love affair is amply documented both in the autobiography, and fictionalized in A Many-Splendoured Thing. For the first time, Han Suyin suggests, she was conquered in love, but not by cultural, moral and spiritual domination, not by brutal physical force, but by softness, gentleness, tenderness, care and intellectual sharing. She represents her earlier self as defenceless against Morrison's love, not because her moral integrity, spiritual strength and intellectual freedom were disarmed by uncontrollable passion, but rather because they were respected and safeguarded by a love she consistently defines as gentle and tender. Perhaps because she had never had such love from her parents in her childhood, nor from any of the other men in her life, she sees Ian Morrison as having provided her with what she most needed and most wanted. It is scarcely surprising that he becomes in her autobiography the grand passion of her life, invoked over and over again.

After several years' inability to function sexually, which she claims arose from serious psychological and physical abuse she had endured from her husband, Tang Paohuang, Han Suyin was able not merely to fall in love again but function normally. The contrast Han Suyin establishes between Pao and Ian could hardly be sharper; it was Ian's kindness, understanding, respect, and tenderness that made it possible for the wounds left by Pao's feudal, chauvinistic, and brutal treatment of her to heal. In her

account, perhaps the greatest gift Ian Morrison possessed, and the one most appealing to her, was his astonishing talent for words, in both talking and writing. Indeed Ian's feelings for Han were poured on her in a torrent of words that washed away her suspicions of male chauvinism and healed the damage done by Pao. Han puts it in terms that explicitly links the past and the recreation of that past:

Words have their nostalgia; their whisper challenged time and death. Words, the wind in motion of living. And that spring and summer words were oasis, marvel and privilege which my ears have not ceased hearing. I then discovered again the birds; the song and the sight of wagtail and laughing thrush, and the chorus of francolin and golden oriole at dawn. We met seldom, but Ian wrote to me, wrote to me, wrote, every day, twice a day, even when we were in the same city .... And now that all this has been resurrected with words, what shall my busy heart do (HTD 22-23)?

What Ian Morrison could offer her was again what Han Suyin had lacked since childhood. Her mother used to wound and reproach her while her father was usually silent and seldom talked to anyone in her family. Ian Morrison was the first person to realize and recognize the multiple selves of Han Suyin and be prepared to accept what Han was rather than what, as her former lovers insisted, she should be. Han Suyin clearly explains this point in her thinly fictionalized autobiographical book A Many-Splendoured Thing<sup>20</sup> in which Mark Elliott is modeled on Ian Morrison:

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<sup>20</sup> Reading Han Suyin's autobiographical description of her love of Ian Morrison in HTD, one can not help but notice the striking similarity between the description of it and that of MST. Many important events in both books are the same, and similarly described. Even the narrator's name is Han Suyin in the latter book. Ann F. Wolfe, in her review of the book, calls it "Han Suyin's autobiographical memoir." Ann F. Wolfe, "Eurasian World," Saturday Review, 14 February 1953, 40. Time comments: "Han Suyin's A Many-Splendored Thing is frankly autobiographical." "Hong Kong Affair," Time, 8

I heard Mark's voice again, clear and tender and light: "The multiple *you*——I never know which *you* it is going to be next time I see you——do go on being unpredictable, and I shall stick to my predictability." ... The gay, mocking true words. Would anyone else ever find me out so quickly, accept me so completely? For this I would open all my worlds to him, the thousand and one ways of looking at the one thing, the many-faceted, the rainbow diffraction that magicked splendor into every fragment of life (MST 119).

It was precisely Ian/Mark's capacity to recognize and accept Han Suyin's multiple selves that enabled him to avoid misunderstandings in their love relationship, as Han Suyin acknowledges: "For Mark always knew me better than I did myself, and there never was any misunderstanding between us" (MST 91). Ian/Mark knew well that Han was not made to be moulded by anyone unless she was ready to accept change herself. Hence he himself wisely told Suyin, "I never want you to be anything but yourself" (MST 96). Of course he clearly understood Han's patriotism, or her China complex, accepted it because he himself believed that it was time that Asians decided their own future and the Western powers no longer had any right to decide the fate of China. Clearly this was another reason why Han Suyin was intellectually attracted to Ian/Mark.

Behind all these factors most important in Han Suyin's account was the basic passion that bound Ian Morrison and Han Suyin together, despite all the obvious obstacles. In certain respects their love, as recorded by Han Suyin, is reminiscent of the romantic passion that drove Marguerite and Yentung to surmount the obstacles in their own path, and which kept them together for so long. Despite her comments about the

"prosaic" nature of her love, quoted earlier, Han Suyin, like her mother, was capable of both strong passion and deep love. Like her mother also, who lived amid contradictions for a long time, struggling desperately to survive between her love of Yentung and her European cultural heritage, Han Suyin suggests that for a while at least she was entrapped in a not dissimilar world of paradoxes and failed to find the thread that would get her out of the labyrinth of choosing between her love for Ian Morrison and her commitment to China.

In the end the death of Ian Morrison during the Korean War put an end to Han Suyin's dilemma. Ignoring the objections of Ian's friends and colleagues, she determined to lift the heavy burden of her desolation through writing it out. Yet it was in many senses a futile attempt and even she questions her own actions: "But did I really try to exorcise him? Through writing a book about him? Was this not too a kind of resurrection, trying to wrest him from the grave in Korea?" (*HTD* 56). The result of her determination is well-known, her novel A Many-Splendoured Thing. In her own distinctive fashion, she chose to express her guilt at wresting Ian away from his wife by offering his widow the royalties of the novel; not surprisingly, her offer was turned down. She does not record her feelings on the subject.

Han Suyin's second marriage, to Leonard Comber, was perhaps the only one of her relations completely conventional, the only one that reflected her mother's views that marriage and family were women's social duty and moral responsibility. She married Leonard not because she loved him but so she could satisfy the longing of her daughter,

Yungmei, for a father figure, for, as she explains her own actions, "she needed stability" (HTD 54). She even had a traditional church wedding ceremony and a huge and expensive reception. In her account the marriage seemed to work out all right at the beginning, for like Ian Morrison, Leonard also possessed a sceptical intelligence which made him different from the Orientalists in Asia, who believed that it was their duty to save Asia from the dark "middle ages" of feudalism and from communism. Also like Ian Morrison, Leonard had the talent of pleasing people, especially children. As Han Suyin tells us, "He was definitely a strong character; everyone ... liked him. Yungmei liked him very much, and he set out to conquer her. He was at his best, delightful, with children" (HTD 51). Because he was normal, intelligent and polite, Han's friends were happy about her affair, and all participated in "an unplotted, well-meaning conspiracy to make me marry Leonard" (HTD 51), in Han's words.

Yet as her writing makes clear, Han Suyin has never been really a traditional woman; more specifically she is not one who can be satisfied with conventional sexual life in a marriage without love. This doomed her marriage with Leonard from the very beginning. Leonard, a man with strong sexual drives, Han Suyin suggests, wanted to lead a conventional married life, including an active sexual relationship with Han Suyin. Yet from Han's perspective, and unlike Ian Morrison, he lacked sexual understanding, for he never really understood the trauma or scars left by her ex-husband Tang Paohuang. Thus his frequent and strong sexual demands finally brought back Han's rejection of sexual life. Leonard could only understand such a rejection by assuming another man was

engaging her attention. The scenes he made as he expressed his jealousy, intended to draw Han back into a normal marriage, in fact had just the opposite effect, for in her account they insulted her personal dignity and intelligence.

Leonard's suspicion that another man might be involved was indeed very similar to Louis' suspicions when she wanted to go to visit some friends in England. It can be argued that the apparently illogical break up of Han's relation with Louis just a few days after she left for China is reflected by the seemingly illogical break up of her marriage with Leonard. But the logical explanation, suggested though not explicitly stated by Han Suyin, lies in the misunderstanding of her multiple dimensions by both Louis and Leonard, and their insistent demands that Han Suyin should be as they wanted rather than as what she really was. Like her mother who could not be dominated or subdued, Han Suyin could not accept such an attempt to dominate her. As with Louis she broke off from Leonard without guilt, even though Leonard had lost his job in the Special Branch of the British police force in Malaysia partly because of her. As soon as she discovered a deeper love in Vincent, she decisively turned to him and left Leonard.

As an intelligent, decent and civilized person, "an honourable man," in Han's words, Leonard finally understood that he could not win Han's heart back; therefore, he wisely let her go without making too much fuss about it. He as a result is not written out of the narrative quite as quickly as most of the others. At first unwilling to give her a

divorce, he finally agreed; even then the process was not without difficulty.<sup>21</sup> Eventually Leonard agreed to meet Vincent; the two men went out and got amicably drunk together, somewhat to Han Suyin's irritation at the tendency of men to bond with each other whatever their other commitments:

Vincent and Leonard had arranged to go to dinner that night. Together. They came back very late to Wantho's flat, both slightly drunk, and hoarsely cheerful. I was, of course, extremely mortified. Oh, that complicity, that solidarity of men! (HTD 231)

The separation was in the end civilized. After leaving Leonard, Han Suyin patched up things for him in legal and financial terms. She describes the process thus: "knowing that he had no funds, and no job, because of me, I arranged for a living allowance" (HTD 111). Later when Leonard was suspected of murdering his girlfriend, Helen, Han Suyin hired her own lawyer to get him out of trouble. In Han's words, "we remained very good friends" (HTD 330-31).

Han Suyin's marriage with Vincent Ruthnaswamy, an Indian colonel and chief engineer in a highway building project in Nepal when they first met in 1956, has been the longest surviving of all her relations with lovers and husbands. In a sense the relationship as she presents it can be compared with that between her mother and her father. Both marriages have lasted long and been relatively stable. Although Han Suyin

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<sup>21</sup> Although Leonard did not reject Han Suyin's plan to create some fake evidence to show his "adultery" in order to get a divorce, at first he was "disinclined to do anything to help." When Han's friend Hans in London found "a virtuous lady in Manchester" for the "adultery" case in court, she "refused to recognize him. The case fell through" (HTD 231).

presents herself as changeable and unpredictable in many ways, she also clearly presents herself as happy and satisfied with Vincent ever since they first met in Katmandu. As in her parents' marriage, in which her mother Marguerite was the dominant partner at home, Han's account of her married life suggests that she too is the dominant partner in her family, for Vincent has never attempted to alter the course of their life significantly or change Han's nature. In fact Vincent, as she presents him, seems there to provide her with a family life, or rather to provide her with a moral and spiritual haven to which she can safely return in her busy life.

Like Ian Morrison, Vincent has naturally and unconditionally accepted what Han Suyin is rather than what she should be in his own designed pattern. Unlike Leonard Comber, who complained to Han Suyin, "You're not a woman, you're a thinking machine" (HTD 101), Vincent has never interfered with Han's preoccupation with China, or her writing, and never complained about her long absences. It is this that makes Han Suyin celebrate their love thus:

Vincent, who has let me work out my magnificent obsession and hunt my dream. Who has endured days and weeks and months when I saw him not, heard him not, even though he was with me. Because I thought of China. And yet all the time he was there; comforting me, his arms warm around me, cradling me. Giving all of himself to my fabulous other passion. Not because he was resigned, but because he loved me. All of me. Without trying to change me in any way. Can many women boast of having been loved like that? (HTD 654)

To some extent the autobiography suggests that Vincent also provides her with a kind of parental love that Han never had in her childhood. He is both a paternal and



a maternal figure whom she can trust and turn to whenever she needs him, especially when she is under emotional or psychological strain.<sup>22</sup> It is perhaps this quality that soothes, comforts, and protects that has become one of the corner stones on which their marriage rests. In the summer of 1967 when the Cultural Revolution was at its peak, when she desperately wanted to know what exactly was going on in China, she was refused permission to go back to observe and examine the reality of the country. As a result she experienced a mental crisis which almost broke her; she describes herself as reverting to infancy, becoming a disturbed, restless and desperate baby who needed spiritual consolation and parental care, both of which Vincent was able and willing to provide her:

However, I would often break down and weep. I would wake up in the morning with streaming eyes, and Vincent would take me in his arms, his arms my shelter against all storms, and rock me like a child, and utter cooing sounds. I regressed into a total baby (HTD 479).

Han Suyin keeps on repeating to Vincent, "You are my good earth." "Without you I go into bewilderment" (HTD 276).<sup>23</sup>

Han Suyin's love of Vincent also reflects a conflict which runs throughout the autobiography in which her love of men and her preoccupation with China are forced to accommodate each other, with the latter being the more important. As all her love affairs competed with her preoccupation with China, the conflict never disappeared. Her love

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<sup>22</sup> Helen Buss argues that in Vincent Han Suyin creates a metaphor of the "politics of the maternal pretext" 121.

<sup>23</sup> For the same point see also HTD, 189-90, 234, 236, 259, 275.

for Vincent can survive because Vincent has devoted himself to loving her with both her China preoccupation and her writing. As she observes about the relationship between her love of Vincent and her passion for China:

Never did he reproach me for going away. And yet how was it that I could, with my new love and all its enchantment beckoning, how could I still go away? But then perhaps there is no explanation, except that all my life I shall be running in two opposite directions at once; away from and towards love, away and towards China. Forever side tracking myself; and in the end garnering both sides of my coin of life (HTD 110).

In her relationship with all her men, lovers or husbands, Han Suyin clearly defines herself as a strong-willed and independent woman, never accepting any form of submission easily, and taking her own fate and destiny into her own hands at every opportunity. Writing herself in her autobiography, she is clearly not dismayed that she has been the victor in her love affairs and marriages, winning her struggles with weapons of her own choice, to gain respect and equality between herself and all who would share her life. According to her, these weapons have been instinct, will, intelligence, and "the loyalty of my emotions" (HTD 653). Given such a background, it is perhaps not surprising that in her self-creation of her relations with all her men, lovers and husbands, Han Suyin chooses not to acknowledge that most of her victories in fighting male chauvinism and domination have been won by appropriating such privileged position herself. As Helen Buss points out:

For women like Han, the warning [of the danger of going to the opposite extreme] could be rewritten to add that in matters of female self-construction, one is always in danger of becoming more male-defined than the males by appropriating without questioning the most conservative

images of maternity from both Asian and European sources.<sup>24</sup>

### III

#### **Han Suyin's Paradoxical Patriotism**

The consensus among critics is that a good autobiography not only focuses on its author but also reveals his connectedness to the rest of society; it is representative of his times, a mirror of his era.<sup>25</sup>

##### **1. The Background of Han's Patriotism**

Han Suyin's commitment to the cause of the Chinese people, articulated everywhere throughout her autobiography, has been established on a foundation built with many different kinds of materials. One has been discussed at some length already, namely her father's family's cultural influence. But the starting point, Han Suyin suggests, of her identification with China in a political sense was the influence of Teacher Wu, who had taught her Chinese before she entered Yanjing University in 1932. Teacher Wu was a patriotic intellectual who was deeply involved in national affairs, especially in the context of the Japanese invasion of China at that time. Han Suyin suggests that it was in part because of Teacher Wu's influence that she became so strongly committed to the Chinese cause, and determined to fight against the Japanese invasion of China, that she returned from Belgium. Han herself comments:

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<sup>24</sup> Buss, 122-23.

<sup>25</sup> Estelle C. Jelinek, "Introduction: Women's Autobiography and the Male Tradition" in her ed. Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 7.

it was towards Teacher Wu's world that I was moving, so slowly, so imperceptibly that even I did not know it.... Teacher Wu was part of the seabed motion, deep, strong, enduring, which in my many-levelled life would, in the end, efface all shallow tumults, and carry me in the strong current back to China, a China not of the past, not dead, but of today, alive (MF 157).

It was because of Teacher Wu's influence that Han Suyin often, and publically, denounced the Japanese invasion of China, and attacked the common arguments that Japan was too powerful to resist and that China was not ready to fight against Japan yet. She also rejected the idea that China should again let the enemy do their worst, and in the end absorb the invaders as it had done so often before.

During the three years from 1935 to 1938 at the University of Brussels, according to her own account, Han Suyin lived a life of European fashion among Belgian students and relatives. She had a Belgian law-student boy friend, upper-class relatives, excellent grades, and an active social life. The quiet and peaceful life seems at first to have been therapeutic, healing the wounds inflicted on her in China and providing her with a stimulating environment. Both her social life as the little Chinese cousin of her Belgian upper-class relatives and her study as a scholarship student were extremely successful.

Amid such distractions, however, she did not forget the Japanese invasion of China and actively participated in giving lectures on China in Belgium. She also made friends with those who sympathized with China against the Japanese invasion. It was perhaps again Teacher Wu's influence that gradually led her to realize that her peaceful life in Belgium, far from the reality that was China, was turning into a kind of

stagnation, which gradually began to suffocate her inner self:

All this placidity, this happiness, if this was happiness, I did not want. I did not want this deadly sleep. Almost I had become a sleepwalker, like those around me; almost closed in on my life; my own pettiness, growing round me that shell of small contents and mean comforts.... A world that narrowed me down (MF 386).

The feelings of such spiritual suffocation, perhaps caused by a subconscious guilt for not directly contributing anything to help her country against the invasion, was the pivotal reason that drove her back to China.

Her second return, fully described in Birdless Summer, this time from England after she finished her medical studies at the end of 1948 when she was 32, was driven by the same patriotism as the first. Her account is more prosaic, less quixotic than that of the first; what is most striking, perhaps, is the fact that although she had suffered tremendously at the hands of such Chinese as Robert Pang and her husband, she still did not drop China. Although she realized that the old Confucian conventions would not disappear easily in China and that even the Big Revolution could not destroy them, she could still say that

China was not Pao, not the cruelty I had witnessed and endured, not the vile regime of Chiang [Kaishek] and his administration. China was much more than this; it was the people I had seen, carrying their loads, sweating, starving, fighting, dying, the millions and the millions—the Revolution was for them ... (BS 347).

Her account of the years in Hongkong, Malaysia and Singapore, from 1949 to 1956, make it clear that Han Suyin lived in the middle between the Western and Eastern worlds among both European and Asian friends, but that she was geographically and

spiritually close to mainland China. Apparently and externally she got on well in her career as a medical doctor and in her life as a sociable person, going to upper-class parties and making friends with all sorts of people. But internally she was seeking for opportunities to break through the curtain between the New Order of China and the physical world in which she was living. She had burnt the bridge behind her to the old regime by giving up her Guomindang diplomatic passport, and was now prepared to go back to the new China.

In May 1956, after many tries she finally obtained a visa to go back to China for a visit for the first time since 1949. She records a new but paradoxical world opening before her. Many things she saw during her visit were what she had longed for since childhood. China was no longer oppressed and exploited by foreign powers; the poor, the peasants and the overwhelming majority of the people were finding both their national and personal dignities; wars, famines, epidemic diseases and unbearable poverty were gone; opium addicts and prostitutes no longer existed; beggars, blind children with running sores, filthy homeless people were not seen in the streets any more. Moreover the achievements, the reconstruction of the whole country in every field, among them, industry, agriculture, forestry, health care, transportation, and the drive for women's equality, all clearly impressed Han Suyin tremendously and convinced her that finally the Chinese had their fate in their own hands and that this alone deserved her dedication, devotion and commitment.

Nevertheless, the relentless scrutiny of every public employee's personal history,

every procedure of thought reform or re-education that the intellectuals had to go through in endless meetings in which they would have "self-criticism" and "mutual help" in order to be accepted by the New Order, seriously disturbed Han:

Yet there was also this stranglehold pressure to reveal one's naked soul, to become transparent like a clean glass window, to repudiate one's crimes or sins; to confess and to be redeemed, accepted, no speck of spirit opaque, no corner of the mind unturned; established in a bright new house of living (HTD 148).

The so-called socialist morality was in fact a refurbishment of old Chinese puritanism, and hurt many people, especially in terms of sexual behaviour. She discusses in detail the degree to which traditional Confucian conventions were merely covered with new political jargon. As the autobiography shows, it made her uneasy, restless and suspicious: "Would I be able to stand being the natural target for criticism, a horrendous example of bourgeois tendencies and decadence?" "Supposing I do stay; I too shall have my love with Ian exposed and made ugly ..." (HTD 130, 148)

Although morally and spiritually this visit obviously recharged her commitment to China, she did not stay but returned to Hong Kong and Malaysia. Her return, however, was not as simple as some Western diplomats and journalists insisted. Typical of these were the two diplomats from the American Consulate in Hongkong, who told Han Suyin: "You must take sides. You've got to choose. The fact that you're here shows you choose freedom" (HTD 181).

Han Suyin clearly indicates that she returned to Hong Kong not because she rejected China and chose Western values. The basic reason that made her return from

China was the puritanical scrutiny of sexual conduct rather than anything else: "I think it [revealing improper sexual behaviour] was actually the pivotal factor which made me decide to wait for more dust to settle" (HTD 148).

Yet here as elsewhere the autobiographical account is ambiguous. The fact that she returned to the Western world itself certainly suggests the paradox in her life and career, the complexity of her state of mind and the dual or rather multiple dimensions of herself. It was her identity as a Chinese patriot that drove her to China; it was her Western cultural heritage that made her realize that she was not able to stay in China, for she was so different from the majority of the Chinese: as a Eurasian with a Western higher education, as a widow of a Guomindang general, as an "immorally" romantic lover with many "illicit" love affairs with foreigners, as an overseas Chinese with a Western life style, as an independent writer who wrote "yellow" or "pornographic" novels. Because of her terrible experiences with her first husband, she had every reason to suspect that the old values and prejudices deeply seated in the mentality of the Chinese for so many centuries could appear and reappear in different forms with different covers and labels. Whatever forms they might take, they would neither tolerate her past nor accept her present. She confesses her fear of being picked up as a vulnerable target for mass criticism, as an negative example for social mass education. It was in such a context that her friend, Hualan, told her in 1978, "Well, my dear, in a way you are right ... If you had stayed, I think you would have died" (HTD 176). The caution recorded in the autobiography seems in retrospect fully justified. Indeed had Han Suyin stayed in



China, she would certainly have had trouble in the Anti-Rightist Movement for her outspoken style. With her complex background she would not likely have survived the Cultural Revolution in which many intellectuals such as writers, artists, professors, teachers, scientists and even Party and government administrators or cadres were both mentally and physically abused. Some of them, such as the famous writer Lao She, were persecuted to death.

It is the same complexity of her background that made her feel that she could not accept mind reform or re-education by others although she wanted to do it by herself. As she observes: "I need time to remould myself, but nobody can do it for me. I have to do it myself" (*HTD* 179). However, if she had stayed in China she would have had no choice but to accept thought reform or remoulding by her colleagues, her fellow writers and the people with whom she would work. Most important of all she certainly would not have been able to write the books that she wanted and needed to write. Other factors that intrude into her account are of course her love of Vincent and her daughter Yungmei.

Yet another factor that influenced Han Suyin while she was thinking about staying in China was her Eurasian identity. As she makes clear, she had no illusions about the implications of such a status. Han Suyin had experienced discrimination against Eurasians not only in the West but also in Hong Kong and in China. She was aware how difficult it was for an overseas Chinese to adapt to Chinese society in order to be fully accepted by it; her own problems, as both an impure woman (in conventional Chinese terms) and

a Eurasian, in adapting or being forced to adapt to Chinese society would be proportionately great. Thus she asked herself in her visit of 1956, "If it was a task to cope with pure Chinese returning from abroad, how much more difficult would a Eurasian prove to be?" (HTD 120). She was certainly right; even in the early sixties, she noted that "some Eurasians ... had been used as targets in criticism meetings simply because they were of 'mixed blood'"; in typical fashion, therefore, she "put up a protest" to the Chinese and finally got support from Premier Zhou Enlai who "would help Eurasians in China, fight up to his death" (HTD 309). In Han Suyin's vision of the world, of course, prejudice against Eurasians, like all other prejudice, will disappear as the world learns to come together to mingle; different peoples will integrate and Eurasians or people with a multi-cultural background will have the advantage in the future. In Han Suyin's confident words, "But we [Eurasians] are the future" (HTD 651).

All the reasons for not remaining in China noted here, however, do not make Han Suyin a member of anti-communist Western ideological camp, nor do they mean that she gave up China, nor that materialism or personal interests were paramount in her decision-making. Rather they helped to underline the conflicts in her psyche. On the one hand she was after 1956 more than ever convinced that she could no longer live without China:

Meanwhile, I would not cut the umbilical cord I would grow, nurtured by China, by China. I would not give up .... I would never be able to get China out of my brain, my cells, my bones. I would write in order not to die, trying to bring to birth things and beings in words. But it would be China all the time (HTD 180).

On the other she realized that she could not stay in China for the reasons mentioned

above. Although it was not as simple as the American diplomats assumed, namely that by coming back to the West she had chosen freedom, it is clear from her account that her Western heritage, and the values inherent in it, balanced her spiritual dedication to China. She also realized that she was not selflessly committed to the Chinese ideological principles after the fashion of some of her best friends such as Gong Peng and Hualan, though she pays full due to such commitments:

So many of my friends, so many, have that courage, obstinate and valiant as heartbeat itself. And although I realized that I could not stay in China then without betraying things that mattered to me—including my love, my love, a many-splendoured thing—yet I would also not betray my friends, who had given everything they were, everything for China (HTD 153).

As mentioned in Chapter Three, Han Suyin claims that Third Uncle has influenced her most in historical, cultural, philosophical, political and economic terms and his influence consolidated her spiritual dedication and commitment to China. Third Uncle's patriotic discussions of both family and national affairs gave Han Suyin a deep and profound understanding of Chinese history, ethics, philosophy and culture, which fuelled Han's patriotism. His distrust of foreign powers, his analysis of the cultural, political and economic harm done to the Chinese people by the Western powers' aggression and exploitation (CT 78-88) helped to shape Han's own views on the subjects in her writing. His views on the Japanese and on the fate of China, his often-expressed opinion that China would only be respected by the West when it became strong (CT 88), also influenced Han Suyin, who expresses many similar ideas in her books.

Han Suyin also records the influence of some most distinguished and well-known Chinese writers, among them Lu Xun, Lao She, Bin Xin and Ba Jin, all of whom were dedicated intellectual patriots. Her meeting with Lao She in Hongkong in November 1950 can testify to such an influence. Among the many patriots she met at the beginning of 1950s, it was Professor Hou Paochang at the Department of Pathology, Medical School, Hongkong University, who "was fiercely nationalist, in love with Chinese culture" (HTD 32), who perhaps influenced her most in terms of Chinese culture and history. She comments:

We both hated colonial subjection, but we were also products of this subjection, and in this duality became supple, flexible, knowing our quandary not havoc; since behind us were many centuries of dilemmas surmounted, upheavals lived through.... We accepted ourselves, tolerating well the perpetual discomfort of being never entirely right, never entirely true, but in our imperfect way entire and flawless in our faith to our only religion, China.... In the end the Chinese Revolution would make us whole; the new world coming so painfully into being would bring us to assimilate our own internal contradictions (HTD 33).

Everywhere she acknowledges as well the many courageous and staunchly devoted people who worked for the Chinese people in China, all of whom strengthened her own commitment. She has been deeply impressed as well by the many brave and extraordinary women who fought and worked for their country without thinking of their own interests. Throughout her work, she constantly holds up their unselfish devotion to their people and their selfless and untiring work for the construction of their country as an inspiration and model for herself:

As I think of her [Madame He Xiangning], of Shih Liang, of Soong

Chingling, of Li Techuan,<sup>26</sup> of so many others and of their immense work they did for their people, I feel grateful that I had the luck to meet and speak with them, for each one of them gave me spirit to live by (HTD 146).

In both personal and political terms Han Suyin identifies three persons who changed her life tremendously and made her forever bound to China: Gong [Kung] Peng, Deng Yingchao and Deng's husband Premier Zhou Enlai. Gong Peng was Han's schoolmate at Yanjing University in the early 1930s and then went to Yanan and became a Communist; she was Zhou Enlai's secretary during the 1940s and then became the director of the Department of Information of Foreign Ministry and Assistant Minister, posts she retained until her death in 1969. Her selfless devotion to the Party, her courage in risking her life for her ideology, and her commitment to China and the Chinese people tremendously influenced Han Suyin, whose friendship with Gong Peng conveniently built a bridge for her to reach the top leaders of the Chinese government, especially Premier Zhou Enlai.

With Gong Peng's help, Han Suyin records, she was able to adjust and readjust herself to understand the new system, and to become in the end deeply involved in Chinese affairs. More importantly, as Han discovered:

Kung Peng would come out boldly for me, to address many people who were irate with me and wanted to throw me out, and would tell them to

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<sup>26</sup> Madame He Xiangning was the widow of Liao Zhongkai who was Dr. Sun Yatsen's devoted Finance Minister in the Republic in the first half of 1920s; Madame Song Qingling was Dr. Sun Yatsen's widow and became first Vice President and later Honourary President of the People's Republic of China; Shi Liang was the Justice Minister of China until 1966; Li Dequan was the Minister of Health until 1966.

let be; tell them the story of my life. Not once, not only that year, but many, many times through the years, she would fight for me against the witch-hunters, the sectarians (HTD 153).

It is hard to imagine how Han Suyin could have accomplished what she has without Gong Peng defending and protecting her right to be Chinese, trusting her, offering her time and opportunity to learn and understand the thousands of twists and zigzags in the labyrinth of the Revolution and guaranteeing her the privilege of going back and forth while others were denied any access at all to China. Han Suyin acknowledges her debt thus:

For so many years I would need her, need her, while I made my way so painfully through the unknown universe of the Chinese Revolution; a world not as it was represented: unilinear, unidimensional, both in the West and in China's propaganda, but infinitely complex and multitudinous; a wholeness made up of a million contradictory aspects; subject to swings and crises, each of which overlapped its contrary; magnificent in its achievements and colossal in its errors and failures; I sought clearness and Kung Peng said, 'You yourself must think it out.' This was the greatest boon of all; her trust in my ultimate lucidity. Meanwhile, she gave me the gift of time and space and silence, and so many encounters; argued for me against the Party cadres who were infuriated by the unorthodox, non-conformist me. Thus was I privileged; and if I feel like a thief, having purloined so much from living, then I must thank the bounty of Kung Peng who gave me to hoard in such great measure knowledge to last me all my days (HTD 127).

Of course it was Premier Zhou Enlai and his wife Deng Yingchao who fundamentally transformed Han Suyin's always-strong commitment to China into an overwhelming passion. From her first meeting with Premier Zhou in 1956, as she repeatedly tells us, she has been overwhelmed by his vision of China and her life and career have been inseparably bound up with that vision. In other words she has tied herself to the fate of China and committed herself to breathe the same breath with the

Chinese people. Her work self-evidently represents above all else an attempt to make a positive contribution to the future of China, showing her belief that the destiny of China is the responsibility of every Chinese, especially the educated Chinese. And so she is not only prepared to share weal and woe with the Chinese people but is also profoundly affected by the ups and downs of China. The result of all this is obviously the inspiration nurtured by her ten formal meetings with Premier Zhou Enlai and more informal meetings with his wife Deng Yingchao. About these meetings Han Suyin comments:

Now, more than ever, I was a Chou Enlai addict. I would try my best to follow his thinking (HTD 413).

In that June of 1956 I met the couple, and we talked for hours. After that my life had been irrevocably changed, although it took me some years of doubt, hesitation, to realize that indeed this had happened. Today, thirty-five years later, the bond which was then forged has proved enduring, unbreakable. It has been an all fulfilling commitment, not to a political creed, but to China, and to her people, who are also my people. Never was it a political adherence, and always Zhou Enlai admitted my freedom to differ, to hold sceptical and contrary views. But it was he and his wife Yingchao who reinforced in me that passion and dedication which has made me what I am (WS 5-6).

## **2. Han Suyin's Preoccupation with China: Consistency or Inconsistency?**

There are many ways of dealing with contradictions... of which only one is try to resolve them. Another way amounts to joining a contradiction——engaging it not so much for the purpose of overcoming it as to tap its energy ... one may recognize a point of connection by its contradictions ... that we have tried to resolve away lest they belie our

argument frequently are our firmest and most fruitful grounds.<sup>27</sup>

With all the biological, emotional, moral and spiritual connections to China discussed above, Han Suyin, not surprisingly, is bound herself to fight for the Chinese people in her writing. The complaints by her critics that she is a propagandist, or a spokesperson for China, ignore her peculiar background, the nature of her development as a patriot, and above all, her writings themselves. They refuse to acknowledge Han Suyin's self-definition of her professional integrity and moral honesty in terms of her commitment to her readers, her dedication to the Chinese and her conviction of the truth of what she writes.

"Truth" is of course a concept easy to invoke, but hard to define. "'What is truth' said jesting Pilate, and would not stay an answer," as Bacon begins his celebrated essay on the topic.<sup>28</sup> Han's own words on the subject are less epigrammatic, but just as much to the point: "There are many truths ... Truth is not the same for all ... For each one, truth is self-fulfilment" (DC 270). Han Suyin has a faith in her own truth, but never denies the existence of other truths. This is perhaps the difference between her and some of her critics, who condemn her by reference to only one "truth," refusing to consider any other truths that do not follow their "standards." For them, in Han's words: "the

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<sup>27</sup> Myra Jehlen, "Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism" in Feminist Theory: A Critique of Ideology, ed. Keohane, Rosaldo, and Gelpi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 200-201.

<sup>28</sup> Francis Bacon, Essays and New Atlantis, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Roslyn, N.Y.: Walter J. Black, 1942, 1969): 3.



world was ... simple, divided between the 'Reds' who represented the Evil, and Good, which was the Western democracies" (HTD 28). Han Suyin may not on the face of it be the most credible critic of her critics, but her statement here perhaps can be tested and proved by the criticism of one of her more vehement critics, John Scott.

Perhaps Scott's most characteristic response to Han Suyin is one of visceral rage. In his discussion of Morning Deluge and My House Has Two Doors, his language topples over the edge of coherence: "Yuck, and again I say, yuck!" "Phew!"<sup>29</sup> With such vehemence he argues:

She does not quote one convincingly reliable original piece of source material to support the monumentally extravagant claims of this lengthy but feeble book [MD].<sup>30</sup>

His standard for any "convincingly reliable original piece of source material" seems to be that it must be hostile to the Chinese government; anything else is automatically unconvincing, unreliable and unoriginal. The fact that Han Suyin has relied on the works of Jerome Chen, Stuart Schram, and Edgar Snow, according to Scott, is itself unconvincing, unreliable and unoriginal, because the writings of those writers are not totally against China. Since Han Suyin has relied on them, her writing consequently becomes "heresy" and "speculative gumph." Scott questions Han Suyin's writing in part because she does not challenge such sources: "The fact is she has relied on the pioneer

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<sup>29</sup> Scott, "Mao Is a Many Splendoured Thing," 780; "The Truth Is Naked," The Spectator, 245 (12 July, 1980): 19.

<sup>30</sup> Scott, "Mao Is a Many Splendoured Thing," 779.

works in English of Snow, Chen and Schram, for all the factually substantiated framework of her expensive rehash."<sup>31</sup> All Han Suyin's research, her intensive and extensive studies through her many trips to China and her many interviews with various Chinese people make no difference, for to Scott, they are merely "'personal interview[s]' with undoubted official CCP stooge[s]."<sup>32</sup> How could he know that they were "undoubted official CCP stooge[s]" without knowing them at all? It seems that except for his cynical sarcasm he has not much to offer in his altogether less-than-three-page criticism of Han Suyin's multi-volumes of writing.

Like Simon Leys and John Fraser, John Scott condemns Han Suyin for her inconsistent attitude towards Jiang Jieshi:

Han Suyin started her career in literary sycophancy back in 1944 with Destination Chungking [the book was, however, first published in 1941]—then as spokeswoman for the ancien régime of Generalissimo Cash My Check and his good lady wife Madame Cash and Carry.<sup>33</sup>

Here Scott is perhaps right in one sense, for she has indeed been inconsistent towards Jiang Jieshi; she herself, however, never denies the change of attitude toward him in her later books. She married a Jiang Jieshi devotee in 1938 and praised Jiang in a brief passage of a few lines in her first novel Destination Chungking in 1941. But Han Suyin explained her reasons for the change with lengthy and full documentation in several of

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Scott, "The Truth Is Naked," 19.

her books, especially in Birdless Summer. John Scott, however, chooses not to mention anything of the full documentation of her change in Birdless Summer. He quotes one passage from Destination Chungking, and another from My House Has Two Doors,<sup>34</sup> and about the latter he comments:

In a passage reeking of insincerity and generally representative of the whole of this disgusting saga the author attempts to explain away her desertion of her old paymasters the KMT as the incipient stirrings of a revolutionary revelation.<sup>35</sup>

Without mentioning Han Suyin's full documentation of her reasons for the change, without discussing any of her many books, Scott cannot plausibly claim to have made the case that Han Suyin is insincere and her writing is "disgusting." Moreover it is simply not true that the Guomindang (KMT) were her "paymasters." Except for the fact of being the wife of a Guomindang army officer for seven years, as it turned out a source of life-time pain, she had no connections with the regime.

In Birdless Summer Han Suyin describes in detail the process whereby she gave up everything for which she had worked very hard in Belgium and returned to China to

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<sup>34</sup> The following is the passage that Scott quotes:

I could not explain that even if I could not live in New China that the Revolution would bring forth, phoenix reborn and the sound of its beauteous wing filling the air for me, at the same time I could not bear to stay, for to stay in England would be to renounce China ... I longed for the absent forest where the new-born phoenix would sing, and I would hear its wings beat the air (HTD 11).

<sup>35</sup> Scott, "The Truth Is Naked," 19.

help to fight against the Japanese invasion. In the painful process of disillusionment she gradually discovered that Jiang Jieshi was not really a nationalist hero, that he was not capable of, or even willing, to lead the nation against the Japanese, and that his regime did not represent the Chinese people but rather fought for its own power. She supported Jiang Jieshi at first, that is, because she believed that he would serve the interests of the Chinese people, who are always her first priority in her writing. Even in her praise of Jiang Jieshi and his wife in 1941, she made the point clearly:

Coolies. The man-power of China .... These are the builders and carriers, the peasant farmers, the workers of China. They built the palaces in Peking and the Burma Road. They made the Great Wall and the shelters of Chungking. They keep traffic moving, carrying loads, pulling carts and rickshaws, towing boats. They keep life going; they dig in the fields, they plant and harvest. Everything in China depends upon them. Coolies. I would make the word 'coolie' a name of honour before the world!

We are not the important ones in China, we who ride in sedan chairs, while you bend to lift, to carry us. The officials, the bureaucrats, the would-be intellectuals——without you we are nothing. We are sterile and without power to create the future. The important one is you, coolie (DC 286-87).

What she was truly praising was Chinese patriotism and the people. In the last few lines of the novel she clearly hints that the hope and future of China are embodied in the coolies, and that a new era will be dawning when the coolies can read and write. In this context, it was not surprising that when Han Suyin discovered the nature of Jiang's regime, she changed her attitude towards it. To accuse her of inconsistency in her account of herself, therefore, is in this context to ignore what she herself has to tell us about her side of the story, and to deny the obvious reasons she provides as to why she

has acted as she has.<sup>36</sup> It is easy and simple to accuse her of inconsistency here, but relatively pointless, since she herself fully documents it; she herself boasts: "I'm a person who changes, who adapts"; "It's because of my avidity for learning. If tomorrow you prove to me something new, I'll be quite willing to overturn my ideas because ideas are made to be overturned."<sup>37</sup> It is of course possible to attack the integrity of the very extended explanation of her change of attitude, which makes up virtually the whole of Birdless Summer, but that is a far harder task which few of her critics have even begun to attempt.

The changes Han mentions here are different from the inconsistency of which her critics have accused her, for Han Suyin has shown that one can only understand China by understanding its own changing history while some of her critics pay attention only to Han's own change of attitudes towards certain historical events and individuals without considering the larger context. In other words, while Han Suyin wants to understand the reality of the changing China, some of her critics only want to judge her writing on the basis of certain set political principles and moral standards based on Western cultural values. The only principles which Han Suyin professes to believe in are those that work for the benefit of the Chinese people:

I shoulder and make do with systems, with ideologies. I am not committed to any. Only one thing concerns me: in the great sweep of history, will

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<sup>36</sup> The reasons why Han Suyin has changed her attitude to the Guomindang regime are extensively explored in Chapter Two (46-60).

<sup>37</sup> Dullea, B6.

this or that system have been another step forward for the Chinese people? They are the only 'side' I am on (HTD 652).

It is of course true that there are many changes and "inconsistencies" in both Han Suyin's writing and life, but her critics have neglected the fundamental consistency of her commitment to the Chinese people and her dedication to her truth. Within this context she indeed has committed many inconsistencies in her writing, for the new China is forever changing in its own experiments, while Han Suyin also changes according to the rhythms of the developments or setbacks or swings of China. She does so in order to understand the changing country herself, to explain the changes to the reader and show them to the rest of the world.

In his half a page of condemnation of Han Suyin, John Scott also dismisses all Han Suyin's books (33 in 1994<sup>38</sup>) in the following manner: "The fact is that any reading of Han Suyin's opera, and I don't care which opus you care to choose, is guaranteed to bring on a severe attack of Eurasiatic cholera."<sup>39</sup> The most respected Chinese writer and critic in the contemporary literary history of China, Lu Xun, has a famous and often-quoted remark which may be relevant here: "Insult and threatening are never serious and true criticisms themselves."

Han Suyin is manifestly a strong-willed, determined, and sometimes abrasive woman, one whose sense of self-importance is not modest. Though she is willing to

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<sup>38</sup> See Jiongqiang Zhu, "Passion for the Chinese," People's Daily, overseas ed. 21 June 1994, p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> Scott, "The Truth Is Naked," p.19.

admit that she is wrong sometimes, she seldom acknowledges that others are right. This clearly irritates some of her critics, who naturally focus on the harder side of her personality rather than on, for example, her capacity for friendship, generosity to and sympathy with the unfortunate and the poor. On one level the issue at stake in the conflict between Han Suyin and such critics as John Scott, Simon Leys, John Fraser and Jacques Guillermez seems more ideological than anything else. One common characteristic of these critics is their strong hostility to the Chinese government. Naturally with such a strong bias against China, their views on any writing about China which is not against the communist system is very likely to be negative. In such a context neutrality is hard to maintain and objectivity is easily marred by the critics' ideological bent. The discussion of Simon Leys' criticism of Han Suyin at the end of Chapter Two has perhaps already shown the point; John Scott's criticism of Han Suyin suffers from the same zeal against the Chinese government.

It is true that Han Suyin has often attempted to fight for the Chinese and never denied doing it. If she does not deny that, how much of a case can her critics make against her for something she herself has documented? At the same time, however, she also claims to present a fair picture of China based on "reasoned facts." Han Suyin may not be the best judge of the fairness of her own "reasoned facts." Yet her critics' own complaint that they were denied entry to the country and access to all those "facts" from 1949 to the 1970s perhaps puts them into an even more compromising position. If they did not have access to those "facts" how could they tell if they were true or not? How

could they prove that they were merely "heresy," "speculative gumph" and "expensive rehash"? At least Han Suyin had many trips to China, many interviews and talks with various Chinese people from top to bottom in almost every field, while her vehement critics were denied all those privileges. In short Han Suyin did have "facts," reasoned or unreasoned, while her critics had none at all. As one who has lived and witnessed many of the historical events recreated in Han Suyin's writing, I myself find that most of her "facts" are indeed reasoned in the historical terms in which she sets them.

Many times in her writing, Han Suyin claims that she tries hard to keep a fair balance between her moral dedication and her professional integrity. Given the complexity of the world in which she lives, it is perhaps not an easy task for Western critics to understand both her person and writing. That perhaps is why Han Suyin complains, "... no one wanted the whole truth. Because the whole truth was a mass of contradictions. Everyone wanted a simple picture, in one world and in the other..." (HTD 180). This may be a large and sweeping claim, but it seems to apply aptly enough to critics such as John Scott and Simon Leys.

Criticism of Han Suyin, of course, comes not only from anti-communist zealots. It is not without irony that she, attacked in the West for her inconsistencies, has also been equally fiercely attacked in China for her criticism of old vices clothed in new revolutionary garb. It is an irony, however, she relishes: "I think it was fun to be castigated as an agent of the CIA in China at the same time I was black listed in America. I enjoyed it immensely and I enjoy also the controversy of people who ascribe



to me motives I never had."<sup>40</sup> Her forthright style of criticizing the "feudal, medieval, rigid Old China ... trying to survive by assuming righteous, moralistic 'anti-bourgeois' attitudes," "the recurrent obscurantism disguised as revolutionary advance," "the medieval mind, its total absence of cause-to-effect logic, its subjectivity, its intolerance, its emotional composition" (HTD 131, 151, 152) irked some of the Chinese cadres, especially the middle-rank ones, who complained about her and wanted to throw her out. As certain Western critics chose to overlook her larger purposes set out in her work, so did they. Simon Leys and John Fraser each has "his" China, and they are not prepared to tolerate the challenge to it posed by Han Suyin. So too the cadres had "their" China, and were equally indisposed to see it challenged. They refused, that is, to accept that Han Suyin's end, namely to help them to improve their work for the sake of the better future of the country, justified her criticism of them. Much of what she attacked she did because she felt that it was harmful to the country rather than useful. One of her examples was the feebleness of Chinese propaganda; as she told Gong Peng:

I talked about the need for new words and expressions for the adjustment of new ideas; I thought both the jargon of the West and that of Marxism as I had heard it stale and inadequate. At this time the West had nothing to offer China except hostility, the language of prurient enmity. 'As for the propaganda from here, it's appallingly childish and has no influence or impact' (HTD 126).

Many cadres firmly believed that they had published the facts but did not take the trouble to find out how the West reacted to such information and to their ways of writing

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<sup>40</sup> Dullea, B6.

about it. Often they were ignorant about Western reactions to views of and about China that they themselves believed unquestionable; therefore, they were often arrogant to those people from outside, such as Han Suyin, who criticized their ignorance and rigidity. Han Suyin was to fight against such things in China for the next twenty years and in such fights she certainly made enemies.

As a woman Han Suyin repeatedly denounces sexual prejudice in China and has indeed fought hard for women's rights in both her public activities and her writing. Although she agrees that the Chinese "government backed the women fully" (HTD 144) after 1949, with her own terrible experience of various kinds of prejudice against women, Han Suyin is well aware that the old conventions of male chauvinism in Chinese culture and society will not disappear overnight. Moreover because of her multi-cultural background, she sees more clearly the nature of traditional conventions concerning women than many Chinese in China do. It is her full sympathy with women that inspired her to pay great attention to the social and political conditions for women in China. She has never hesitated to talk and write about terrible cases of persecution of women and children, nor been afraid of proclaiming that in the countryside girl children are still under-educated and treated as second class human beings. True equality between men and women, she argues, is still far away in many aspects of Chinese social life, especially in remote areas in the country. Ironically enough, Western-style reforms have exacerbated the situation:

Privatization of land also led to the return of male domination in the

family. Women were no longer paid for their work and again became dependent on husbands and fathers. Child marriage, arranged marriages, the sale of women and children, female infanticide, returned in full force (TB 236).

These things do exist in the rural parts of China, especially poor remote areas, for old ways die hard; as Han Suyin points out, "Confucius is still alive in the minds of all of us, in the minds of Party members as well" (WS 202).

In her essay, "A Tale of Peacocks" (in TB 86-89), Han Suyin exuberantly satirizes the old conventions, which should have been cast away completely, while suggesting that society as a whole should be involved in demolishing the outworn ways and that women themselves should bravely fight against inequality in any forms. It is here that her attitude towards women's issues marks her most strongly as one who has not only struggled for her own freedom by breaking the fetters of male domination and authority embedded in, and protected by, traditional conventions but also fought bravely for women's rights in a society largely indifferent to them. It is in such a context that she has also talked and written positively about the Chinese government when she saw that great efforts had been made towards the drive towards women's rights, to the improvement of women's social and political conditions by the Chinese government since 1949: "I was greatly impressed by the drive for women's equality, and the Marriage Law" (HTD 144).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> For Han Suyin's attitude towards the social and political conditions of women in China see also her "Down With the Meal-Ticket Husband!" Atlas 19 (Mar. 1970):49-50; "Family Planning: The Chinese Experiment," Unesco Courier (July 1974): 52; "Family Planning in China," Japan Quarterly 17 (1970): 433; "Population-Growth and Birth-

If her battle in China was to help the Chinese to understand the world outside, especially the West, the purpose of her battle in the West was to help the Western people to understand China and other Asian countries. It is quite understandable that Han Suyin has often been branded as the spokeswoman of China, for in the era of the Cold War very few writers struck out to say anything positive about China. Ignoring the pressure and attacks from many Western critics Han Suyin kept introducing China's successes and achievements in its development and construction in a world where the overwhelmingly dominant voice was passionately hostile to China.

Meanwhile, as her account makes clear, she also attempted to explain China in its most controversial and difficult situations, such as the Anti-Rightist Movement, the dispute between China and the U.S.S.R., the serious food shortage resulting from the Leap Forward and the accompanying natural calamities, the border dispute between India and China, the Cultural Revolution and the student movement at Tiananman Square. Yet she was, in her own words, a bridge builder or a messenger between China and the rest of the world rather than an apologist or spokeswoman for China:

My self-appointed task (one for which I was naturally fitted ...) was to convey views and news, the aroma, savour, atmosphere, reactions of outer world to the great 'within' of China; and to convey the sensation of China to the outer world (HTD 282-83).

I could, perhaps, build a bridge. Between China and the rest of the world (HTD 319).

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Control in China," Conference Board Record 10, no. 10 (October 1973): 51; "The Woman Revolution," Unesco Courier 35 (July 1982):30-34.

Her purpose in writing about China, that is, was to introduce the country to the rest of the world more fully than had been done; yet her self-assigned task was a thankless one, for the majority of the China experts, commentators and critics were used to only one tone in the chorus of anti-communism, and were deeply hostile toward China during the Cold War period. Thus Han Suyin's voice naturally became an irritating noise, her popularity in the media a disturbing sign and her writing an opportunist adventure to those Cold War critics such as Simon Leys and John Scott.

As her succession of books make clear, her Chinese cultural heritage and patriotism have increasingly dominated her mind, her public activities and her writing since 1956, as she has dedicated herself to write, lecture and go on TV and radio, talking about China. The fate of China has become her destiny, for she has felt most anxious and deeply worried when China faces danger, and correspondingly happy and exuberant when China achieves success. She rushed to talk to Jawaharlal Nehru, hoping to help to ease the tension between China and India in the border dispute of 1959; she worried terribly when China was facing its serious food shortage in 1960 and gave much of her money to China after returning from her trip to the country then; she skilfully managed to help important people such as David Marshall, the Chief Minister of Singapore, Malcolm MacDonald, the Commissioner of Great Britain in south Asia, Felix Greene, well-known journalist, writer and once Malcolm MacDonald's secretary, to visit China in order to help people from the West to understand the country better. In 1961 finally she realized that "without any political indoctrination, or thought remoulding, or compulsion, or

persuasion, a transformation had taken place. Now it was in China that I felt at ease, secure, and it was when I crossed the border back into the world outside China that disquiet invaded me" (HTD 320). Then she offered to stay in China voluntarily but was persuaded by her friend Gong Peng not to do so because of her lover and future husband Vincent and her daughter Yungmei.

From 1964 to 1978 most of her books, such as China in the Year 2001, The Morning Deluge, Asia Today, Lhasa, The Open City and Wind in the Tower, were preoccupied with her devotion to and defence of China. Not all of them have stood the test of time. Some of them, for example, are perhaps marred by the limitations of her sources. Although she tried very hard to obtain as much information as possible for her books, much of her material was from Chinese official sources. Even the material from various Chinese people was to some extent limited by the framework of political propaganda which heavily influenced the Chinese no less than the Western political establishment and press influence people in the West. Yet Han Suyin, as she makes clear, acknowledges the limitations of the sources of her information; when she obtains new material and information that suggest a different interpretation, she likewise changes her attitude in her new writing. This is perhaps why some of her critics attack her for her inconsistency. But it is significant that Han Suyin does not deny her changes, but merely claims that she changes in order to understand the twists, the swings of the political events in China, and thus to introduce them to the outside world.

Nevertheless, here as elsewhere Han Suyin is obliged to note that her works were

not always approved of by the Chinese but indeed often criticized by them. Her novels were banned for their "yellow" aspects or explicit love scenes and many of her articles and books were criticized for their comments and descriptions that were discordant with Chinese policies. Often she had to argue with the Chinese strongly with grounds that her writing was not Chinese propaganda and she was not really writing for the Chinese audience but rather for the audience outside China. Thus she told the Chinese that "one cannot write for a Western audience as one does for a Chinese one" (HTD 200). If, as her critics have claimed, she was a propagandist or spokeswoman for the Chinese government many Chinese themselves seemed unaware of it. Torn between East and West, she cries out: "In my heart I hoped the time would come when both China and the West would accept what I wrote" (HTD 201).

With respect to China, the time did not come easily, but when Mao Zedong's era ended and the new era of Deng Xiaoping began in the late 1970s the atmosphere for writers in China became comparatively free. This was perhaps the time that Han Suyin's writing also became acceptable to the Chinese; although paradoxical as ever, she began to be more critical of Chinese policies. Meanwhile as she acknowledges, some of the statements she had made in some of her lectures and books, such as China in the Year 2001, Asia Today, The Morning Deluge and Wind in the Tower, were proved at least partly invalid by later political developments in China. Thus she admits:

I realize now that some of the statements I made [in Asia Today] were excessive, in fact, 'ultra-left', and 'petty-bourgeois radical'" (HTD 482).

... and all conjectures and conclusions [of Wind in the Tower] were proved invalid" (HTD 624).

Moreover she also became aware of many disastrous and harmful things done during the Cultural Revolution, and so she has provided many terrible examples of that period, such as Lao She's death in My House Has Two Doors; yet in the same book she also states, "I was right to defend it [the Cultural Revolution]; I am more convinced than ever that it had to be" (HTD 571). The paradox of her contradictory statements lies in the fact, Han Suyin insists, that "the *principle* of the Cultural Revolution is correct, [yet] history in its faltering is never straightforward" (HTD 571).

In other words Han Suyin claims in My House Has Two Doors that theoretically the Cultural Revolution was necessary in the course of socialism in China to educate the masses, to prevent themselves and the country from falling into the bourgeois, capitalist quagmire, and to guarantee the communist future of the Party and the country. But as she discovered and recorded, in reality the mass movement in many areas of the country turned into a struggle for power and supremacy, with mob violence, fighting, chaos and confusion occurring as the movement went out of control. Of course Han Suyin does not deny that she has made inappropriate and invalid statements about the Cultural Revolution, but at the same time she also repeatedly claims, "I stand by everything I ever said or did"<sup>42</sup>; "I'm not going to change one sentence, one word. Who knows that in 50 years time much of what I said will not be proved right?" "I'm not saying I'm right.

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<sup>42</sup> Han Suyin, "Interview," Journal of Contemporary Asia 12 no. 2 (1982): 246.



I'm not saying I'm wrong either. I just stand behind my work."<sup>43</sup> Here again she is both consistent and inconsistent; what is perhaps most important is not the paradox itself, but the degree to which she makes it part of her self-representation. On the one hand she acknowledges her inconsistency; on the other she still believes that there is no need for her to justify herself for what she has written. She does not deny the inaccuracy, invalidity and incorrectness of some parts of her writing and speaking, yet she does not intend to shirk her responsibility for them by self-apology either. It seems that she wants to let the critics, her readers, and history judge her work rather than to justify it herself. Thus she confidently claims:

My books will one day help them [Chinese young people] greatly to know how to believe without faith; how to keep faith with oneself and serve Man's cause with a clean heart (HTD 653).

"A foolish consistency" Emerson writes, "is the hobgoblin of little minds."<sup>44</sup> It is not a vice of which Han Suyin could be accused. She elaborates her larger, sometimes inconsistent, logic thus:

Because I have refused to see the world in white/black, good/evil terms, all worlds are mine. I have built bridges which many people will cross from one civilization and culture and mode of thinking to another. Bridges of good-will (HTD 653).

Perhaps the most significant thing about the debate waged between Han Suyin and her

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<sup>43</sup> Barbara Basler, "Outsider, Insider or Apologist for Modern China," The New York Times, 23 December 1989, sec. A, p. 4.

<sup>44</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, Selected Essays, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: The Penguin Books, 1982), 183.

critics is that it is not about fact, but integrity. Han Suyin documents her shifts in opinion, her mistakes and her inconsistencies extensively and repeatedly. Further she acknowledges that there are many truths, and that they are seldom absolute. She is, I believe, more successful in staking her claim to her own integrity in these terms than her critics are in denying it.

## V

### **Han Suyin's Careers: Doctor, Writer, and Bridge Constructor**

#### **1. Han Suyin Fighting to Be a Doctor**

The opportunities for a professional career in old China existed in the male world only; very few women were able to cross the boundary and enter such fields such as medicine, law, the military and government administration. When Han Suyin declared at the age of twelve that she wanted to be a medical doctor, her parents' response was discouraging. Her mother seemed to believe that Han's talking of becoming a doctor was day-dreaming nonsense, "making up stories as usual", while her father told her, "It's very difficult to be a doctor if you are a woman." (MF, p.43). That lack of encouragement perhaps explains her enthusiasm for telling everyone of her plans.

It is in the context of medicine that Han Suyin first attempts to define herself, as one wanting to help the poor and the sick, especially children. She tells us that the profession of medicine first came to her mind after she read some books left by a British

doctor in a house at Beidaihe where her family were having their summer vacation in 1928.

The idea of medicine clearly became an preoccupation for the young Rosalie/Han Suyin. The reason she gives was seeing so many poor children, often blind and with running pus, whom the sympathetic and naive Rosalie was determined to cure. Yet another important reason for her choice of careers, which she does not directly tell us but is obvious in her writing, is that the strong-willed and stubborn Rosalie wanted to show everyone, her parents, relatives and friends, that she would do what she professed simply because no one had seriously believed what she said. She indicates that nothing was more hurtful than that she was not taken seriously; therefore, she had to forcefully insist on telling everyone that she wanted to be a doctor. Han's self-presentation of herself as Rosalie shows a twelve-year-old girl with an apparently naive idea, but with an innocent, but deadly, seriousness, and a surprisingly mature determination and commitment to it. The extraordinary quality of the young girl is that she did indeed achieve what she had claimed to want.

The young Rosalie, like the Han Suyin she was to become, proceeded simply by doing what was necessary. Working as a full-time secretary, she also took up extra part-time jobs to tutor individual students in French or English in order to support herself in her pre-medical studies. As mentioned earlier, she also used her "wiles" to get Joseph Hers to offer her a scholarship and threatened her parents that she would become a prostitute if they did not allow her to take the scholarship. Later threatening to kill

herself, she forced her husband, Pao, to let her study and work at the midwifery hospital in Chengdu. In 1945 after getting rid of her husband, she picked up her interrupted medical studies and finally fulfilled her long-cherished childhood wish and became a doctor in 1948.

The difficulties she had to face in her long journey to becoming a doctor reflects deep-seated prejudices against women who attempted to have a professional career, not only in China but also in the West. When she decided to resume her medical studies in London most of their acquaintances disapproved of her actions. A whole group of upper-class, elderly English ladies, who liked to fuss over her husband, lectured her that a woman's duties as a wife were "to put Husband and Children and Home first, before any other desire" (BS 280). That she did not do so they found hard to forgive:

The dowager ladies, the honourable so-and-so, that well-meaning group so fastidiously clutching their conventions—I could now feel almost condescending about them. They still contrived, by gushing over Pao and nodding icily to me, to convey their disapproval (BS 298).

As a woman doctor, Han Suyin continued to fight her battles against the prejudices which had prevented women, especially non-white women, from entering professional careers such as medicine. Although Han made her way into the medical profession, she tells us that she had to face more difficulties than male colleagues did. In her Hong Kong hospital, she had challenges from her male colleagues who often either ignored her opinions or rejected her diagnoses, simply because she was a woman doctor. The unfair treatment of her by her male colleagues elicits this comment from Helen Buss:

Throughout her public life as doctor, journalist, novelist, historian, and memoir writer, men will accuse Han of being too many things. Hospital officials will demote her because her practical experience gained as a midwife in China leads her to challenge the unthinking diagnoses of White, male doctors in Hong Kong's racist, sexist hospital system. Academics will question her credibility as historian because she wrote novels.<sup>45</sup>

One incident in particular points to the kinds of prejudice from which, in her own account at least, she suffered. A drunken British doctor mis-handled the case of a woman in labour, who subsequently died because of the doctor's mistake; it was Han Suyin, however, who was blamed. As Han Suyin describes it, the incident points to racial prejudice against non-white "others," especially non-white women, for the nurses were aware that in a colonial world the white people represent "authority," and they were of course to be protected by all means. Hence no nurse dared to tell the truth of the doctor's mis-handling of the case, and so the blame fell upon Han Suyin, who was called to the dying patient in a desperate situation and lost her position because of it.<sup>46</sup>

Han Suyin's career as a doctor is of interest not least because she displays a less abrasive side of her personality than that which she frequently shows in her autobiography. She had a deep empathy for her patients, a sympathy that made her very popular in private practice. In Malaysia, although a male doctor told her, "You won't have any patients. People don't like women doctors' (HTD 82), she notes, not without

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<sup>45</sup> Buss, 119.

<sup>46</sup> It is perhaps impossible to know if this is exactly what happened; but Han Suyin's medical career was a successful one and so at least it seems plausible.

self-satisfaction: "I became too successful a doctor. My patients increased phenomenally" (HTD 83), "... more than any other doctor in Johore Bahru" (HTD 82). Many of her patients told her: "I've kept my disease for you to look at, Doctor" (HTD 101).<sup>47</sup>

## **2. Han Suyin: The Writer as a Bridge Constructor**

Although Han Suyin accomplished her childhood ambition to become a doctor, she could not, of course, fulfil her promise to cure and give an egg to each blind child in China. Nevertheless she has attempted to satisfy her childhood dreams through her dedication and contribution to China in writing and in public life, activities which in fact forced her to give up her medical practice for writing and speaking about China in 1965. In this respect such a childhood wish played a very important role in her writing about China at the time when the country was not accessible to outsiders. Since then she became a professional writer, presenting herself as a "bridge builder" between China and the rest of the world, bridges resting on piers of mutual understanding and respect through cultural exchange and compromise.

Although Han Suyin defines herself as a defender of China, she claims that such defence is not confrontational, but rather an attempt to suggest that the differences between cultures and peoples can be bridged with compromise, mutual understanding and love rather than with cultural hegemony, power politics and economic domination.

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<sup>47</sup> The fact that her medical practice became so demanding that she had to hire an assistant and a doctor for her clinic, and that she became rich, suggests that she is accurate here.

Through both her parents' and her own experiences she is able to see the necessity of compromise and reconciliation between East and West. It is perhaps on this basis that Han Suyin has committed herself to her grand task of explaining East/West differences, to condemn ignorant attempts to widen the old ones or to create new ones, to explore possible ways to bridge them, or dissolve them.

Through her parents' examples Han Suyin both exposes the harmful prejudices existing in both Eastern and Western cultures and explores possible ways to eliminate them, or to bridge their differences. Her parents provide a central example; despite the many contradictions in culture, the love between her parents still lasted for more than forty years, not only because their love was stronger than the social and racial prejudices which surrounded them but also because both to a certain degree compromised their differences. Marguerite threatened many times that she would leave China and go back to Europe because of the miserable conditions in China, but she did not do so until just before the Communists took over Beijing at the beginning of 1949. Han Suyin makes it clear that one of the obvious reasons why her mother stayed for a long time was her love for her husband and her children.

But in recreating her mother's life, Han Suyin also clearly expresses her disapproval of her mother's rigidity, and her refusal to compromise enough, especially in cultural terms. Han shows that her mother's inflexibility was both the fundamental cause of her own isolation and alienation and the source of much suffering for her husband and children. It is not a coincidence that Han Suyin's treatment of her mother's

role in terms of cultural exchange foreshadows the larger role of the West in China; the general tone of her writing clearly suggests that her disapproval of her mother reflects her more comprehensive rejection of the Western powers' attitude towards the Chinese. Han Suyin demonstrates in her writing that it was the harm caused by her mother's unwillingness to further compromise that first inspired her to advocate mutual understanding and respect through compromise or reconciliation between different cultures and peoples.

Yentung's compromises in Han Suyin's account were even more obvious than Marguerite's. Like Marguerite he rebelled against his ancestors to marry a partner whose religion and people his elders resented and feared. Moreover, when the crises between Marguerite and his family became inevitable, he compromised his family honour for his love of her. Further, facing his nation's crises with the West, he chose to be passive and silent after he had failed to convince her of the wrongs done to the Chinese by her people. He understood well that if he did not compromise but insisted on telling her the truth, he would destroy their marriage. As he himself pointed out, "It would have broken our love, our marriage, had I insisted on being truthful telling her historical facts" (CT 289).

Although Han Suyin does not seem to agree with her father's passivity in his relationship with her mother, she certainly acknowledges that it was necessary for her father to compromise if the marriage was to survive. Yet the irony of Han's analysis of her parents' lives is that she, in her own relations with men in particular and in social



and cultural life in general, like her mother, "appropriates a male position," to borrow Helen Buss' words.<sup>48</sup> If we accept this interpretation, we may speculate that although emotionally she may have sympathized with her father's passive position, rationally and practically she rejected it, taking on herself an active role in both life and career. Her emotional sympathy with her father of course marks her moral support for China while her rejection of her father's passivity obviously coincides with China's rejection of its own passive past which is so graphically recorded in her writing.

Han Suyin's depiction of her own experience of compromise in marriage is another dimension of her complex self-portrait, in which one side of herself demands love and another side offers it to her Indian husband's relatives. This is the general picture that she has painted herself in one of her autobiographical books, A Share of Loving, whose main theme is how to share love, to understand others' need of love when one is in need of it, and to learn to compromise one's own need with that of others. In the book Han Suyin tells us that her husband's son, Peter, suffered brain damage after a complication caused by meningitis. Peter then needed his father's attention, care and love, and for a long time, leaving Han home alone in Switzerland, her husband stayed with his son in India. One part of her cried for attention, care and love; another, the rational part, finally learned to understand another's (in this case Peter's) need of them. In the end she not only compromised but more positively offered both her moral and material support to both her husband and step-son. Through her own story, Han Suyin

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<sup>48</sup> Buss, 123.

seems to suggest that one should not always selfishly demand what one wants from others by ignoring their rights. Instead one ought to learn to understand the needs of others and offer them one's help and love. In a larger sense, this is one of the most important themes in Han Suyin's writing, one which echoes her theory of bridging East/West cultures by mutual understanding and compromise.

### 3. Bridge Constructor in Fictional Autobiography

It is important to note that all Han Suyin's novels are in a sense an extension of her autobiography and all the love stories in her novels in one way or another are reflections of herself in an autobiographical sense.<sup>49</sup> Her views on the possibilities of mutual understanding and love between Asians and Westerners are also shown in her fictional creations of Mark Elliott and Han Suyin in A Many-Splendoured Thing, Unni Menon and Ann Ford in The Mountain Is Young, Sumipoon and George Rolland in The Four Faces, Jean-Frances Duriez and Daout in The Enchantress, and especially Jen Yong and Stephanie Ryder in Till Morning Comes. All her novels illustrate her will to bridge differences among different peoples from different cultures; in all of them her fictionalized self-presentation and her larger design of exploring the possibilities of cultural exchange between the East and the West are central.

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<sup>49</sup> Her novel, A Many-Splendoured Thing, is, like her other novels, autobiographical in nature. It is not difficult for us to find Han Suyin's own shadow in her novels, if we have carefully read her multi-volumes of autobiography. Certainly many of her own cultural, moral and spiritual views are fully shown in characters who can be identified with Han Suyin herself in one aspect or another.

In Till Morning Comes Han Suyin strongly advocates that cultural exchange and co-existence on equal terms can be achieved by compromising and sometimes by sacrificing some of one's own important cultural values. The novel is about the love and married life between Jen Yong, a medical doctor from a well-to-do Chinese family and Stephanie Ryder, a journalist from a rich American industrialist family. It is also about cultural exchange and political engagement and conflicts between China and the United States since W W II, embodied in the life stories of the couple and their two families on both sides of the Pacific. Han Suyin invests Stephanie Ryder with much of her own character. Han Suyin herself and Stephanie are journalists and writers; neither was a virgin when she married; both sympathize with the poor, have a strong commitment to justice, honesty, and truth; and above all both are fascinated by and committed to Chinese culture and both pay a dear price for their commitment by suffering from the prejudice of the very culture they love. Moreover Stephanie's Chinese lover and husband Yong is a medical doctor, a profession with much resonance for Han Suyin herself.

On a deeper level, Yong is an obvious embodiment of an idealized Chinese culture, particularly with respect to traditional Confucian conventions concerning women. Han Suyin's wish to challenge and eliminate these conventions is suggested in Yong's willingness to compromise and sacrifice some of his Chinese cultural values in order to love and marry Stephanie. He fights against both the social pressures from his society and the psychological pressure within his own mind to love and finally marry Stephanie, who is not a virgin. The psychological marks left in his mind by cultural tradition do not

easily disappear: he is tormented when he sees Stephanie with another man or when she mentions her male friends or colleagues.

Han Suyin is aware that the traditional prejudice against women in Chinese culture poisons most men's minds in one way or another. She suggests that unconsciously Yong is still imprisoned by the influence of traditional Chinese culture; yet he is determined to battle against his own culture and sacrifice some of his own values, if not all his prejudice, to love and marry Stephanie. Thus Yong not only heroically makes war against his own psychological self but also asks Stephanie to help him in his battle:

Yes, it is true, I am a jealous man. It's my upbringing ... but please, never give in to me on this.... If you give in to me, you throw me back into my own tradition, which is vilely possessive about women. We deny the woman any right to her own body; we men have all the rights, to theirs and to ours ... It must change. I want this new equality between us ... I love you, Stephanie, and I *want* to love you, as an equal. And loving you I must accept that you make your own choices (TMC 176).

Han Suyin understands that cultural heritage is always deep-rooted or ingrained in one's nature and it is not an easy job to change. As an old Chinese proverb says: "It's easy to change rivers and mountains but hard to change one's character." Yet with her bitter experience with her abusive Chinese husband, Han Suyin is determined to wage her war both in life and in writing against conventional prejudice against women in China. Her determination is embodied both in Yong and Stephanie.

Stephanie's suffering as a result of traditional prejudice against women in China reflects that recorded by Han Suyin in her account of her own struggle to become a doctor. The difficulties both Yong and Stephanie face when they want to stay together

and get married in Yanan clearly suggest that even in the New Order traditional prejudice against women, so-called "improper" relationships between men and women, will surface and resurface though with different forms or covered in fashionable political jargon. It is a topic that Han Suyin explores more fully in My House Has Two Doors.

As an American daughter and a Chinese daughter-in-law, Stephanie carries Han Suyin's most important message of cultural engagement, exchange and above all conflict between China and the United States. Her personal difficulties obviously mirror cultural and political problems between the two countries during the most difficult years of the Cold War period. The miscarriage of her second child because she is refused treatment by the hospital in Shanghai, since she is an American, is a typical example, one that indicates the Chinese hostility towards the American involvement in the Korean War, which threatened the national security of China. Both her physical and mental sufferings in her own country caused by the fact that she is married to a Chinese from "Red China" reflects the terror of McCarthyism. Stephanie's case is not unlike that of Han Suyin herself, once branded as a CIA spy in China while at the same time black-listed as a "Red" in the United States.<sup>50</sup>

Both the title and the ending of the novel suggest Han Suyin's optimism concerning a fresh beginning of and a hopeful future for the relations between China and the United States. This is not a naive wish, for Han Suyin is fully aware of the difficulties, the thorny problems and barriers in the relations between China and the

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<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Dullea, B6.

West. Her optimism is tempered by darker lessons derived from human suffering, tears, blood and lives. Almost all Stephanie's loved ones, her husband Yong, her second child, her only brother Jimmy and her father Heston Ryder, die as a result of cultural prejudice or political conflict between China and the West.<sup>51</sup> Despite such losses her hope is based on the possibility of understanding and respect through cultural exchange that are symbolized in both Yong and Stephanie's lives. Indeed Stephanie is one of Han Suyin's self-images, a "bridge" that Han Suyin has created, which connects China and the West in both cultural and historical terms.

In all her novels Han Suyin suggests that prejudice and racism can be overcome above all by love; in a sense they are all reworkings of the Romeo-and-Juliet motif, with China and the West standing in for Montagues and Capulets.

Han Suyin's fictions are autobiographical in a slightly larger sense than that of merely creating versions of herself. Her parents, and the example of cross-cultural understanding and love they represent, also figure prominently in the novels in fictionalized form. It was, after all, her mother's courage in defying convention that was the only thing about Marguerite that Han Suyin really admired:

I was enchanted, almost ecstatic with pride, to think what spirit, what courage, my mother must have had to break all obstacles, to go forward, so boldly, go forward and take Love by the hand and pay for it all her life. Perhaps she was spitting in the wind's face, but she had bravery (CT 210).

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<sup>51</sup> These episodes are also interesting reworkings of Marguerite's tragic confrontation with the French doctor's wife, and the consequent death of Sea Orchid.

In The Enchantress, Jean-Francis Duriez conquers religious taboos to love and marry a nature-worshipping heathen woman, Daout, while his son Colin also leaps similar barriers to love and marry girls from different races and cultures. Like Han's parents who paid dearly for their love, Jean-Francis and Daout pay a heavy price for theirs. In order to love and marry Daout, Jean-Francis gives up his aristocratic family heritage and is disowned by his family. In the end both he and his wife are burned to death by the fire set by the mob stirred up and led by the religious fanatic Antoine. Yet in death they are triumphant, for they demonstrate that love is worth dying for, because without it life is not worth living.

It seems clear that the love and life stories of Jean-Francis and Daout in many respects reflect those of Han's own parents. Both Jean-Francis and Han's father are skilful engineers, both betrayed their family traditions for their love, both have to leave their families in order to hang on to their love, and both pay a heavy price for their unconventional love. The twin sister and brother Bea and Colin seem to represent two different selves of Han Suyin herself. Bea's power, inherited from her mother, to read minds, enchant men, hear voices from the past, foretell the future, and communicate with her brother through the mind instead of voice, could be seen as the symbolic gifts of imagination of Han Suyin as a talented creative writer. Certainly Bea's strong will and determination not to allow anyone to dominate her, and her enchanting power of attracting men, especially men from different cultures, seem akin to that of Han Suyin herself.

Colin's talents inherited from his father in making androids might also suggest the creative ability of a professional writer. Likewise Colin's status as a cripple carries the weight of imagery which she repeatedly emphasizes and uses to colour her portrayal of such things as the people, culture, history, and civilization of China in general, her Chinese ancestors, her father, and brother more particularly; the motif is most explicit in the title of the volume of her autobiography entitled The Crippled Tree. It is tempting to speculate that, like Colin, who is a crippled child of a mixed marriage in religious terms, Han Suyin is presenting herself as a product of a culturally crippled product of a mixed marriage. The many historical tragedies of the Chinese discussed in Chapter Two might suggest further that Han Suyin inherited a crippled Chinese culture from her Chinese ancestry.

Both Bea's and Colin's interests in foreign cultures and their love affairs with people from cultures other than their own parallel Han's own interest in different cultures, extensively displayed in her writing as well as her own love affairs with men from different cultures. Further, "the autobiographical tidbits, the fervent, prolix descriptions of China's role," as Jacqueline Austin points out, "all become[s] clear. It is a parable ——the author's underlying concern is the fusion of the West's scientific rationalism and the East's natural mysticism into a single utopian vision."<sup>52</sup>

As mentioned earlier, A Many-Splendoured Thing is in this context closer to pure

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<sup>52</sup> Jacqueline Austin, Rev. of The Enchantress, The New York Time Book Review, 3 February 1985, p. 22.



autobiography than fiction. Indeed the whole book is only thinly covered with fictionalized events, for most of the important stories, especially the strong and passionate love story between Mark Elliott and Han Suyin, are very close to the facts of her life. The choice of Han Suyin for the heroine's name suggests the degree of overlap. Suyin here is a young widow whose long cherished wish is to go back to China to serve her people, while Mark is a married journalist who has both professional obligations to his job and moral responsibilities for his family. Obviously they should not have fallen in love, because both are largely conventional people who value their own culture, and thus the prohibition on free love that both cultures embody, but they nevertheless do. Both, however, understand and respect each other's human dignity, personality and feelings and this perhaps starts their romantic love.

As a child of a Chinese man and a Belgian woman, as a woman who has had both Asian and European lovers, and been married first to a Chinese, then to a Scottish, and finally to an Indian husband, Han Suyin herself is clearly aware of the enchanting illusions, charming attractions, and possibilities for passion between Asians and Westerners. Such passion carries risks; it also contains the promise of a better world to come. The former are expressed most forcefully in such a novel as Till Morning Comes; the latter gets its due in, for example, The Mountain Is Young, where Unni Menon is an embodiment of Han Suyin's own Indian husband, Vincent, and Ann Ford is Han Suyin herself only thinly disguised. The final triumph of the love between Unni Menon and Ann Ford indicates Han Suyin's wish to build a happy union between the East and

the West and this wish is likewise embodied in the harmonious union between Sumipoon, again a self-image of Han Suyin,<sup>53</sup> and George Rolland in The Four Faces. Both happy unions are ideal cultural exchanges, a triumph of humanity in terms of cultural sharing, exchange and reciprocity.

Through her own love stories and her fictionalized ones, Han Suyin suggests that when mutual understanding and respect are established between peoples from different cultures and races there will be genuine friendship and true love, no matter what cultural and racial obstacles they encounter, they will try to reconcile and overcome them for their love, which can bridge any cultural, social, religious and racial gaps. Although all her love stories show that there are extreme difficulties and hardships on the way to final happy unification, they also indicate the possibility of mutual understanding and true love between people from different cultures and societies.

This is precisely why Han Suyin advocates cultural exchange on a basis of mutual benefit rather than self-interest. Here Han Suyin's point of view might be taken to reflect the post-colonial "hybridized and syncretic view of the modern world ... [which] provides a framework of 'difference on equal terms.'"<sup>54</sup> Although she realizes that there will be countless unexpected difficulties between the West and China, she believes

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<sup>53</sup> As mentioned earlier, the obvious parallel identities between Sumipoon and Han Suyin herself are that both are Eurasians and writers who claim to love their own culture in particular and world peace and humanity in general; both are married to men from different culture and both have families marked with multi-cultural background.

<sup>54</sup> Bill Ashcroft, et al., The Empire Writes Back, 37.

that sooner or later both the West and China should and will overcome the difficulties, compromise on their differences, and explore each other's cultural values in the larger course of explaining their common humanity.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **Conclusion**

It is hard to summarize the accomplishment and significance of Han Suyin as they are reflected either in her life or her writing. In both she is too varied, too multi-faceted, too inconsistent to permit any easy generalizations. Nor is it any easier to come to an easy conclusion concerning the principal focus of this study, her six volumes of autobiography. In them three different narratives unfold: that of China, that of her family, and that of herself, yet all three record essentially the same story and they are inextricably linked to each other. None of them can be understood without reference to the others. This dissertation, based as it is on a formal division between them, is to that extent misleading.

Han Suyin begins with an account of her distant ancestors, the Hakka, and their own migrations. She moves on to the rise and fall of her father's family as a particular example of the implications of Western involvement with China. Then comes the more immediate encounter of East and West in the decision of her father's family to send their children abroad to study, followed by the even more direct confrontation involved in her father's involvement with, impregnation of, and marriage to Marguerite Denis despite the fierce opposition of both families. Their return to China marks another phase in larger saga of China and the West in the early twentieth century, as Marguerite found herself isolated as the European wife of a Chinese husband, while Yentung was discriminated against as a Chinese engineer working for a European enterprise, the

Belgian Railway Co. in China. Their children, the most literal embodiment of all these examples of East-West relations, were in due course to be caught in a Eurasian limbo all their own.

In her account of both the histories of modern China and her family, Han Suyin defines or rather recreates herself in her writing, for history not only has defined her family but also nurtured and defined her in its own making. As the marriage of Han Suyin's parents was defined by the history of modern China, Han Suyin thus became a historical product marked by both Western and Chinese cultures. The particular historical conditions in China where she was born and spent her childhood, adolescence and some years of adult life not only deeply influenced her but also created her in cultural, social and moral terms. Naturally her writing of both modern China and her family is inescapably branded with such an influence and creation. Thus if her writing is a recreation of the modern history of China, it is also a recreation of her family history and a recreation of herself as well, for in her writing we see not only her version of Chinese history, the history of her parents' families, but also her life, career and most important of all her emotional and moral involvement in her interpretation of that particular history, part of which she witnessed and lived. To some extent the process of her writing or recreation of modern Chinese history as well as her family history reflects an intended self-expression, self-integration, self-definition and self-recreation. This is the basic foundation of her passionate patriotism.

In her treatment of the relations between the East and the West Han Suyin

deliberately breaks the boundaries of cultures, races and ideologies to bridge different civilizations. In this respect she shares the view that "boundaries [of nations or cultures for that matter] are, constitutively, crossed and transgressed" with Geoffrey Bennington and Homi Bhabha<sup>1</sup> whose arguments represent the interests of various social groups, especially the minority "others" within the margins of the modern nation. Although Han Suyin's theme of union among different cultures is, to some extent, similar to Homi Bhabha's internationalism, what she has attempted to do in her autobiographical works and novels is in essence very different: Han Suyin advocates harmonious marriage among different cultures on the bases of mutual understanding and respect, while other post-colonial writers and critics such as Chinua Achebe, Frantz Fanon, R. K. Narayan, Nadine Gordimer, Salman Rushdie, Helen Tiffin and Homi K. Bhabha focus on the insidious influence and the complex impact of colonialism on the post-colonial world, the incomprehension or the difficulties of comprehension between the central world and the marginal worlds created by the legacy of colonialism in modern society, and the deserved rights of the "others" in the marginal worlds to share world civilization. It is important, in this context, that unlike most post-colonial writers, Han Suyin positively and exuberantly explores a different side of human relations, the romantic attraction between Asians and the Westerners that in an entirely negative sense props up the kind of "Orientalism" explored by Said. To this extent, she pioneers a field which is ignored or

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<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, "Postal Politics and the Institution of the Nation" in Nation and Narration, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 121.

avoided by most post-colonial writers. Her domain, in this sense, is obviously beyond the scope of Orientalism which is "the Western approach to the East," but in which the East itself is absent.<sup>2</sup> Like many other post-colonial writers, she attempts, that is, to change the traditional pattern for non-European characters in colonial fiction written in English, who lack human qualities; in such fiction Michael Harris notes: "the indigenous characters are portrayed as isolated individuals with little or no humanizing connection to family or society."<sup>3</sup> Her exploration of the romantic attractions between people from different cultures in her novels may in this context point in a new direction that post-colonial literature might well find itself taking.

In terms of the cultural exchange and search for understanding extensively explored in almost all her books, Han Suyin is perhaps best defined in her own terms: a bridge builder who is forever constructing links between China and the rest of the world. The importance of her contribution to the understanding of the West in China is at least recognized by the Chinese government, for she was the second winner of the newly established and prestigious award for international cultural exchange and understanding by the Ministry of Culture in China in 1995 and the outstanding award of contribution to international relationships and friendship by the Chinese Association for International Relationships and Friendship on May 10, 1996. It seems not beyond the

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<sup>2</sup> Orientalism, 73. Said points out, "in [the Orientalist's] discussions of the Orient, the Orient is all absence, whereas one feels the Orientalist and what he says as presence" (208).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Harris, Outsiders & Insiders (New York: Peter Long, 1992), 182.

realm of possibility that the West will eventually acknowledge her role in cultural exchanges between China and the rest of the world in similarly generous terms.

As her writing, especially the part concerning the historiography of China, identifies itself with her patriotism, it is considered controversial by many historians and sinologists who regard it as propaganda or apology for the Chinese government. I have attempted to take on the task of exploring both Han Suyin's and her critics' views on the history of modern China, focusing on the differences between hers and those of her Western critics. I have stressed the limitations of her critics' charges largely because they are not founded on solid evidence. In part, this is a reflection of the fact that there is very little serious discussion of Han Suyin, with the exception of the works cited by Simon Leys and Helen M. Buss. Even my study of her, I cannot claim, is a full one in a sense that much of her material and some of her books have to be excluded for reasons both of the subject matter,<sup>4</sup> and the time and space necessary to discuss such material.

Since most of the criticism of her work is in the form of brief book reviews and short pieces, there is little space to develop a substantial argument about her writing; instead such criticism tends to offer whatever conventional view of her is fashionable at the moment. The Western critics' charges that Han Suyin is a propagandist and apologist

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<sup>4</sup> As this study mainly focuses on her autobiographical works and her other works that bear on the autobiography, most of her novels have not been discussed here in a systematic manner. Even much of her autobiographical material which is been collected in Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University (108 boxes of material on three long shelves and much more uncatalogued since 1988), has to be excluded due to the necessary limitations of such a study as this.



for the Chinese government are in this context inadequate, for no criticism of her has yet been able to provide sufficient and convincing evidence to discredit her writing; more characteristic are such comments as "her history is pure Party-line mimeograph"<sup>5</sup> and "apologies for China."<sup>6</sup> John Scott, who calls Han Suyin "the nauseous doc and romantic hack," considers her writing as "a tour de force in name-dropping, anecdotes of hobnobbing with the high and mighty, and general self-glorification on a scale that would even make Mr. Ustinov and the late Charlie Chaplin look reticent."<sup>7</sup> Such reflex abuse reflects Western critics' attitudes towards Han Suyin's writing more generally. The grounds on which she is condemned are legion. Thus Western historians dismiss Han Suyin's historical writing because they regard her as a popular novelist rather than an orthodox historian. Sinologists treat her as a propagandist for the Chinese government rather than an independent observer and critic of the country, while the Western literary establishment considers her as, in Scott's words, a "romantic hack."<sup>8</sup> That she has consistently refused to let herself be labelled, that she has chosen instead to occupy the spaces between discourses and disciplines, has gone generally unremarked. If she is inconsistent, it is because she has lived many different and not altogether consistent lives,

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<sup>5</sup> "Chinese Wall," Rev. of A Mortal Flower by Han Suyin, Newsweek, 10 October 1966, 123.

<sup>6</sup> Orville Schell, "A Friend of China," The New York Times Book Review, 20 July 1980, p.10.

<sup>7</sup> Scott, "The Truth Is Naked," 18.

<sup>8</sup> For this point, see also Buss, 119.

and clearly has relished them all. Any study that ignores that fact cannot do justice to Han Suyin.

This study from the very beginning has attempted to offer a serious and systematic examination of Han Suyin's writing and to provide sufficient evidences to test the validity of such claims as those above. Whether it fulfils its aims is of course beyond my own judgement, but I do hope that it will, as a Chinese saying puts it, cast a brick to attract jade, namely offer up a work-a-day but useful artifact that will lead to more valuable discussion of Han Suyin in the future. If it invites further academic and scholarly discussion of Han Suyin, one of the aims of this study is fulfilled.

Because of the lack of full and systematic criticism of her writing, this study has had to depend on a largely original examination of Han Suyin's own works and life. In this respect, it can be only a limited and exploratory overview of her attempts to bridge the gulf between East and West, a stepping-stone towards a fuller study of both her person and her writing. Han Suyin's many books and the tremendous collection of her manuscripts, notebooks, letters, unpublished materials at Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University (the catalogue itself is forty-four pages long, and a huge amount of material since 1988 has not yet been catalogued), demand in themselves far more study before the real significance of this fascinating and prolific writer can be adequately assessed.

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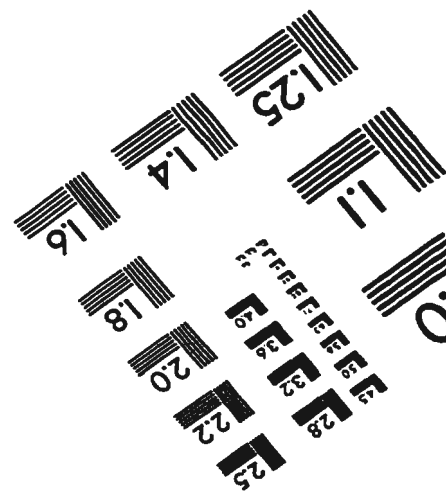
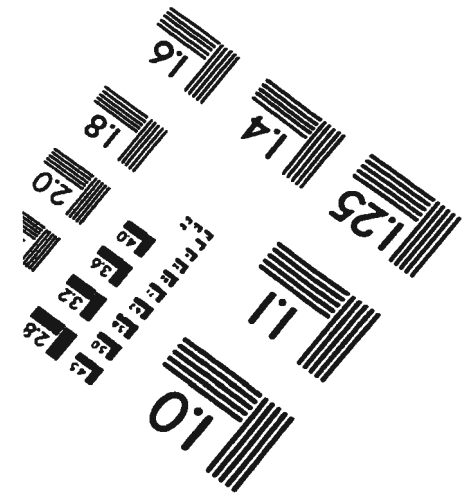
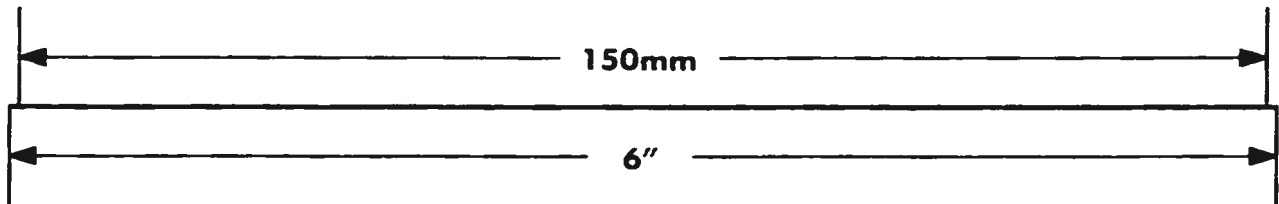
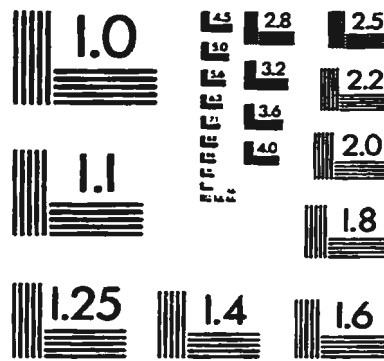
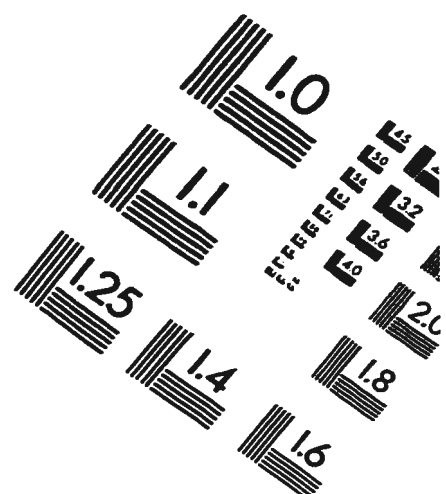
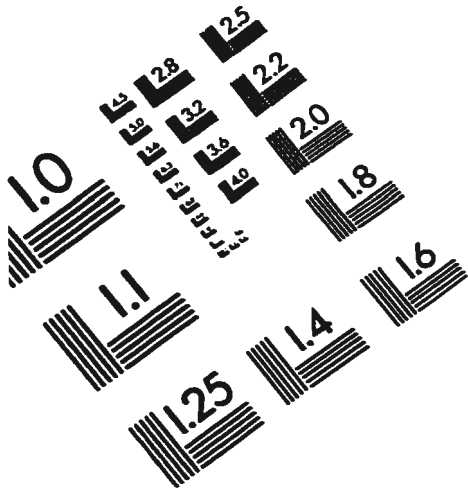
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