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An Ethical Literary Criticism of Han Suyin's Autobiography

Braving Irrationality

FLORENCE KUEK

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Han Suyin (1916/1917–2012) became a household name when *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*, the Hollywood rendition of her novel, won several awards in 1956. The study of Han Suyin went out of fashion for a while, but it has recently been revitalised, especially in Singapore and Malaysia. Kuek pays attention to *The Crippled Tree* autobiographical series, delineating her two-track narrative of her family saga against the backdrop of 20th-century China.

Different from the earlier studies on Han Suyin that employed perspectives from postcolonialism, feminism, and new historicism, this book examines Han Suyin's autobiography through the lens of ethical literary criticism (ELC), paying attention to the ethical lines and knots embedded in her series. Using ELC, an apolitical literary analysis approach, this book uncovers multiple layers of meaning and reveals Han Suyin's life trajectory which draws attention to China's difficult path of modernisation in the past century. The insights gleaned from this book shed light on Han Suyin's life accomplishments in the face of great adversities and challenges.

This is a valuable book that will enlighten literary critics on critical approaches to autobiography and those interested in understanding the development of modern China through the words of a proud Chinese-Eurasian writer living in the era.

Florence Kuek is Senior Lecturer at Universiti Malaya. Her latest research publications include translation studies of *Honglou Meng* in Malaysia, the English translation of Li Zi Shu's *The Age of Goodbyes*, translation strategies in Ho Sok Fong's *Lake Like a Mirror*, and the concept metaphor translation in Chang Kuei-hsing's novel.

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Foreword by Danny Tze-ken Wong

I would like to thank Dr. Florence Kuek for inviting me to write a foreword to her book on Han Suyin's multivolume autobiography. It constitutes a significant contribution to literature, as it expands the concepts of ethical literary criticism through a close analysis of Han Suyin's highly acclaimed series of autobiographical works and memoirs.

Her autobiography traces her life, beginning with the union of her Chinese father and Belgian mother, through her early years in China, and later, her life abroad in various countries. Han Suyin also spent 12 years in Malaya and Singapore, the height of the Malayan Emergency. At that time, she was married to a Special Branch officer, who later became a noted writer on security issues.

For many of us who grew up in the late 1980s and 1990s, Han Suyin's autobiography was an essential part of our reading on China, a country still largely inaccessible then and when books on China were still scarce. Reading these volumes provided a greater comprehension of China through the people with whom she interacted and the events that she experienced first-hand. Her highly descriptive writing style and perceptiveness painted unforgettable images of a nation grappling to find its footing in turbulent times marked by warlordism, the Japanese invasion, and the civil war.

Han Suyin was most productive during her years in Malaya. Besides working as a doctor, she was actively involved in the Nanyang University literary circle. Her novel *And the Rain My Drink* chronicles events of the emergency in the southern state of Johor, but woven into the engrossing accounts are human stories that bring the narrative to life. In *Braving Irrationality*, Dr. Kuek's thought-provoking perspectives of Han Suyin's life in China and her self-appointed role as the mouthpiece for China have laid bare sensitive content that tends to be avoided by academics due to controversial opinions on Han Suyin's role.

Examining Han Suyin's autobiographies through the lens of ethical literary criticism, Dr. Kuek's penetrating analysis navigates themes in Han Suyin's narrative-like rationality, choice, and legitimacy, among other interesting themes, primarily in the two-track, microscopic-macroscopic discussion about Han Suyin's life in the face of critical national changes, through

ethical and relational lens. While this discussion of 20th-century China in the global context from the aspect of a Eurasian female author may appear distant, it recounts real experiences, offering an unfiltered window on the lived-in experiences of a brave, unapologetic woman ahead of her time.

Han Suyin's tones and narrative angles in her autobiography, which introduces characters from all walks of life in a spectrum of emotions, behaviours, values, and orientations, have always been a compelling read. Dr. Kuek's work offers a fresh perspective of Han Suyin and her world in her writings. It reminds us of her remarkable contributions, and it is my hope that it will challenge readers to brave irrationality in their own contexts to make a meaningful difference to lives around them. I hope that scholars and researchers will continue to advance research into Han Suyin's remarkable works to push the frontiers of knowledge of Sinophone and Anglophone literature in Southeast Asia.

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Foreword by Nie Zhenzhao

Nie Zhenzhao, FBA, MAE

Dr. Florence Kuek's *Braving Irrationality: An Ethical Literary Criticism of Dr. Han Suyin's Autobiography* creatively investigates the autobiography genre via an apolitical approach. Most studies into literature have discussed Han Suyin's works using postcolonial or gender perspectives. Reading Dr. Han Suyin's works through the lens of ethical literary criticism offers new insights. Autobiographies, particularly those like Han Suyin's, address ethical concerns and accentuate the ethical value inherent in literature. With the inevitable adoption of AI in all realms, scientific cum humanistic approaches to literary criticism are timely and definitely necessary.

Ethical literary criticism is both a theory and a method. Kuek demonstrates this well in her book, especially in the beginning chapters. Her diagrams effectively illustrate the conceptualisation of the theory. Her careful inclusion of two new key terms – i.e., "legitimacy" and "illegitimacy" – to the theory enriches the corpus of key terms in ethical literary criticism. At the same time, her thematic analysis, which delves into the intricacies of Han Suyin's autobiographical narratives, unravels the ethical issues in her bizarre world, which, unfortunately, were real and took place in modern China's history.

Ethical literary criticism, a theoretical framework that I have had the privilege of developing, sees literature as more than mere art. It positions ethics as the essence of literature, even though the field has often been associated with aesthetics. My study of literary criticism by Aristotle and Plato has led to reflections on the essential difference between moral criticism and ethical literary criticism, and I see their differences clearly if applying on, say, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The crux of Hamlet's ethical dilemma, as reflected in his famous soliloquy "To be, or not to be" is closely tied to the ethical choices guided by his identity, and his choice is often incapacitated by the changed identity. The complicated ethical relationship between Hamlet and Claudius further underscores how ethical identities function as determinants of ethical actions. Hence, ethical identity is one of the key elements to be examined alongside the ethical choice of the protagonist and supporting characters in literature. This will be the foundational train of thought when analysing literature using ethical literary criticism. In contrast, a moralistic critique of

Hamlet may linger along with the depiction of his character flaws and regretful actions. It is very clear; thus, applying ethical literary criticism to literature makes a whole world of difference.

Han Suyin's life, straddling both East and West, offers fertile ground for ethical enquiry. Kuek's book encapsulates the key terms of ethical literary criticism and draws attention to the crucial role of literature in fostering ethical consciousness, thereby fulfilling the didactic function of both literature and literary criticism. I am confident that this book will serve as an essential reference for scholars of ethical literary studies, modern Chinese literature, and cross-cultural narratives. I hereby congratulate Dr. Florence Kuek on this remarkable scholarly achievement. It is my hope that this book will inspire more scholars to view literature through the lens of ethical literary criticism, recognising its crucial role in cultivating empathy, understanding, and humanity.

Acknowledgments

This book is for my beloved father, big uncle, and sister, my biggest pillars of strength. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Wei Chen Education (M) Sdn. Bhd. for funding the open access to this book. To all who have been involved in the publication of this book, I owe you a debt of gratitude. It would not have been possible without your commitment and unfailing support. May you be blessed, always.

1 Introduction

Why Han Suyin? Why Ethical Literary Criticism?

Han Suyin (1916/1917–2012), or Dr. Elizabeth Comber, received regional and global attention from the award-winning Hollywood movie *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*, a big-screen adaptation of her semi-autobiographical novel, *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, depicting the poignant relationship between a Western male correspondent (symbolic of the Western Bloc) and a prominent Eurasian female (representing the Eastern Bloc) during the Cold War. A medical doctor turned writer, Han Suyin's fame surpassed expectations, from her romance novels to her regional medical reports, being a consultant to the World Health Organization on China affairs (Han 1960, 1971). Her writings were very well received, but her six-volume autobiographical series – *The Crippled Tree*, *A Mortal Flower*, *Birdless Summer*, *My House Has Two Doors*, *Phoenix Harvest*, and *Wind In My Sleeve* – deserves attention, as it provides profound insight into her thoughts, life, time, and 20th-century China from the viewpoint of a Eurasian woman raised in China who had received medical training in the West but returned to Asia during her prime before resettling in the West.

With 20th-century China as the backdrop, *The Crippled Tree* and its sequels painstakingly and eloquently weave together Han Suyin's life story and family saga. While not intended to be history with a capital "H," her autobiography pieces together her account of people and events that constitute the mosaic of modern Asian history albeit not without some of Han Suyin's biases. With intimate details in family letters, journals, and records of private and public conversations, Han Suyin's lively narratives draw readers into her story. Her pictorial descriptions and engaging storytelling skills add to the charm of her informative autobiography. Her non-fiction literary world, however, reveals a society when equality between peoples was still questioned and when there was always a blurring of ethical fine lines between what it was and what it ought to be. In the first three books in her autobiographical series, she physically, emotionally, and spiritually railed against the irrationality of her society and spirit of the time, specifically the bigotry against Asians and coloured people, as well as local resentments and rejections of Eurasians and "white" people (Caucasian) when her paternal family were living in China. In

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three subsequent books, she took on a friendlier tone, advocating at times for China on the international platform. It was the time of China's remaking, and Han Suyin, having lived almost a century during this rather progressive yet chaotic time, had much to offer to reassure and enlighten concerned readers.

Some of Han Suyin's readers may profess to have gained insights into the yesteryears of East Asia from her "insider," informant-like autobiographical account. After all, she was born and raised in the land. Tracing back to the time when nations were divided along the East-West and Capitalist-Socialist axes, her work is a breath of fresh air as it reveals a personal account different from those of mainstream Western media as it facilitates the construction of some "factual" materials from both axes. *The Crippled Tree* is informative about the people and events of her era, narrated in a lively and engaging style. It also embodies her rhetoric about the state of affairs of her homeland China, especially her rationalisation of China's route to modernisation in the 20th century. Her China-advocate tone is further accentuated through "Revisiting Beijing" in the American newspaper *Vacation* and the reprints of the articles in major English newspapers in 1957, as pointed out by Yang (2007, 2). But as always, Han Suyin's leftist slant during the Cold War might alienate critics with Western expectations, evident in their eulogies on her demise (Yu 2012).

Not all China observers from the West were in close contact with the Chinese. Some of her contemporaries, such as Edgar Snow, Felix Greene, Peter Fleming, and Joseph Alsop, lived in and reported about China. However, Paul Cohen points out in *China Unbound: Evolving Perspectives on the Chinese Past*, the American-based historiography about China, that it might not be helpful to see the nation as the Chinese experienced it (Cohen 2003, 51). Cohen's appeal to paying attention to the "universal human dimension," especially not seeing "China – its peoples and their cultures – less as prototypically exotic and more as plausibly human" (Fitzgerald 2004, 214) is an apt point of departure to reorientate the way Asians are associated on the global scene. The author of this book does not intend to promote nor refute any China-centric position. Neither does this book intend to remake or reconstruct China's history based on Han Suyin's autobiographical account. Rather, the interest is in the two-track, human-centred narratives in Han Suyin's autobiography, both at the individual and national levels, as told from her experience as a Eurasian-born female raised in China and spending significant years in Asia and Europe. To appreciate her autobiographical series at multiple levels, it would be useful to view her experiences from the lens of literary criticism.

Several scholars have examined Han Suyin's work from the standpoint of postcolonial writing (for example, Kowalska 2000; Wang 1996; Cui and Tickell 2021). Some have identified feminism in her works (like Buss 1992). This book, however, highlights her voice from an apolitical, non-hierarchical analytical structure. It examines her six-volume autobiography through ethical literary criticism, a theory and method first proposed by Chinese scholar Nie Zhenzhao and his colleagues in 2004 but has subsequently developed

into a full-blown living school of criticism through the annual conferences of the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism (IAELC) since 2012 and the publication of thousands of related indexed-journal articles and textbooks in various languages (among others, Nie 2024 in Routledge's *China Perspectives* series). In addition, two related terms that define acceptable behaviours, antisocial acts and sanctionable conduct – "legitimacy" and "illegitimacy" – have also been included in the list of key terms, as they fit well into the ethical literary criticism framework, and it is argued that these terms can enrich the discussion of rationality, irrationality, and the ethical order in the literary world depicted in Han Suyin's autobiographical series.

1.1 20th Century: A Critical Era for China's Modernisation

When Han Suyin published her *Asia Today: Two Outlooks* in 1969, she expressed confidence that China, the East Asian nation of her birth, would rise to become "the first non-white power to grow strong on her own resources and efforts" (Han 1969, 5), in terms of China's socio-economic development. She outlined China's advancement dynamism that stemmed "from within," from the "relentless processes of historical forces," the determination of its "self-proclaimed vanguard," and its vision of "revolutionary change" (Han 1969). Back then, Han Suyin was already asserting that China's unstoppable ascent would result in the emergence of new geopolitical patterns on the global scene.

While Han Suyin remains a controversial figure today due to her self-assumed role as an unofficial spokesperson for China throughout the Cold War, her projection of China's abilities to rise from the ashes of poverty and economic setbacks of the time has been prophetic. Recounting the Taiping and Nien Uprisings (1851–1867), the Boxer Uprising (1899–1900), and the Revolution led by Sun Yat-sen to transform dynastic China into a Republic (1911), she delineated how these movements were *inner-directed* by the power of the people (Han 1969, 7) and that they could not have been so impactful without the will of the people themselves. Piecing itself together after the series of historical impossibilities, China was proving its ability to innovate according to the needs of the times while preserving its *originality* and Chineseness (Han 1969, 47). China's enduring cultural self and socio-political will make it possible for it to remain "China" amidst the clashing of political ideologies and waves of Western subcultures.

Han Suyin's conceptual formulation of "Chinese originality" might be understood, among others, using the proposition of "Chinese exceptionalism" (Ho 2014). The latter, however, refers specifically to China's choice of self-positioning – that is, to maintain traction and her own legitimacy in the relations with the global society (Ho 2014, 164). According to Han Suyin's rationalisation, the socio-political revolution of China in the 20th century was

developed under the Marxism-Leninism framework, with a careful study of Russian revisionism and spearheaded with "complete *originality*" (Han 1969, 48) by the late Chairman Mao Zedong (Mao Tsetung 1893–1976), generally considered one of the most influential Chinese leaders of the 20th century. She argued that instead of adopting Trotsky's "permanent revolution," China's transformation under Mao progressed in stages (Han 1969, 49). Despite many technical failures, setbacks, and dire predictions from international observers, China's economy, industry, and agriculture have thrived against all odds, leading to the country's economic superpower status today. Nonetheless, it is common knowledge that the late Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997), who took over Mao's leadership, implemented his "socialism with Chinese characteristics" guidelines vigorously. Han Suyin argued that gaining the support of the people was Deng's earthshaking political decision that was instrumental in driving China's modernisation. Appreciating the Chinese sense of *originality* would shed light on the interpretation of the nation's socio-political evolvement in the post-dynastic era. This notion of China's wanting to retain its Chinese characteristics in its simplistic yet not without idiosyncrasies differs distinctly from John K. Fairbank's Western take on China which identifies its traditional inertia as a hindrance to its modernisation (Fairbank 1968, 1982, Lin 2012, 213).

Table 1.1 Two-Track Historical Accounts in Han Suyin's Autobiography

Book	*Years Depicted*	*Published*	*Two-Track Issues (a) Individual/(b) National*
The Crippled Tree	1885–1928	1956	(a) "Crippled" family of origin. Difficult childhood. (b) Concessions. Treaties. National humiliation.
A Mortal Flower	1928–1938	1966	(a) Furthered studies. Quit studies. First marriage. (b) Civil war. Warlords. Hope for a unified China.
Birdless Summer	1938–1948	1968	(a) End of first marriage. Continuation of medical studies. Second marriage. (b) Sino-Japanese war. Chinese nationalism.
My House Has Two Doors	1948–1965	1980	(a) Emerged as a romance writer. Relocation to Malaya. End of second marriage. Third marriage. (b) UN's sanction. China closed her door.
Phoenix Harvest	1966–1979	1982	(a) Prime of Han Suyin's lecturing and public speaking career. Frequent visits to China. (b) Post-Mao. "Public spirit."
Wind in My Sleeves	1977–1991	1992	(a) Published autobiography and historical books. (b) UN membership. New horizon. Socialism with Chinese characteristics.

The 20th century was a critical time for China in terms of modernisation but also the realisation of this rising nation's entry into the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in October 1971 and as one of the UN's five permanent members of its Security Council. The rapid development during this critical period is largely reflected in Han Suyin's autobiography. The China that Han Suyin portrays in her literature is an influx of "irrational changes" (Han 1965, 165). From the invasions of the Western powers to the giving of concessions, from the civil wars to the rise of Chinese nationalism, from a non-UN member to a UN charter member, and so on, Han Suyin captured almost every single incident that contributed to the radical change of China in the 20th century. A brief outline of the major developments in China captured in Han Suyin's autobiographical series, layered with her personal and family stories, is as presented in Table 1.1.

1.2 East-West Attitudes and the Eurasians in China During the 20th Century

Han Suyin's autobiographical works recount her family history as far back as 1885, the birth year of her Belgian-Flemish–origin mother, with references to the Opium Wars in the earlier period of the 19th century. *The Crippled Tree* has altogether six references to that particular historical point in which Han Suyin recounted how the signing of treaties on unequal terms between the Western powers and China affected East-West attitudes thereafter. Her narrative reminds her readers that the event affected families and the people on the ground. Her recall of the fading connections between her Hakka relatives in Xichuan (Szechuan in Han Suyin's text) and Meixian (Meihaien) after the wars is a testament to how East-West struggles at the macro level affected everyday life in the land marred by warfare, poverty, and unrest:

> From 1720 to about 1820 the Chou clan in Meihaien received formal visits from representatives of the branch in Szechuan. Births of sons, deaths, marriage contracts, establishments of sanctuaries, extensions of commerce, and successful competitions in examinations, were announced in the ancestor's hall to the soul tablets there. Then came the Opium Wars, and after that the Taiping rising, and the connection ceased.
>
> (Han 1969, 47)

Indeed, the Opium Wars have always been seen as the beginning of China's official interaction with the modern world by researchers like Immanuel Hsü, many Western historians and political scientists, Marxist scholars, and many Western-trained Chinese scholars. They form an influential school that takes this historical watershed as the point of departure (Hsü 2000, 4). Another school that has gained more attention today, however, dates the effective East-West contact earlier. Scholars from this school, mainly Chinese

historians, regard the arrival of European explorers and missionaries during the transitional period from the Ming (1368–1643) to the Qing (1644–1911) dynasties – more specifically, the rise of the Manchus and the establishment of the Qing dynasty – as the beginning of official Western learning in China (Hsü 2000, 4–5). They argue that the East-West relations adopted by the Chinese in the 19th century and the following centuries were largely "an extension and intensification of a process already set in motion two and one-half centuries earlier" (Hsü 2000, 5).

China's early perception of Western relations during the early Qing period was influenced by the ruling Manchus, whose origins were semi-nomadic and initially preoccupied with internal affairs, especially the unrest in the northern nomadic region. The preoccupation somewhat handicapped their efforts to handle the encounters with the Westerners (Hao and Wang 1980, 142). However, towards the end of the 19th century, the Manchus firmly adopted a Sino-centric worldview, perceiving the nation as the Middle Kingdom that embodied thousands of years of human civilisation. This Sino-centrism naturally led to an assumption of Chinese superiority, with the Chinese emperor being the "Son of Heaven" (Hao and Wang 1980, 144), a pseudo-God concept that is different from the Son of God in Christianity. This hierarchical socio-political order and expectations in the kingdom were projected upon the Qing government's foreign relations (Hao and Wang 1980). Rather than military headship, policymaking and political decisions were largely influenced by the advisory board of the Chinese ruling government, which consisted of learned officials or the Confucian literati. These political advisors were responsible for shaping China's foreign policy at the turn of the 20th century. On the ground, Sino-centricism permeated the minds of the elites and literati and impacted the Chinese perception of the "others," i.e., the non-Chinese in the territories.

As history unfolded, China experienced humiliating experiences of contact with the Westerners during the Opium Wars in the 19th century, triggering an urgent need to gather information about the West through the translation of available newspapers as ordered by Commissioner Lin Tse-hsu in Canton in 1839 (Hao and Wang 1980, 146), followed by a surge of interest in world geography (Hao and Wang 1980, 147). Among these early works was Wei Yuan's *Hai-kuo T'u Chih*, an illustrated treatise on the maritime kingdoms (Hao and Wang 1980, 148). After 1860, a self-strengthening movement was launched throughout the ambivalent period of conservatism, the disintegration of Sino-centrism, anti-foreignism, economic nationalism, the rise of national sovereignty, and debates about Western learning.

Given the situation, after 1940, divided Chinese intellectuals oscillated "between exaggerated eulogies and masochistic condemnation of their culture on the one hand, and between unhealthy fetishisation and irrational dismissal of Western theories, paradigms, and approaches to scholarship and knowledge on the other," as highlighted by Gu (2013, 1) in *Sinologism: An*

Alternative to Orientalism and Postcolonialism. Describing the ambivalent situation, Gu argues that Said's orientalism and postcolonialism were incapable of facilitating China-West and cross-cultural studies "without the interference of politics and ideology" (Gu (2013, 3). He further emphasises that an alternative conceptual grounding free of intellectual unconsciousness, cultural unconsciousness, epistemological unconsciousness, ethnic unconsciousness, literary unconsciousness, and a string of other unconsciousnesses (Gu (2013, 8) would be more helpful to understand the Chinese. Learning from Gu, one is reminded to re-examine any mindset that lauds the superiority of one culture over another and the naivety of such mindset.

Beneath the macro level of East-West relations were the interpersonal contacts between the peoples. A close reading of Han Suyin's autobiographical series will reveal many intricacies experienced at the individual level. She had not only given voice to the local Chinese in presenting how the events affected them but also highlighted the double marginalisation experienced by the Eurasians then. A Eurasian herself, Han Suyin's accounts of the "mixed blood," such as those experienced by her siblings, peers, and herself, are rather revealing, conveyed by this and similar terms that denote "Eurasian" and related negative connotations used in her autobiographical series, listed in Table 1.2.

From Table 1.2, one can easily detect all the negative connotations the term, or rather, personal identity, bears. Besides her own experiences, Han Suyin also exudes pain in her depiction of her elder brother Son of Spring, the firstborn in her Chou family, as the subject of racial bigotry. The following excerpts describe the social status of a Eurasian in particular contexts:

> Elder Brother was Eurasian, half-caste. He could not be Chinese. He could not be European. But he could work for a European firm and secure a higher salary than if he had been all-Chinese; he would be able to have people under him, even if he had to accept people above him. And though a Chinese father meant that he was Chinese on his passport, he would be paid better than a Chinese, better than his own father for a similar job. Had Elder Brother insisted on becoming all-Chinese, it would have meant to him becoming despised, going down in that unreal hierarchy of race, down among the anonymous, faceless crowd he saw around him.
>
> (Han 1969, 412)

> Of course, being Eurasian was a calamity in those days, and still is today for certain people. But more than being a Eurasian, I think he (Elder Brother) allowed the fact of a legitimatised near-illegitimacy, . . . which was a great pity, for he was gifted, and could have done so much had he been able, like myself, to shake off the nonsense people.
>
> (Han 1969, 200)

Table 1.2 Words Associated with "Eurasian" and Occurrences in Han Suyin's Autobiography

Han Suyin's Autobiographical Series		*"Eurasian" (Occurrences)*	*Selected Terms or Phrases Associated with "Eurasian" within the Sentence or Paragraph and Its Number of Occurrences*
Book 1	*The Cripple Tree*	15	"half-caste": 2 "mixed blood": 1 "died because he was Eurasian": 1 "a calamity": 1 "legitimatised near-illegitimacy": 1 "belong nowhere": 1
Book 2	*A Mortal Flower*	25	"dirty half-caste": 1 "not Chinese": 1 "mixed": 1 "despise(d) . . . no way out": 1 "cannot marry (a German/an Aryan)": 1 "secretaries": 2 "mistress": 2 "empty": 1 "(higher) pay/salary (than Chinese)": 1
Book 3	*Birdless Summer*	13	"not pure Chinese": 2 "not a nice word": 1 "dirty": 1 "mixed blood": 1 "Eurasian tag": 1 "mistress, interloper, shame-bred": 1 "half-caste": 1 "mixed blood": 1 "natural victim": 1
Book 4	*My House has Two Doors*	12	"(being) pushed down": 1 "Eurasian pigs": 1 "under strain": 1 "Eurasian lawyer . . . president": 1 "utterly devoted to China, though a Eurasian": 1 "Eurasian doctors": 1
Book 5	*Phoenix Harvest*	2	"minority": 1 "terribly proud of being Eurasian": 1
Book 6	*Wind in My Sleeve*	1	"a good thing, a superiority": 1

In the second excerpt, Han Suyin highlights her fighting spirit, comparing it with her brother's passive attitude against the oddities of her time. Her uncompromising attitude towards life and not giving up on herself despite great discouragement and the hostile attitude towards Eurasians eventually marked her among the very few prominent early female medical doctors in Asia. She was hailed for her professional and intellectual services in Malaya

in the 1950s–1960s – the country she settled in, as returning to live in China was practically impossible for a widow of a former Kuomintang official.

1.3 Han Suyin: From Rosalie to "A Plain Voice for the Han People"

Han Suyin was born to Chou Wei[1] and his Flemish wife, Marguerite Denis, in the Xinyang County of Henan Province, China, in the spring of 1917. She adopted the pen name "Han Suyin," a pseudonym that stands for "a plain voice for the Han people." She was born Rosalie Matilda Kuanghu Chou and later registered as Dr. Elizabeth C.K. Comber in her passport, after her second husband's last name.

Her father, Chou Yengtung, was of Hakka descent and was among the first Chinese students to further their studies abroad. In 1903, while studying railroad and mining engineering in Belgium, he met Marguerite, the cousin of the then-Belgian Minister of Defence, Henry Marguerite. As Yengtung was not a believer in Catholicism, Marguerite's devout Catholic family members protested against their marriage. The couple eloped to China in 1913.

Eurasian by birth, Han Suyin received bicultural education in both the East and the West. When she was young, she attended Chinese classes in the morning and learned English at a convent school in the afternoon. Even as a young girl, she found herself deeply concerned about the widespread famine and deaths in China. This prompted her decision to become a medical doctor to "save" her country (Han 1965, 150, 155, 157, 1985, 72). Han Suyin was so determined to fulfill this ambition that she did not heed her father's warning: "It's very difficult to be a doctor if you are a woman" (Han 1966, 37). At the age of 15, Han Suyin got a typist job at Peking Union Medical College, now part of Beijing University. In 1933, she enrolled in the medical school at Yanjing University for matriculation studies but felt discriminated against as a Eurasian. Two years later, she furthered her medical education in Brussels, the capital of Belgium, her mother's home country.

In 1938, after hearing news of China being drawn into the anti-Japanese war, Han Suyin abandoned her studies and returned to China. On the homebound ship, she met her first husband, Tang Pao-Huang, or Pao (in Han Suyin's text), who was an aide-de-camp to General Chiang Kai-shek of the Chinese Nationalist Party. Han Suyin and Pao got married quickly. Their marriage was far from rosy, as Pao was physically abusive. Han Suyin then worked as a midwife in an American Christian mission hospital in Chengdu, Sichuan. During this period, she wrote her debut novel, *Destination Chungking*. Through her connections at the hospital, Han Suyin was able to adopt a daughter by the name of Yungmei. The family then moved to London due to Pao's new military posting. Unable to withstand her husband's abuse any longer, Han Suyin left him and pursued her interrupted medical education in 1945. Three years later, she received her L.R.C.P., M.R.C.S., and M.B.B.S.

degrees, with honours in surgery and pathology from the School of Medicine, University of London. Pao died on the battlefield a year before her graduation.

Widowed with a daughter, Han Suyin moved to Hong Kong in 1950 because she would not be welcomed in "red" China, as her late husband was a former Nationalist general. In Hong Kong, Han Suyin began her assistantship at Gordon King's Obstetrics and Gynaecology Department at Queen Mary Hospital. She discontinued her one-year work contract after being falsely accused of professional negligence, which was the doing of an English gynaecologist. With the help of Gordon King, she moved on to work at the pathology department, under Professor Hou Baochang. Soon, she became the Head of Casualty and thrived in her new career. She said:

> Casualty work was exactly what I could do. Though looked down upon by the more snobbish houseman in medicine and surgery, it was for me (an) occasion for showing talent in diagnosis. Everything came to Casualty. Rare cases of leprosy, lupus, tetanus, enlarged spleens from long-term malarias, syphilitics, tuberculous meningitis (mostly children, and very common in Hong Kong), accident and suicides, homicides, fishermen blown up by the dynamite they used for fishing, early cancers, and late cancers, pneumonias and jaundices and brain absences and the insane . . . Everything uncanny, impossible, and fantastic came to Casualty.
>
> (Han 1982, 48)

Within three months, she earned the reputation of "a medical officer right on the top of the job" (Han 1982, 49). During this time, Han Suyin had a short-lived affair with *Times* correspondent Ian Morrison, which inspired her best-selling *A Many Splendoured Thing*. The relationship ended with Ian's death while reporting on the Korean War. In 1952, Han Suyin left Hong Kong for Malaya and married Englishman Leonard Comber, an Assistant Superintendent in the Special Branch in Malaya. It was a marriage of convenience so as to provide Yungmei with a good home.

In Malaya, she worked briefly at the Johor Baru General Hospital. There, a senior nurse, Mrs. Wong, convinced her to open her clinic on the main street of Johor Baru, with a pharmacy at the lower level and the doctor's room above. When she opened her clinic in 1953, she received a plaque inscribed with the saying "*Hua Tuo is Born Again*" from the Chinese Merchant Community. Hua Tuo was a famous Chinese doctor in the 3rd century who could cure almost every kind of illness. Dr. Sulaiman, the first male guest at the clinic, warned her that she would not have any patients because "people don't like women doctors." However, by the end of the second month, she was seeing 40 to 50 patients a day, more than any other doctors in Johor Baru then. A patient told her, "I've kept my disease for you to look at, Doctor" (Han 1982, 48).

In 1956, Han Suyin was invited to attend the coronation of King Mahendra of Nepal, the Himalayan Kingdom known as "The Land of the Gods." Out of

this experience, she wrote *The Mountain Is Young*, with the background set in Malaya and Nepal. Han Suyin's trip to Kathmandu, Nepal, changed her life, as she met Vincent Ruthnaswamy, a colonel in the Indian army. After securing a divorce from Leonard, she married Vincent in 1971.

The success of *The Mountain Is Young* convinced Han Suyin that writing was her all-consuming passion. She told a journalist in 1958 that she might be a "top-grade, highly paid [medical] specialist," but she was "possessed of a demon" that forced her to write instead of practising medicine full-time (Swaim 1985). Her husband, Vincent, was a reservoir of strength and love, fully supporting her dreams and aspirations. The couple resided in Hong Kong and Lausanne. Given a solid and enriching marriage, Han Suyin became a productive novelist, writer, and historian, producing notable works, such as (a) autobiographical series: *The Cripple Tree; A Mortal Flower; Birdless Summer; My House Has Two Doors; Phoenix Harvest*; and *Wind in My Sleeve* (these works cover the story of her family, as well as the history of modern China from 1885 to 1992); (b) historical works: *The Morning Deluge: Mao Tsetong and the Chinese Revolution 1893–1954*; *Wind in the Tower: Mao Tsetong and the Chinese Revolution, 1949–1965*; and *Eldest Son: Zhou Enlai and the Making of Modern China*; (c) essays: *Tigers and Butterflies: Selected Writings on Politics; The Creation of a Malayan Literature;* and *An Outline of Malayan-Chinese Literature;* and (d) novels: *Destination Chungking*; *A Many-Splendoured Thing*; *And the Rain My Drink*; *The Mountain Is Young*; *Cast But One Shadow*; *Winter Love*; *Four Faces*; *Till Morning Comes*; and *The Enchantress.*

Recognised for her social and cultural portfolios, Han Suyin became a world-renowned speaker. Her presence at international conferences included the inaugural convention of the US-China Peoples Friendship Association in Los Angeles in 1974. She breathed her last at her home in Lausanne on November 2, 2012.

1.4 Han Suyin's *The Crippled Tree* Autobiographical Series

As China was completely closed to the Western world between 1949 and 1970, Han Suyin's autobiographical series, released between 1965 and 1980, warrants attention. The series, encompassing *The Cripple Tree, A Mortal Flower, Birdless Summer, My House Has Two Doors,* and *Phoenix Harvest*, recounts the story of her family saga and the history of modern China from 1885 to 1979. In 1992, she released another addition to her autobiography, *Wind in My Sleeve*, which continued her story from 1977 to 1991.

As a China-born Eurasian author and physician, who adopted British citizenship and became a Swiss resident, Han Suyin had extensive first-hand accounts of 20th-century East-West relations. Given the challenging socio-political tensions then, her stories of courageous perseverance in the

face of ethnic and cultural adversities and gender discrimination provide penetrating insights into the radical changes that China was undergoing – from a post-dynastic monarchy to a modern country.

In her six-volume autobiography, Han Suyin's literary imagery of a new China against the backdrop of unprecedented East-West tensions poignantly recalls numerous personal and national struggles. Listed according to the timeframe of her storyline, Han Suyin's autobiography is captured in *The Crippled Tree* (1885–1928, published in 1965), *A Mortal Flower* (1938, published in 1966), *Birdless Summer* (1938–1948, published in 1968), *My House Has Two Doors* (1948–1965, published in 1982), *Phoenix Harvest* (1966–1980, published in 1985), and *Wind in My Sleeve* (1977–1991, published in 1992).

1.5 Ethical Literary Criticism as a Fitting Approach to Analysing Autobiographies

During the last two decades of the 20th century, moral philosophers in the West, such as Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, and critics, such as S. L. Goldberg, Wayne C. Booth, and David Parker, campaigned for a resurgence of ethics in literary criticism. One may notice an "ethical turn" in literary studies in the 1980s, with publications, such as J. Hillis Miller's (1987) *The Ethics of Reading* and Wayne Booth's (1988) *The Company We Keep: The Ethics of Fiction*, which were receiving attention from critics (Yang 2016, 34). Moreover, Martha Nussbaum's (1986) *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* also turned the tides of literary criticism. David Parker's (1994) monograph, *Ethics, Theory, and the Novel,* drew attention to "the virtual absence of explicit ethical interest in contemporary literary discourse," particularly due to the damage of the decade-old poststructuralist theory at the time (Parker 1994, 4, 32, 195). However, it is not entirely clear whether the ends of some of these propositions were geared towards philosophical "ethical criticism" or literature per se. Besides, the generalisation of "ethical interest" made it challenging for one to see whether the epoch was leaning towards the Platonian moral criticism or the Aristotelian school of literary criticism.

For some clarity, Platonic moral criticism rejected Homer's depiction of the anthropomorphic gods. For Homer, deities should not err. Thus, wicked gods should never appear in literature. Plato, therefore, disapproved of free expressions of moral ideas in literature, as he could not see the demarcation between the simulated literary world and the real world. Contrary to Plato's moralism, Aristotle viewed the literary world apart from the real world. He allowed a certain literary world to exist in its unique simulated setting. Aristotle's ethical criticism was thus closer to the nature of literature, as it paid attention to the historical and literary context of the literature in view (NIe 2024, 72).

In 2004, Professor Nie Zhenzhao presented a preliminary proposition for ethical literary criticism (ELC), emphasising an approach that was somewhat akin to Aristotle's ethical criticism. This approach considers the ethical environment of the literary world, making observations and analyses on the ethical lines and knots embedded in the literature. The key areas of discussion concern the ethical dilemma of the characters, ethical order or disorder in the story, the corresponding ethical judgment, and the choices of the characters in the narrative. Nie's landmark monograph in 1992, titled *Thomas Hardy: A Study of His Novels*, paved the way for his future direction in ethical literary studies. For Nie, the unique disposition of Hardy should not be understood as pessimism but rather marked him as a "reflective moralist and idealist," who warned against moral degradation at the turn of the century (Yang 2016, 34). Subsequently, Nie built his ELC framework, both as a method and a theory, which took on a firm grounding in 2014 with carefully defined key terms.

In his latest monograph, Nie defines ELC as "a critical methodology for reading, analysing, and interpreting literature from an ethical perspective" (Nie 2024, 185), explaining that ELC "regards literature as a product of human ethical choice and holds that literature is essentially the art of ethics and the expression of ethical choices within a specific historical period" (Nie 2024). Perceiving ethics as the origin of literature, it argues that literature is a form of ethical expression of human experiences in historical times.

Due to the assertive works of Nie and his colleagues, ELC sparked a resurgence of interest in ethics-foci in literary criticism, first in China, then in international circles. In 2012, the International Association of Ethical Literary Criticism (IAELC) was officially established. According to Juri Talvet (2014), the aim of the IAELC was as follows:

> to initiate a *new* trend of international literary scholarship that would form a certain counterweight to Western literary studies, which at least since the last quarter of the 20th century have indeed oscillated between two extremes: on the one hand, linguistic-formalistic research (including narratology, cognitivistics, language philosophy applied to literature, etc.) and, on the other hand, sociological approaches (discourses on power relations, postcolonial scholarship, gender studies, etc.).
>
> (Talvet 2014, 17–21)

After a decade of revivalism of ELC with its unique Chinese slant led by Nie, the number of adherents of this criticism method has grown exponentially. Its annual conferences attract hundreds of researchers who enthusiastically engage and critique the ELC. The discussions on ELC have been featured in China-based *Foreign Literature Studies*, Germany-based *Arcadia*, and Taiwanese *Universitas: Monthly Review of Philosophy and Culture.* The American-based *Comparative Literature and Culture* saw it timely to publish a special issue on ELC in 2015. Even the London-based *Times*

Literary Supplement took notice of the method and practice of ELC in its July 2015 issue. Indeed, since ELC's firm establishment in 2014, the Chinese Knowledge Resource Integrated Database (CNKI) has included hundreds of post-graduate theses and about 1,570 indexed journal articles that highlight ELC in literary criticism research.[2]

ELC is considered to be uniquely Chinese. First, Chinese civilisation stemmed from *ethics* at its onset. Chinese classical texts argue that human beings are distinguished from animals due to man's *ethical* consciousness. A letter that Confucian scholar Zhu Yixin wrote to Kang Youwei asserted that ethical consciousness existed before the substance and that "consciousness" marked the difference between a man and a dog or a cow (Guo and Wu 2003, 26). Zhang Zhidong, also known as "the Last Confucian Officer," stated:

> The essence of five major human relationships and the hundred principles (of humans) were passed on for thousands of years, and there was no dispute about it. A sage is undoubtedly a sage; and China is undoubtedly China because of this (namely, *ethics*).
>
> (Guo and Wu 2003)

Next, it was perhaps due to the exhaustion of literary theories of the West that ELC gradually gained prominence among literary critics in China. If Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* had indeed been true, "the golden age of cultural theory" would have been long past since there were no new contributors to literary critical theories apart from those proposed earlier, like those proposed by Jacques Lacan, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Raymond Williams, Luce Irigaray, Pierre Bourdieu, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Jurgen Habermas, Fredric Jameson, and Edward Said (Eagleton 2013, 1). In this respect, Chinese scholar Shang Biwu echoed Eagleton's proposition and stated that " 'Theory' was over, and we thus return to the pre-theoretical phase, and subject to disappointment" (Shang 2014, 28). But the glaring dearth of newer, novel Western literary criticism approaches was filled by Nie's ELC, capable of bridging "the unnatural gulfs between critical theory and literary criticism on the one hand, and elaborating the frameworks, objectives of this critical approach as well as the ethical tradition of literature on the other hand." ELC emerged as a rather fitting approach to the in-depth reading of literature. Hence, despite not being an entirely new idea, ELC is a plausible new methodology that can illuminate literary works.

1.6 Chapter Conclusion

Narrative is inseparable from ethics. Without an ethical approach to questions of life, the value of aesthetics could be compromised. By applying ELC to examining Han Suyin's autobiographical series, this work seeks to bridge a gap in the study of autobiographies in general and the near absence of such

an approach in the study of the compelling works of 20th-century author Han Suyin in particular. In this book, one will discover the attempts to untie the entangled ethical lines and ethical knots in Han Suyin's autobiography. In particular, her rationality, and the correlation between her ethical consciousness, ethical identity, and ethical choices, will also be expounded.

Notes

1 "Chou" or "Zhou" is a family name. Today's Hanyu Pinyin spells it as "Zhou," while in Han Suyin's autobiographical series, it was spelled as "Chou."
2 These statistics were on March 1, 2025.

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2 Autobiography as Revelation of the Irrationality and Lost Humanity of an Era

Autobiography is an avenue to explore the consciousness of self and society encapsulated at a certain time and space. A literary genre of its own, autobiography is not history or anthropology proper. Depending on its style and structure, an autobiography can be either a narrative or a poetic work, or both at the same time. Although not entirely without omissions or distortions, autobiographies generally contain truthful accounts of people and events, snapshots of the writers' lives. As subjective as autobiographies could be, they are worth studying, offering some answers to the question, "How shall we live?" (Olney 1972, xi).

Autobiographical writing is a literary genre that is not without dispute. When William Wordsworth first worked on his autobiographical writings in 1805, this genre was still "a thing unprecedented in literary history that a man should talk so much about himself" (Marcus 1994, 11). But by 1850, when Wordsworth's *The Prelude* was published, readers were relatively acquainted with autobiography as a literary genre (Marcus 1994). Autobiographies produced over the centuries have served at least four different functions.

First, autobiographies may serve as a *confessional* function, whereby one attains salvation as the ultimate meaning of life. Renowned Catholic priest Saint Augustine's *Confessions* started the tradition of confessional literature, aimed at setting right the relationship between man and God, thus achieving the purpose of depicting the salvation of one's soul. The 18th-century social philosopher, Rousseau, wrote *Confessions* at the end of his writing career to relieve himself from his lifelong burden of keeping a secret that might "cause one to blush," insisting that by doing so, he should be at least credited as an honest man. On the other hand, the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, one of America's founding fathers, depicts that behind his affluent front, he was from an underprivileged family background and had to earn a livelihood through sweat and hard work. In Asia, Lu Xun (also known as Lu Hsun), generally considered China's greatest modern writer and thinker, left behind an autobiographical essay of a similar nature named "Zizhuan Chuanlue (Brief Autobiography)," which sinologist Yang Jiyun (Lu 1935) included in a collection in memory of him titled *Jiwaiji (Collections Beyond Collections)*. Lu

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recounted his determination to pursue education despite the extreme poverty his original family experienced. By revealing oneself, confessional autobiographies aim to secure or redeem the relationship with the other, either God or man. Thus, it is said that the confessional type of autobiographical writing seeks the redemption of oneself.

Second, some autobiographies may be written for *educational* or *didactic* functions. Known as confessional literature, St. Augustine's *Confessions* may also be categorised as didactic, as it depicts one's spiritual journey in combating stubborn carnal desires through willing submission of one's willpower to Creator God and the internalisation of the Holy Word as a daily guide for wise living. Early feminist thinker Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *Eighty Years and More: Reminiscences, 1815–1897*, which showcases women as the equal counterparts of men (Jelinek 1980, 73), is also a significant work with an overriding educational aim. Another example is Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*. As the first president of South Africa, who mobilised the decades-old anti-apartheid movement, his rationale for the black majority to rule their motherland and his concept of South Africa for all people are a learning subject for all humanity across times.

Third, autobiographies might serve as an epistemological means to the understanding of oneself, one's twisted life path, and perhaps, one's identity. This category may fall under the discussions on "autonoetic consciousness" as discussed by Katherine Nelson (2003). In this respect, Nobel Prize laureate Pearl S. Buck's *My Several Worlds* recounts her experience of being raised in China and struggling over her "two worlds" in China, namely, the Presbyterian American missionary circle and her Chinese friends, in which "there was no communication between them" (Buck 1955, 10). Also struggling with identity issues and using the analogy of a "crippled" tree, China-born Eurasian Han Suyin wrote about her multiple identity and life inconsistencies in her *The Crippled Tree* autobiographical series. In Southeast Asia, renowned sinologist Professor Wang Gungwu's *Home Is Not Here* narrates how his multicultural upbringing led him to a lifetime intellectual quest about the multiple self-identification of ethnic Chinese in the region. Epistemological autobiographies are aimed at self-understanding, especially for autobiographers who have experienced many trials and tribulations in life. The process of journaling and writing about one's difficult passages of life may facilitate self-knowledge and self-acceptance, thus resulting in the healing of the self from any bitterness caused by the circumstances or others in life.

Finally, autobiographies might be employed by writers as a self-branding platform for self-assertion and public attention. Craving the heroism attained by great men and women of the world, Harriet Martineau's *Autobiography* brands herself as a Unitarian and her political controversial ideas as a well-thought theoretical framework that could potentially counter unfulfilling theologies and social structures in her eyes. Equally eloquent was Virginia Woolf, who proudly revealed her Bloomsbury elite club membership in her

Moment of Beings, which was published posthumously. Nobel Literary Prize laureate Annie Ernaux's auto-fiction works that blur the line between autobiography, non-fiction, and fiction are critiqued as attempts to engage in social climbing using autobiographical materials (Alheit 2022, 309).

Han Suyin's *The Crippled Tree*, the subject of the study here, besides fulfilling the epistemology function, actually doubles up as means of self-assertion and an overt revelation of the unreasonableness and lost humanity of her era.

2.1 Self and "Self in Time" in Autobiographies

German historian and philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) was among the first to establish the scholarly approach to autobiographies. He defined autobiographies as textual formalisations of one's self-reflection, in which the autobiographers' self-conceptions were historically determined (Corbett 1992, 137). For instance, Rousseau lived a public life that complied with the ideal upper-middle-class male of his time. It was through his written confession that he could appeal indirectly to his contemporaries for acceptance. In a dogmatic society, he did not have other open ways to reveal himself without getting judged.

Dilthey's findings on autobiography were included in his *Drafts for a critique of historical reason*, with his early collection published in 1910. One of his more recognised works is *Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, or in its English translation, *The Structure of the Historical World in the Human Sciences*. For him, autobiographies recorded "lived experience" (*Erlebnis*), which facilitated "understanding" (*Verstehen*) that would give meaning to the past, values for the present, and purpose for the future. The reflection on the autobiographer's own life, thus, helps him or her to make sense of his or her own existence as well as the lives of others. Besides, even though autobiography does not constitute history, Dilthey was concerned about the "structural relationship" between an individual and history, rather than with the magnitude of a personality as a value in itself (Corbett 1992, 143). For him, every aspect of each life bore historical witness (Rickman 1976, 248).

Following the footsteps of Dilthey, his disciple and son-in-law Georg Misch (1878–1965) continued to engage in the study of autobiographies. Lauded for his monumental work *Gesclichte der Autobiographie* (*History of Autobiography*), Misch emphasised his theory of "self-consciousness" or self-awareness (*selfbsthewusstsein*) in autobiographies. For him, the history of autobiography is a history of human self-awareness (Corbett 1992, 150). He embraced the idea of unity of author and subject in the autobiography and suggested that the universal and fundamental "psychological root" of all autobiographies was "man's need for self-revelation" (Corbett 1994, 151). He said, "it is of the very essence of human existence that we can rise to the clarity of consciousness that which moves us 'deep down'" (Misch 1950, 8–9).

In saying that, Misch's idea of self-consciousness or self-awareness was tied to self-assertion, as his self-revelation carried the nuance of asserting the centrality of self.

Existential phenomenologist Georges Gusdorf (1912–2000) offered further perspectives on man's self-knowledge and self-awareness in "Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie (Conditions and Limits of Autobiography)" and "De l'autobiographie initiatique à l'autobiographie genre littéraire (from the initiation autobiography in literary genre autobiography)." For him, the inner space of man could be carved out, especially when the soul – in a Christian sense – finds itself through communion with God. Gusdorf held that autobiography as a genre was limited in time and space and was historical and cultural. Both historical consciousness and individualism were essential preconditions for the writing of autobiographies (Misch 1950, 156–157). He was concerned about the loss or dying state of the interior of consciousness, for autobiography proper would be assuming the task of reconstructing the unity of one's life across time. For Gusdorf, autobiography was a second reading of one's life experience. Interestingly, he proposed that it might be truer than the original experience because it added to one's experience the consciousness of it, namely, the "truth" of the self or one's life, which came forth in the second reading in the retrospective realisation of elements of experience which had made up one's destiny. Without the "second reading," Gusdorf believed one's life would appear unfulfilled or "inwardly botched" (Misch 1950, 158). Hence, the task of autobiography is, first of all, a task of "personal salvation . . . its deepest intentions . . . a kind of apologetics or theodicy of the individual being" (Gusdorf 1980, 39).

Contrary to the suggestion that autobiographies could assist in the healing of one's wounds, Germanist Roy Pascal (1904–1980) and American historian Karl Weintraub (1924–2004) held a more pessimistic view. Roy Pascal's *Design and Truth in Autobiography* was a prominent work in the field of contemporary autobiographical studies. For Pascal:

> autobiography is a shaping of the past. It imposes a pattern on a life, constructs out of it a coherent story . . . in every case, it is [the writer's] present position which enables him to see his life as something of a unity, something that may be reduced to order.
>
> (Pascal 1960, 6)

Likewise, Karl Weintraub saw autobiography as a cultural and literary form that demonstrates temporal scope, interpreting the past from the present standpoint. Weintraub approached autobiographies from the two lines of historical development, namely, the emerging "historical consciousness" in Western culture and the growth of individuality as a value (Marcus 1994, 167). He found that historical consciousness was linked to the growth of individuality, which began in the Renaissance and which departed from "a static conception

of the world towards an understanding of both self and world as process" (Marcus 1994). Focusing on historical figures, such as Augustine, Rousseau, and Goethe, Weintraub's well-recognised work, *The Value of the Individual*, argues that the personal crisis is enacted in a microcosm, the historical crisis of cultural transformation. For instance, the ages of crisis make individuals doubt and reinvestigate the foundations of his or her self-conception.

Since the turn of the 20th century, critics, such as Christopher Lasch (1932–1994) and Richard Sennett (1943–current), have lamented the tendency of "narcissistic" preoccupation in autobiographical writing. Lasch, in his award-winning work, *The Culture of Narcissism*, commented that "Even the best of the confessional writers walks a fine line between self-analysis and self-indulgence . . . it also allows a lazy writer to indulge in 'the kind of immodest self-revelation which ultimately hides more than it admits'" (Lasch 1980, 16–19). Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man* attacks the "autobiographical culture" of the modern society. He argues that the erosion of a strong public life affects intimate relations and limits the sphere in which one could invest oneself (Sennet 1977, 7). Feminist Rita Felski disagrees, maintaining that subjectivity, though perceived as self-indulgent narcissism, "is at least partly dependent upon the standpoint from which it is being judged and the context in which it occurs" (Felski 1989, 107–108).

On the other hand, there have also been discussions on whether autobiography is an established genre per se. Laura Marcus asserts that autobiography showcases human beings as capable of self-reflection (Marcus 1994, 21). Hence, compared to journals or diaries, or memoirs, which are organised in a looser, more chronological structure, autobiography somewhat fulfills a "higher" literary function. Therefore, although some, like James Olney, hesitate to support the definition of autobiography as a literary genre, critics like Lejeune and Gusdorf argue that it is an authoritative form of "truth-telling" that is clearly distinguished from fiction (Anderson 2011, 5). Founder of the Deconstruction theory, Jacques Derrida, on the other hand, struggles with the borders of a text. For Derrida, it was a question of whether the text of each autobiography could fulfill the law of genre or be included "inside" the genre (Anderson 2011, 9). Poststructuralist Paul de Man questions the status of autobiography in "Autobiography as De-Facement," asserting that an autobiography "always looks slightly disreputable and self-indulgent" and that each work could be an exception to the norm, thus not able to provide "an empirical useful way of understanding texts" (Anderson 2011, 11).

One thing is certain about autobiography: it always is "a historical and ideological construct, an effect of discourse" (Anderson 2011, 57), as Candace Lang argues. Carolyn Steedman's (1986) *Landscape for a Good Woman*, for instance, depicts the autobiographical memories of her father picking bluebells and then getting caught and humiliated by the keeper of the forest. Such a role of the father did not fit well with the centrality of the father's code of behaviour and status in a patriarchal society. Hence, the memories captured

and narrated in an autobiography become "individualised instances of some general truth" to serve as an "interpretive device," namely, a way to examine the relation between individual experience and theoretical issues, based on the historical and cultural setting of the time of the incident in the text (Steedman 1986; Anderson 2011, 104).

Notably, recent discussions on autobiography as a genre have considered its "epistemic value in its natural setting," giving rise to discussions on episodic memory characterised by "autonoesis," namely, an awareness of or re-experience of oneself at a point of time (Nelson 2003, 126). In a discussion, Katherine Nelson demonstrates how the "self in time" charts a trail that provides "the continuity of the self across time from the past to the future," such as the "extended self" discussed by Antonio Damasio, Chris Moore and Karen Lemmon, Ulric Neisser (Nelson 2003), and other psychologists or neuroscientists.

While the present impact of an autobiographical past has been emphasised by the literati, historians, and behavioural scientists, I assert that due to the difference in the ethical norms and moral codes of the past and the present, a critical literary reading should not be from the standpoint of the present day but from the historical point when the literature was set. As far as the reading of a text is concerned, any reconstruction of an account of the past using the present day's ethical assumptions will not do justice to its original context, whether about the individual ("self") or its time and society. A careful treatment of literature will consider the historical and cultural environment in which the people and events of the narrative took place. In the interpretation of "self" in a literary context, that is, the "self" in society there and then, the ethical literary criticism (ELC) might be more promising as a method than previous approaches, as it examines a literary text in a specific era and ethical environment.

2.2 The Lost "Head" and Lost Humanity in ELC's Sphinx Analogy

This chapter examines the key themes related to the lost "head" and lost humanity in Han Suyin's *The Crippled Tree,* through the lens of the ELC on the texts of all volumes of the series for theme generation. Nie (2014, 2024) and other proponents of the ELC introduced key terms, such as ethical taboo, ethical chaos, rationality, and irrationality, to examine the messiness of human life conditions, especially the layers of complexities in human relationships in society.

In many languages, an individual said to have lost his "head" is an inference of the person acting irrationally or simply not being sensible. Functionally and philosophically, a man without his *head* – the symbol of *rationality* – is not a *man* but an irrational, non-human being. It is still possible that human beings are not recognised by their brain or intellect but by their forms, as portrayed in

Carl Sandburg (1961)'s poem "The Walking Man of Rodin" about the impressionist bronze sculpture *L'homme qui marche* ("The Walking Man") that was created by Auguste Rodin in 1878. While the idea of Rodin's sculpture is avant-garde, it can be thought-provoking. Can a man be presented without his head? Perhaps, artistically and visually, one can identify the "form" of a human, and therefore, a human, can be identified even without a head. In literature, however, one analytical aspect for human beings to be "human" is the distinction between human nature and the less desirable, animalistic or beastly nature of a person. That will be the *rationality* or reasoning capability of a human being, symbolised by the human "head." Across the world's civilisations, its equivalent in Arabic literature is the "عقل ('qal)," and in the Chinese context, it is "智 (zhi)" in the Confucian texts.

In ELC, the complexity of man's construct is illustrated in the Sphinx analogy, coined as "The Sphinx Factor" (Nie 2024, 29). The rationality here should not be confused with instrumental rationality or consequentialist rationality in behavioural science but rationality per se – that is, a sense of "cognitive" rationality that is teleological and ends-oriented, dictated by one's cognitive faculty of one's being, as depicted by Nicholas Rescher (1995). The Weberian rationality, perhaps, also runs in the same vein, depicting the rationale for choices by an individual or group that is determined by the state of the knowledge at their disposal (Boudon 2001). In ELC, the Sphinx analogy, borrowed from the Greco legend depicting a mythological winged creature, has the body of a lion and the head of a human (Nie 2024, 28). The creature, a riddle to all travelers passing by the narrow passage of Boeotian Thebes, wants the passersby to resolve which creature has one voice and yet goes on four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three in the evening. Oedipus, who becomes the king in the later portion of the story, answers promptly that it is about "a man," for he crawls on all four as a baby, walks on two feet as an adult, and has to move around using a walking stick in old age. Nie considers the Sphinx's Riddle as a metaphorical hint crucial for man's self-understanding (Nie 2024).

In the Sphinx's Riddle, its insistence on getting every human being to find the answer about themselves says one thing: the essence and developmental stages of a human being. However, the focus of the Sphinx analogy is not on human physical development but on man's integral construct. Mankind is likened to a Sphinx's composure, asserting the interplay between human nature (human factor) and animal nature (animal factor) in decision-making or behaviour as illustrated in Figure 2.1.

When the *head* (signifying "rationality") gives way, a person tends to make watered-down decisions and behave like a soulless being, just like animals. Humans are progressive and organic beings, exercising their volitional powers to develop their human nature and harness their animal nature. Where one's conscience is concerned, one will realise that a man's *rational will* is always at war against his corroding *natural will*. Also, dilemmas and

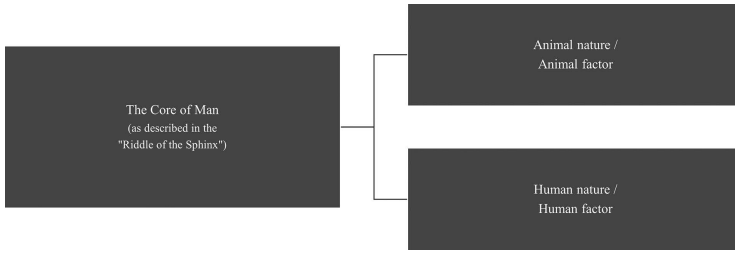

Figure 2.1 ELC Key Terms Related to the Core of Man or the Nature of Man

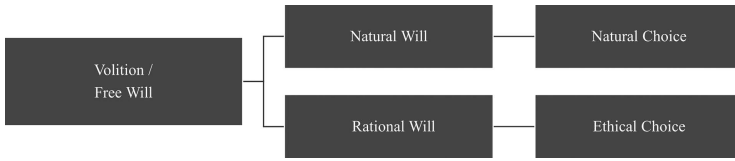

Figure 2.2 ELC Key Terms Related to the Volition of Man

challenges in life may lead one to make choices that have an ethical bearing. Figure 2.2 shows the two tendencies of man's volitional actions, namely, yielding to the unchecked, natural will or the ethical, rational mind.

If one were to yield to one's natural will and disregard the consequence of one's wanton action towards another, one would eventually lose oneself. If one were to exercise the rational will to observe virtues, such as justice, temperance, prudence, and courage, one would be able to maintain or reconstruct the equilibrium of one's ethical world. If there were no ethical bearing, there would be no yardstick for one to combat ethical chaos, inconsiderate taboo breaking, fatal conflicts, and confusion of the minds. Hence, how would a man choose? How should we live? These are the questions that human society faces daily. The demarcation between man's natural choice and ethical choice has great significance in the history of human civilisation, whether it will advance well or decline in decadence. Figure 2.3 contains all other key terms that Nie employs in ELC, which cognate the relationship of one with oneself and with the community.

The key terms or concepts are somewhat organically linked with one another. Judging from the standpoint of ELC as an open theoretical system that may cross-germinate with ecocriticism, philosophy, and psychology, this writer will not be surprised by the inclusion of any new terms or newly created terms within the ELC framework in the next decade. This book proposes the addition of "legitimacy" and "illegitimacy" to ELC key terms.

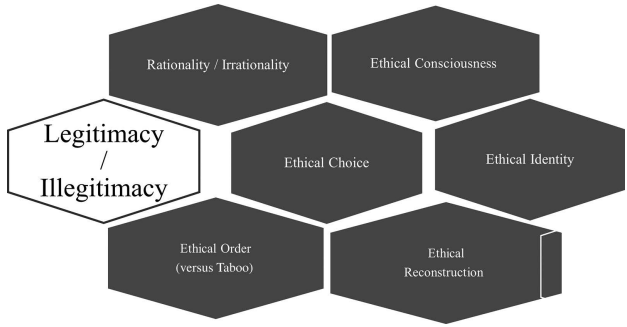

Figure 2.3 ELC Key Terms Related to Individual and the Community

2.3 "The Way of Man" *versus* "Way of the Beast" in Han Suyin's Works

World religions differentiate man from animals. In the theory of karma in Buddhism and Hinduism, a morally questionable human could potentially be downgraded to an animal in the next life. Mankind is thus distinct from animals in terms of man's unique moral properties and ethical accountability. In theocentric faiths, such as Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, it is believed that God created living beings, each according to its respective "type" or species, namely, reptiles as reptiles, birds as birds, and so forth. The *Holy Bible* inscribes that during the creation of human beings, God breathed his spirit into man's nostrils. Hence, man is not only distinctive from the other creatures but is also the apex of God's creation, with a *human* spirit and *human* heart, marking humans different from other creatures.

ELC, proposed by Nie Zhenzhao and his colleagues, is areligious and uses the animal-human allegory differently from the species' understanding of man and animal. It suggests the coexistence of animal nature and human nature within a person, denoting some innate beastly, non-human nature that battles against and at times overrules the humanistic quality of a person. Metaphorically, ELC describes man's potential regression to a less desirable, animalistic, or non-human disposition, in which one may exercise one's volitional powers in ways that cause harm to oneself or others. In other words, when a person yields to his unchecked *natural will*, he could be entirely self-seeking at the expense of others. Such a human being is prone to violating the common ethical codes of human society.

Ruthless, irrational, senseless, and ethics-violating behaviours may be committed by a group of people, or a community against another as well. World literature from the years of yore, such as Homer's epics *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Luo Guanzhong's Chinese classics *The Romance of the Three*

Kingdoms to modern-day J. R. R. Tolkien's fantasy novel *The Lord of the Rings*, Liu Cixin's science fiction *The Three Body Problem*, and so forth, have all showcased how selfishness, misunderstanding, or the greed of a certain tribe or nation can result in rifts, rivalry, and even warfare between the different parties. Such literature reflects the unstable and chaotic world's situation, which is fundamentally caused by man himself, in most cases.

The *Phoenix Harvest*, the fifth book in Han Suyin's autobiographical series, highlights a fundamental principle – that "the way of Man" should triumph over the "way of the beast" (Han 1985, 318). Relating the principle to the sum total of statements made by Zhou Enlai, Chen Yi, and Gong Peng, Han Suyin infers that one should always choose the way that matches the dignity of mankind. For her, the distinction between the two ways is clear: "The way of Man" is concerned with the welfare of others, including the generations yet to be born. On the other hand, the "way of the beast" functions solely on man's survival mode, resorting to choices corresponding with man's selfish gains. The former operates in ways that ensure the civility of human society, where there is compassion for the weak and where benevolence reigns. In fact, as an autobiographer, Han Suyin depicts quite a few of the ways of the beast that she observed. The inhumane cruelty of life, which resembles the ways of the beast, encompasses social ostracism against the taboo breakers, ethical chaos at the superstructure level, painful experiences pertaining to issues such as illegitimacy, inequality, lack of fraternity, and so forth.

Perhaps a comparison between the notion of "the way of Man" in Han Suyin's autobiography and the idea of "being human" by Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Nobel Peace Prize laureate cum famous human rights activist) might be helpful. Using the African concept of *ubuntu-botho*, Tutu said:

> Africans believe in something that is difficult to render in English. We call it *ubuntu-botho*. It means the essence of *being human*. You know when it is there and when it is absent. It speaks about humaneness, gentleness, hospitality, putting yourself out on behalf of others, and being vulnerable. It embraces compassion and toughness. It recognises that my humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be *human* together.
>
> (Tutu 1989, 69)

Research shows that when one hurts or harms others, he or she will experience erosion of self-perception, such as viewing the self as *less human* (Bastian 2013, 156). There are reasons for becoming a perpetrator or bully. First, the harmful behaviour of the perpetrator is perceived by all in the community as warranted and legitimate, e.g., in the context of self-defence. Second, the harmful actions of the perpetrator have no justification other than the one who commits them and are thus rejected by society as unwarranted and illegitimate.

In Han Suyin's *The Crippled Tree,* there are ample examples of interracial harm and hurts, even to the extent of murders. Almost in each case that Han

Suyin documented, the perpetrators claimed "legitimacy" for their racial bigotry or social crimes against her and her family members.

2.4 Taboo Breaking: It Pays to Commit the Forbidden

Han Suyin recorded many occasions when she and her family violated religious, legal, and social taboos. Their taboo-breaking offences included interracial marriages, elopement, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, premarital sex, and extramarital affairs. When they ran against the ethical order and ethical code of behaviour that were guarded closely by their community, the social sanctions against them for violations were grave. Han Suyin and her loved ones thus paid a high price for breaking the taboos, sacrificing their honour and respect before their community.

Things should not have been so complicated from today's point of view. However, during the first few decades of the 20th century, it was taboo for anyone in the West or the East to marry people of other races. Except for her third marriage to Colonel Ruthnaswamy, the consequences of mixed marriages in Han Suyin's family were undesirable and frowned upon. The interracial marriages narrated in Han Suyin's autobiography – those of her parents, her brother's, her sisters', her first and second marriages, and her extramarital love affairs – all ended in misery. These sad endings suggest the family was suffering from a perpetual curse.

In the "crippled" family tree, Rosalie Chou started from her not-blessed mixed parentage, the union of Hakka Chinese Chou Yentung and his Belgian Catholic lover, Marguerite Denis. Yentung was one of the first few Chinese students who pursued railroad engineering in Belgium. Being a "heathen," his romance with Marguerite was strongly protested by the Denises. The young couple eloped, and when they returned to the Denises, Marguerite was pregnant and insisted on her decision to marry her Chinese beau. The scandal was hardly tolerated. The Denises declared Marguerite insane and decided to "wash their hands off her." Yentung was summoned by the Supervisor of Studies and the Chinese Consul, who threatened to deport him back to China (Han 1965, 197). The couple, however, stood firm with their decision. Instead of negotiating for parental approval, they eloped. Within a month, Marguerite became pregnant and "triumphantly announced it to the family" to demand their approval for her to marry Yentung. Although it was illegitimate for couples of different religious backgrounds to marry, Yentung stood firm on his categorical refusal to convert to Catholicism (Han 1965, 198). They managed to find a sympathiser to quickly officiate their marriage. Yentung's side of the family in Chengdu had to give their grudging consent via a telegram.

Han Suyin's parents' mixed marriage had far-reaching repercussions, especially when the couple relocated to Yentung's home province, Sichuan, China, in 1913. Marguerite, who surrendered her Belgian passport and decided to identify with her Chinese husband in every way, said, "I want to be a Chinese"

(Han 1965, 204). She gradually found her Chinese dreams shattered, as she was humiliated and scorned by the locals day in, day out. Once, a 12-year-old boy attempted to humiliate her by urinating on her skirt when she was strolling on the street. To add to this utter humiliation, the unsympathetic locals continued their ridicules outside her courtyard, even after they had witnessed the murder of her chef. As a result, Marguerite never recovered from her bitter experience of social ostracism and hostility. She aged into an unforgiving, ferocious woman and eventually left Yentung, her Chinese husband, for Europe in 1949 (Han 1968, 280). Their interracial romance crashed, despite their initial unshakeable commitment to each other, and they eventually lived separately and were buried in different continents.

Interestingly, Rosalie (the maiden name of Han Suyin), the strong-willed daughter of Marguerite, repeated the same choice years later: "I want to be Chinese, like you, like Papa" (Han 1965, 103). At a time when interracial marriages were rare, Rosalie married Chinese Colonel Tang Pao-Huang, whom she nicknamed "Pao" in her autobiography. During her parents' time, interracial marriages were taboo. During her generation, cross-cultural unions were still unacceptable.

Han Suyin's marriage to Pao was far from blissful. In fact, it quickly turned into a nightmare, as she had committed a taboo before her marriage: she had had premarital sex with a German boyfriend during her adolescence. Priding himself as an elite leader among the Chinese middle class, Pao could not but see his wife's taboo breaking as shameful. Although Han Suyin's premarital social life might not be known among his circle, Pao was determined to punish her for her "impurity" before their marriage. In his perception, a woman who had lost her virginity before the wedding night was a woman with questionable virtue. Subconsciously, Pao also transferred his judgment of Han Suyin's premarital sex to his contempt for her Eurasian identity.

Indeed, Han Suyin's biracial identity as a Eurasian woman was least helpful to clear the air about her chastity, for the reputation of Eurasians was normally frowned upon in her conservative environment. Throughout her eight years of marriage to Pao, Han Suyin had to obediently read the ideological books he assigned her, keep daily journals to recount her wrongdoings and unchastity, and be subject to his severe beatings if she was suspected of having any association with any male, even if it was merely a casual glance or an exchange of social greetings. Besides, Pao warned her that she should not have a mind of her own, which she "violated" involuntarily frequently. Despised by her husband, Han Suyin became an easy subject of his frequent abuse, both mentally and physically, eventually causing her to withdraw before he headed for the war front in China.

After the demise of her first husband, Pao, and widowed with an adopted daughter, Yungmei, Han Suyin committed yet another taboo in Hong Kong. She fell deeply in love with a white, dashing, married journalist named Ian Morrison. For Han Suyin, Ian was more akin to the soul of an Asian, rather

than a Caucasian man who might revel in the white man's burden (Han 1982, 29–30). There was great respect and sensibility in their romance. However, their relationship was but an extramarital affair, for Ian's lawful Australian wife, who was living in Singapore at that time, refused to divorce him. As Han Suyin wrote in her semi-autobiographical novel, *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, Ian, who wanted to divorce his wife, had admitted his dilemma about dismissing his moral obligations towards his children. Polygamy was not permitted by law in Hong Kong, where they were, and in Australia, where Ian originated. Moreover, so long as Ian was not divorced, he was obligated to remain with his legitimate wife and children. To complicate the matter further, Han Suyin was very firm on wanting to return to Communist China whenever possible. Her stubborn choice would naturally exclude Ian from her plan, for Ian was a war correspondent for *The Times*, the leading magazine of the democratic West. In *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, she convinced herself:

> Don't lie to yourself. You want this man . . . He's a foreigner, and you are going to China. It will mean disaster and sorrow. He is married. Don't lose your head now. You cannot afford it. This is not love. It's hunger . . . Remember, he's a foreigner, and you are going to China.
>
> (Han 1956, 88)

Their affair ended in 1950, when Ian was killed in the Korean War. Even if Ian had lived, their dream to be together would have been shattered, as Ian was the last man that Han Suyin could legitimately marry. Considering the ethical environment during the era, if Ian had lived, divorced his wife, and married Han Suyin as they both wished, they would be committing yet another taboo that challenged the public's acceptance of the community they were in. Their interracial union, if it had happened, would pose potential social discrimination to young Yungmei, Han Suyin's adopted daughter, who would be identified as one raised by a less-than-honourable mixed family.

The issues of elopement, premarital sex, extramarital affairs, mixed marriages, and social rejection against Eurasian persons in Han Suyin's autobiography also appeared in her novels. In *Till Morning Comes* (Han 1983), Stephanie Ryder discarded her status as the daughter of a Yankee and married Dr. Jen Yong, a young Chinese surgeon. Although her father supported her plan to travel to China, he did not expect her to eventually elope with a local. Also, her mother had warned her that if she had a baby with her Chinese husband, she would be "bearing a cross" her entire life, namely, "the (burden or) cross of having a Eurasian kid". In *Winter Love* (Han 1962), the protagonist, Bettina Jones, commits premarital sex with Andy, a medical student, "out of curiosity" because he persuaded her to be "a good sport and broad-minded." Wanting to prove herself not "old-fashioned," she gave herself to him several times. In *The Mountain Is Young* (Han 1958), Anne Ford, who had always given her husband a cold shoulder, fell head over

heels for the dashing dam engineer Unni Menon. It was almost cynical that before they started their extramarital affair, Unni said invitingly, "When were the platitudes of adultery valid excuse for the platitudes of marriage?" (Han 1958, 279).

Anyhow, Han Suyin favoured the theme of cross-cultural romance above all. *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, Han Suyin's bestseller, features a love that could find no boundaries between an Australian correspondent and his China-born Eurasian lover who dreamed of re-entering China every day of her life. *Till Morning Comes* highlights the perseverance of true love between an American Chinese couple through critical warfare and political adversities. *The Mountain Is Young* demonstrates the possibility of a withered English female soul finding abandoned love in her Nepali beau. These three novels depict Hong Kong, China, and Nepal as the respective homes for Han Suyin's ideals of interracial unions to take place. Her *The Enchantress* and *Four Faces* showcases Thailand and Cambodia as the meeting points where the East and the West met; while *And the Rain My Drink* reveals how the Chinese in Malaya suffered unfairly under the indifferent Western colonial regime.

It seems that instead of reinforcing religious, legal, and social taboos, Han Suyin chose to remind her readers to love and respect intercultural relationships. Regardless of the ethnicity of the protagonists in her novels, Han Suyin would match them with lovers from the "other" people. Capitalising on those scandalous, taboo elements, Han Suyin boldly presented her hope for a unifying love between a man and a woman, irrespective of race and skin colour. In her writings, social norms and rigid moral standards give way to the importance of truly appreciating a person despite his or her racial background. All in all, her advocacy for harmonious living between people and the need for some balance between the East-West powers shines through in all her writings.

2.5 Chaos and Irrationality: Foreignness Is Deadly

When a homogeneous people decide to uproot any "alien" element among them, their herd mentality can become very dangerous. Chaotic situations, such as murder, brutality, and bullying of the "other" by the community in power, are recorded without prejudice in Han Suyin's autobiography series. In the name of guarding the solidarity of a certain "in-group" people, crimes against their targeted victims could be justified as legitimate. Not only did they not need to feel sorry or apologetic about their hostility towards others but they also declared foreignness legitimately *deadly*.

When Marguerite, Rosalie's mother, accompanied her husband, Yentung, back to the conservative province of Sichuan, she was overjoyed that her Chinese dreams would finally materialise: a Chinese prince, a Chinese pavilion, a beautiful landscape, and lovable people. However, while Yentung deeply appreciated her love, Marguerite's foreignness quickly posed a big problem

to the couple after her relocation to China. Marguerite became the target of bullies and social ostracism, as she was "ugly and huge" – a total alien – in the eyes of the locals in inland China.

It would not be too difficult for one to understand that during the early 20th century, a suburban community in the Southern Chinese provinces perceived their oneness and cohesiveness as a matter of life and death. Under such mob mentality and moral imperatives, the villagers were ready to commit outrageous group bullying. They would "punish" Marguerite for her mere existence in their territory. One day, when Yentung was away working at the railroad, a bunch of ruthless bandits ransacked the house in which this poor foreign wife and her babies resided. The burglars also decapitated her cook and hung his head in the garden to showcase their ruthless power. Not only did the local community completely ignore the decapitated head that was left hanging in Marguerite's garden but their young men, women, and children also continually mocked and harassed Marguerite daily behind that tree in which the head hung. It was grave ethical chaos. Disgusted by the ridicule of the unsympathetic villagers and in tears, Marguerite wrote the following letter to her parents:

> Today I shall not have time to write you a very long letter, because the bandits were here last night, and the cook has been decapitated. His head is in the garden, so I have shut the window . . . I cannot stand their laughter anymore. They laugh when I cry, they laugh when people are executed, they are *not human*.
>
> (Han 1965, 11–14)

After witnessing the decapitation of her cook and the gory head hanging in her garden without getting any sympathy or help, she concluded that the place was uncivilised and inhumane. Twice in the same letter, Marguerite exclaimed that the Chinese villagers were "not" humans.

Besides this horrifying experience, Rosalie (Han Suyin) also recalled the death of her second brother, Gabriel Chou, due to racial discrimination. Gabriel was the apple of Marguerite's eye. One evening, the seemingly healthy baby developed a fever all of a sudden. Although she knew that non-whites would only be treated by the white doctor during the daytime at the clinic, Rosalie's Belgium-descent mother decided to take a chance. She tried to seek medical attention for baby Gabriel at the doctor's residence – a medical privilege exclusive to the whites then. However, her attempt to save her baby was in vain. The doctor's wife stopped her at the door, "Get out, you and your filthy half-caste brat, get out of my house" (Han 1965, 304).

Rosalie's mother was pure white, but her baby Gabriel was of mixed blood, a "half-caste brat," as the father was Chinese. The life or death of a half-caste did not matter to the arrogant, self-assuming French doctor's wife.

Owing to her unchecked *natural will* that resented any human being who was not her kind, baby Gabriel was refused medical treatment. The baby died the next morning. During that era, it was a cultural taboo for people of different ethnicities to tie their nuptial knots and form families. Babies from interracial marriages were *not* seen as legitimate children.

About a decade later, Rosalie was an eyewitness to yet another racial brutality, but this time, her own brother was the aggressor. Rosalie witnessed how her depressed brother George, Son of Spring, beat up a Chinese rickshaw coolie mercilessly. Not only had George kicked and hit the poor coolie violently with a walking stick but he also broke one of the shafts of the rickshaw with his boots. Rosalie was not in a position to intervene. But the effect of the brutality could not be dissolved. Several days after the incident, she could not help but throw a terrible tantrum in the street. Rosalie recognised and identified with the predicament of her brother. However, she would not condone or imitate her brother's behaviour of hurting others. Right from the beginning, she had willed herself to wrestle with her emptiness until she could have a breakthrough. She did not know how and when the battle would be over. Nobody had ever shown her how to do so, or if there was any right way to do it. An alien could kill or be killed. Foreignness could be deadly. Ethical chaos could be the cause of insanity unless one fought against it with courage and great determination.

2.6 "Mixtures" and Derogative Labels

Rivalry and bigotry among different races, ethnicities, and nations could be very intense and far from subtle. According to Han Suyin, one of the most hideous assumptions during her era was that the intelligence of one ethnic group differed from the others. People of mixed races had lower brain capacity than people of pure races. From the books she read during her adolescence, the difference in intelligence between different people could even be quantified. The information about the "mixtures" or mixed races was not edifying at all. Han Suyin was intimidated by the so-called scientific facts that she came across. In *A Mortal Flower*, she recalled:

> The fear of losing my brain was very strong. I had read a book called *Races of the World* the year before. It began: "There are four races in the world; white, yellow, red and black . . . the white race is distinguished by the characteristic that its BRAIN WEIGHT is the highest; the brain of the average white man weighs one thousand six hundred grams, that of the yellow man one thousand four hundred, the red man's brain weighs one thousand three hundred and forty and that of the black man about one thousand two hundred. . . ." This account was illustrated by pictures, front and profile of skulls; with captions calling attention to the "width of the

> brow." There were a few lines on *mixtures*. "Racial mixtures are prone to mental unbalance, hysteria, alcoholism, generally of weak character and untrustworthy." "Oh God," I prayed, "don't let me go mad, don't let my brain go, I want to study."
>
> (Han 1966, 129)

Han Suyin's accounts highlight to her readers the prevalent derogative ideas during the era. Somehow, many believed that there was a hierarchy of different peoples and that a certain ethnic group had better genes than others. The worst of all were the mixed races, whose status was lower than any pure blood. Since the "brain" or cognitive function is one of the most important premises of a human, anyone who is "brainless" or has an undersized brain is a "lesser being." Recording such lingo and mindset of those middle-class Europeans around her, Han Suyin wrote: "the Chinese were degenerate, their brain capacity lower; (it might be) true that they did not feel (any) pain (for how they were treated,) and (they) *died like flies* because so it was and so it would be" (Han 1965, 264).

Today, with the findings of scientific research, one must dismiss the condescending tone and wrong assumptions of the era that Han Suyin captured in her autobiography. It is not true that a larger brain equals higher intelligence. For example, mammals, whales, and elephants have much bigger brains than humans, but their brain sizes do not indicate they are more intelligent than man. There are at least two other factors to consider: first, the ratio of the actual brain mass relative to the body mass matters; next, the connectivity and computational capacity of the brain itself, which involves the complexity of the cellular and molecular organisation of neural connections, or synapses, matter the most (Lechtenberg 2014). Furthermore, while psychologists, such as Michael McDaniel of Virginia Commonwealth University, claim that smarter people have bigger brains, many researchers have found that brain size does not affect the scores of standardised intelligence tests. Related research includes a brain scan study of young children and a study on the correlation between brain size and innovation involving the "Mind's Big Bang" (Bryner 2016). Moreover, it has even been empirically proven that bilingual individuals have better cognition than others (Vince 2016).

It is rather unfortunate that vicious insults and misleading assumptions about Han Suyin's intellectual capacity accompanied her through her growing years. For example, Olga Hempel, Han Suyin's German colleague who was number one in the hierarchy among the secretarial staff, labelled her as "pig-headed" (Han 1966, 134). Disagreeing with Han Suyin on her plan to pursue higher education, Olga commented: "You'll never do it, *Eurasians can't*. They're *mentally blocked* up there" (Han 1966, 137). Instead of saving up money for private tuition in Chinese language and physics, Han Suyin was advised by her colleagues in P.M.U.C. to spend it on manicures and hairdos.

Furthermore, she had to endure Olga's persistent condemnation of her brain capacity:

> "What the hell do you want to study Chinese for, anyway?"
>
> "I want to get on. I want to go to university; I want to be a doctor."
>
> She snorted, "My dear girl, you're nuts. Real crackers. You won't be able to do it. Even if you tried for ten years. Studying Chinese is already bad enough. But what about the rest? Physics, mathematics, and chemistry. *You haven't got the brains.* I've watched you and I know. Why don't you just settle down and give it up? You'll go batty one of these days."
>
> (Han 1965, 134, 138)

Han Suyin also greatly disapproved of the sadism that transpired in many of the conversations and minds of the middle-class whites around her. Being a Eurasian female who was discriminated against by Asians and Westerners, Han Suyin was highly sensitive about any theory of eugenics, condescending remarks against women, or derogatory words against "other" races. She recalled vividly that in one of the most expensive and exclusive nightclubs in Brussels, lit with "ghostlike chandeliers," a man of Walloon nobility made sadist comments about the performers:

> "Me, I am all for kicking these Yids in the teeth."
>
> "Have you heard the joke about the circumcision ceremony?"
>
> "They're apes anyway, just climbed down from the trees."
>
> (Han 1966, 300)

Besides the Jews, the blacks were also the target of sex and sadism. The "niggers" had always been a topic of amusement for a certain group of middle-class whites during that time. Han Suyin took note of an exceptional man, though; Minister Henri Dennis was different from the others. Henri's favourite remark was this: "Negroes are people (or human beings with brains) . . . One day they will have machines, industries like us (the Caucasians)" (Han 1966, 301).

Another group looked down upon during that time was the Chinese. In *A Mortal Flower*, Han Suyin captured disdainful sexual imagery about the Chinese based on a remark by her education scholarship sponsor, Joseph Hers. It was during the impending Japanese invasion that China became a hot topic among the European elite group. Hers commented: "Don't worry, China is feminine, she has always ended up absorbing all her conquerors" (Han 1966, 189). He had two grotesque sexual illustrations. First, "like many other foreigners" during that time, he saw China as "the WOMAN, the all-enveloping, soft, weak woman, who welcomed rape, welcomed being invaded" (Han 1966). Next, the violation of China was equated with the defloration of a woman in marriage, like "the Great White Male seeding in the weak, moaning, submissive coloured female." Han Suyin wrote, "And in this, he (Joseph

Hers) was typical of nearly all the Europeans in China who declared the Chinese 'forever unable to rule themselves because they are weak, devious, volatile, timid'" (Han 1966).

Han Suyin's sponsor, Hers, painted a rather perverse illustration, describing China as a "weak, moaning, submissive coloured female," struggling to survive through subjugation to the stronger nations (Han 1966, 188–189). The Chinese resented this idea. Writing as an in-group member of the Chinese community, Han Suyin presented the rationality of not entertaining the sadism or haughtiness of a people against others. Han Suyin also did not entertain her *natural will* and potential hatred or revengeful mindset towards others. Instead, she exercised her *rational will* in the most sensible manner: "My generation hated the Japanese for what they did . . . In 1962, by accepting an invitation to visit Japan, I was also atoning for having hated the Japanese in the past" (Han 1965, 140–141). Surely, man's *rational will* favours promoting good cause and goodwill among all people.

The popularity of such sadism at the macro level was astonishing and *irrational*. Sadly, the social status of the mixed races was even lower than the ethnic groups being despised. While the Chinese were despised by the middle-class European elite, the Eurasians were in turn looked down upon by the Chinese. In the microcosm of Han Suyin's own married life with her first husband, Chinese general Tang Pao-Huang, a sort of reverse sadism or sadist interpretation translated into physical, psychological, and emotional abuse. The reasons for Pao's cold treatment and abusive behaviour towards Han Suyin were twofold: first, Han Suyin was not pure Chinese and, therefore, incompatible with Pao's pedigree (Han 1968, 78); second, Han Suyin was not a chaste virgin when she married Pao. Not only did she have a premarital sexual relationship but her greatest problem was also that she had "defiled" herself with a foreigner, not a Chinese (Han 1968).

Pao had never accepted the dual identity of Han Suyin. Amid his enthusiasm to promote the purity and highest virtues of the Chinese, he picked on Han Suyin as his greatest betrayal at home and, thus, deserved severe punishment. In this respect, any suspicious rumours in town related to Han Suyin could be his reason for acting violently against her. In 1940, the second year when the couple were in Chungking (Chongqing), Pao came home one day to question whether Han Suyin's mother was of Jewish descent. Surprised, Han Suyin treated it as a joke. She answered affirmatively: "No, my mother is not Jewish. She is Flemish and Catholic" (Han 1968, 78). Her answer did not stop Pao's unfounded suspicion. Rolling up his sleeves in a huff, Pao lashed out at Han Suyin, "Shut your mouth, or I'll beat you to death. You, the wife of a Chinese officer, you DARE to say you'd like to be a Jewess?" (Han 1968, 78)

As Han Suyin recalled, Pao continued his rant. Influenced by his most recent read, Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, Pao concluded that "the Jews were filthy, vicious, sexual perverts" (Han 1968). For unknown reasons, Pao believed that Han Suyin had some unidentified relations with Jews, causing

her to be impure. He framed Han Suyin based on a false understanding of her – that she was a Jew and her mother was, as rumoured, a Jew from Poland. He was determined to chastise and re-educate her to wipe out her "shameful" background.

Clearly, Pao wanted "the foreigner" in her to be thoroughly eradicated so that she would learn to adhere to and practise the ethical teachings of Confucius (Han 1968, 29). Han Suyin was forced to study Chinese philosophical books and books on chastity. On Pao's demand, she had to keep a diary religiously, confessing every single detail of her wrongdoings. Pao used her diary to monitor the "improvement" in her thoughts and worldview (Han 1968, 148). The diary, Pao's reconditioning tool for Han Suyin, created a huge phobia in her. It became an object to facilitate Pao's cruelty and *irrationality*. Interestingly, Pao also kept a diary of his own. Before reporting himself to the battlefield in Manchuria, he couriered his diary to Han Suyin. Pao's diary was as good as his very presence. Upon receiving his diary, Han Suyin immediately lost her mental balance:

> but the very word "diary" threatened to upset my mental balance, to send me into gales of hysterical laughter . . . I could not afford hysteria, upsets, sorrow, sentiment, memory, regret. Forward, hastening past myself, no time for tears, I must go on.
>
> (Han 1968, 318)

After fingering through his diary, Han Suyin decided to burn it over the kitchen stove. Suffering from Pao's frequent mental intimidations and physical punishments, Han Suyin's self-image was like an "overbeaten dog" that trembled "at the sound of a whiplash" (Han 1968, 201). In *Birdless Summer*, she recounted how Pao would severely injure her just because he saw other males greeting her on the street: "and if it were a male doctor or the husband of a patient, such a simple courtesy might be the excuse for another pitiless beating" (Han 1968, 157).

It seemed that wife beating was firmly ingrained in Pao's psyche and, according to Han Suyin, probably endorsed by local Chinese custom then (Han 1968, 200). Whenever Pao was upset with Han Suyin, he would be rough on her, even in public. On one occasion, he knocked her head over and over again against the door when she was trying to stop him from ransacking the room of their tenant, Caroline, without any prior notice (Han 1968, 202).

All in all, Han Suyin's account laid bare the reality and danger of the use of man's unchecked *natural will*. Once human beings do not engage their *rational mind* but adhere to their ethical obligations, there is nothing left to tackle their irrational acts of arrogance, bullying and harming others. The life of man as such would be solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short, as warned by philosopher Thomas Hobbes.

2.7 Chapter Conclusion

If mankind loses its rationality, human beings will lose their essence of being. Allegorically, if the Sphinx were to lose her human head, all that remains would be a body with animalistic instinct, with no human mind, and therefore, would not be able to function ethically. Ethics define the principles and boundaries of human behaviour, as well as interactions between people. In the absence of rationality and ethics, human society will naturally spiral down to unruliness and chaos. When a man sees a human treat another with indifference and cruelty, it would only signal the loss of humanity, endangering the survival of the human species. Even as the "way of Man" should reign over the "way of the beast," Han Suyin's emphasis on the need for *rationality* or the *human mind* seems like a timeless truth.

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3 Ethical Identity, Dilemma, and Soul-Searching in Han Suyin's Autobiography

Han Suyin lived a full life and left behind significant legacies. Today, she is remembered primarily as an early female physician in Asia, a prolific author of 20th-century literature, a US-China-friendly personality, a philanthropist, and a cultural activist. Older Johorians in Malaysia may fondly recall her old clinic, "The Chow Dispensary,"[1] located on the main street of Johor Bahru, which welcomed patients from all backgrounds and walks of life for about ten years (among others, Loh 2013). On Chinese education in Southeast Asia, she is also acknowledged for her efforts in establishing the old Nantah (Nanyang University) in Singapore and serving as the institution's physician. A consultant to the World Health Organization (WHO) on China affairs, she left behind valuable health reports and interview records about the region (among others, Han 1982b; Swaim 1985). Readers in the 1950s enjoyed her best-selling novel *A Many-Splendoured Thing,* which became a famous Hollywood movie. The novel draws attention to the complexities of love, as well as the cultural and geopolitical conflict during the post-war era. After 1949, including the critical years during the Cultural Revolution, she was among the few foreign nationals permitted to visit China. In the United States, Han Suyin was the keynote speaker at the inaugural convention of the US-China Peoples Friendship Association in Los Angeles in 1974. International relations critics in the West, however, view her as a pro-left observer cum advocate for China during the Cold War period, although she was seen as anti-Communism by the Chinese government at one point. During the decade when she lived in Malaya, her involvement in the Afro-Asian Writers Bureau (AAWB) meetings yielded inspiring intellectual content as she contributed articles on the prospect of the literary landscape for the newly formed Malaya then (Han 1957, 1964) and others. Even in today's China, her foundation, which funded the "Han Suyin Award for Young Translators" in 1989, continues to award prizes for literary translation. In Switzerland, where she died, a sculpture bearing her image was erected by the government of Canton of Valais in 2008, recognising her as a significant cultural envoy between the East and the West (Chun 2009).

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The writings of Han Suyin inevitably involve her critical description of the socio-cultural and geopolitical climax during that era. The manner she chronicled China's encounter with foreign powers at the turn of the 20th century reveals where she stood in the East-West discourse. In *China in the Year 2001*, Han Suyin described the century, as experienced by China, as such: "To these one hundred and nine years (1840–1949) belonged the burden of unequal treaties, extra-territorial rights, war indemnities, the concessions, occupation by foreign troops, massacres, and the sacking of Chinese cities" (Han 1967, 21). The book received vitriolic responses from many Western critics due to Han Suyin's seemingly uncritical support for the Red China regime. However, the aftermath of the Opium Wars, as well as the multiple civil upheavals that followed, did put the then millennium-old China in search of a suitable political structure for her modernisation, as discussed in Section 1.1 in Chapter 1. Beneath some general confusion and the sheer mode of thriving through adversities, there was also a nagging need for a shared vision among the people, a rationality, a way to determine the undercurrents of the nation, and what its leaders and people needed to do to guard its political sovereignty, pursue economic stability, and advance its society. As defined by Nie Zhenzhao, "rationality" is "the use of human cognition and value judgment in a particular context" (Nie 2024, 203). Nie emphasised that cognition, value judgment, and moral behaviour are three dimensions that portray the rationality of human beings (Nie 2024).

Amid the radical post-war development, Han Suyin experienced her homeland as a race-segregated environment, leading her to wander with her in-between identity before she became a well-published physician author. With her fighting spirit, Han Suyin not only overcame her unwelcome bifurcated background but also aligned herself with other minority women writers who were known as "word-warriors," namely, Edith Eaton and Maxine Hong Kingston (Hsiao 1991, 133). However, while Eaton and Kingston were outright feminists, Han Suyin was not. Her autobiography series speaks from a non-gender-centric, humanity-for-all vantage point. Besides, unlike Pearl S. Buck, Winnifred Eaton, Bette Bao Lord, Dr. Hazel Ling, Virginia Lee, and some other writers who simply evoked China as an orientalised "landscape of memory" (Hsiao 1991), Han Suyin was more interested in the soul of China, whose radical path to modernisation had shaped her perspectives and dilemmas that compelled her to make ethical choices and renegotiate her ethical identity.

3.1 Ethical Identity: "To Be" versus the "Ought to Be"

One's ethnicity is bestowed upon birth. In Han Suyin's case, she chose to embrace the Chinese in her Eurasian identity, a choice that was starkly different from all her siblings. Inheriting two ethnic and cultural backgrounds was a blessing and a curse. As a child, she was enrolled in a Chinese school in the

morning and a French convent in the afternoon. At home, her meals were a European breakfast, Chinese lunch, and European supper. Occasionally, her mother even mixed macaroni and Chinese noodles in her cooking. But managing the duality was not easy. Back then, she was Rosalie Matilda Kwanghu Chou, a maiden name that reminded her of her European Chinese mixed roots. A young girl who was despised even at home, she figured she needed "another life, a saving otherness which was also self" (Han 1966, 352).

A few key terms about "identity" needs to be clarified. Identity could be subjective, as in self-identity, which might be self-perceived or self-determined; or objective, namely, the general identity of an individual coined by one's gender, ethnic, or social status. The subjective self-identity is how one chooses to define oneself, for example, Rosalie (Han Suyin's maiden name) once perceived herself as a ugly young biracial girl who had awkward behaviour and unrealistic dreams. "This is Hsinyang in Henan, and Papa is Chinese and Ma is Belgian, and I am Rosalie or so they call me, but really am not Rosalie, *I am me*" (Han 1968, 326).

Next, there is objective identity, which could be defined metaphysically, or relationally ("in relation to"), as proposed by ethical literary criticism (ELC). The metaphysical identity identifies what constitutes a person, namely, the appearance and general characteristics of a person, or in more technical terms, the body and soul of an individual. It also denotes whether a person could be always identified as the same person: if a person could be X at one time but Y at another, what makes X and Y the same person? For instance, if Han Suyin was Rosalie Chou at one time and Dr. Han Suyin at another, what made them the same person? As far as metaphysics is concerned, the same DNA or core characteristics of Rosalie Chou remained the same even as she grew up and transformed herself into a licensed physician cum famous writer, Dr. Han Suyin.

Ethical identity, on the other hand, defines the "core" or "true" self, a determinative of one's precise individualism as defined by his or her relational context, namely, the ethical environment of the person: what makes X (or X + Y at different life stages) a certain person who behaves in a certain manner under a certain circumstance, instead of the manners another individual would exhibit. For example, in Rosalie Chou's case, what made her persistently pursue her dream to be a medical doctor, while her sister Tiza Chou did not have such an idea at all? Given the same gender and ethnic background, and in an Old China environment, what constituted the ethical identity of Rosalie Chou that she made all those choices that eventually shaped her into Dr. Han Suyin? Also, given the same Eurasian background, what differentiated Rosalie Chou from her brother, George Chou, who disowned and denounced everything Chinese until the end of his life, while Rosalie considered China as her homeland and the subject of her lifetime advocacy through and through?

In ELC, identity defined as "the many relationships one cultivates, be it of the social or cultural community," will qualify under the discussion of one's

ethical identity (Nie 2024, 196). One's cultural identity or social identity, which is essentially ethical, falls under the discussion of the ethical identity as well (Nie 2024). For reflection, the ethical identity of an individual could be studied via two dimensions: Descriptively, what are the core traits and values that define Person X, e.g., who was Rosalie Chou at her core? Normatively, what are the core traits and values that should define who Rosalie Chou was? Very often, race, class, age, gender, and ethnicity are the basic determinatives of one's ethical identity in a community. As the saying goes, a leopard cannot change its spots. To a certain extent, these determinatives play undeniable roles in defining who a person is and suggest what core traits and values the person might probably subscribe to. However, one's ethical identity is also determined by the social roles that one assumes. For example, after Rosalie Chou completed her medical education and became a qualified physician (Dr. Chow [Chou]), her Eurasian female identity became secondary in her socialisation process. Her patients, as well as her social circle, would recognise her as a trusted medical professional, a doctor, rather than a normal Eurasian lady. Also, because of her professional qualifications, any negative preconception regarding her as a female or her "Eurasian" background was automatically re-evaluated.

Ethical identity is a determinative of a certain individual as perceived and determined during a certain era – what is expected of X as a member of society of that time. There was already an objective "ought to be" identity for Rosalie Chou (Han Suyin), as the perception of Eurasian young women during the 20th century was rather stereotyped. However, by redefining her "to be," Rosalie Chou became Dr. Chou, who fitted into the "ought to be" of her environment. Her ethical identity was also reshaped and redefined. As such, the ethical reconstruction of her objective identity resulted in her new ethical identity, which allowed her to play the role of an independent contributor to society, rather than a "loser" at the mercy of anybody. In Poulsen's (2015) language:

> Han (Suyin) is invested in *emplacement*, and while (the rejection of) citizenship (with her homeland) limits it, and (her increasingly recognised) world citizenship abstracts it, the environment potentially offers an inclusive *rootedness*. Han Suyin gestures towards a mode of being *grounded* in the present and *not dependent on* racial identity, nationality, or individuality, and which therefore interrupts the predictive use of Asian mixed race.
>
> (Poulsen 2015, 158–159)

3.2 Changing Identity: From a Doctor to an Author

In *My House Has Two Doors*, Han Suyin wrote about her changing interest and shifting identity from a medical professional to a published writer. By 1958, she had published her first four novels, namely, *Destination Chungking* (1942), *A Many-Splendoured Thing* (1952), *And the Rain My Drink* (1956), and *The Mountain Is Young* (1958). During a writers' party thrown

by her publisher, Jonathan Cape, Han Suyin found herself fitting nicely into her new-found literary circle. Nicknamed "Sunflower" by Cape, Han Suyin debated excitedly during the party with her literary associates whether the protagonist in her novel should be "burnished" or "suntanned" (Han 1982, 275–276). As a doctor, she impressed her patients; as a writer, she attracted readers. Now, it boiled down to whether she wanted to hold on to both or forgo one of her two endeavours.

Han Suyin's writing career was not limited to novels. She favoured novels, as they provided a literary world in which themes like cross-cultural romance could be emphasised, imagined, and developed. While novels gave her the platform to promote equality between people and the amicable relationship between people of different ethnicities, she also found writing satisfying, as she could chronicle history and assert her opinions. It was not difficult, thus, for Han Suyin to decide. Medical practice might address the needs of her patients, but it was in writing that she could project her voice on the global scene, especially during the Cold War, when access to and from China was almost impossible for other correspondents. Han Suyin's opinions reverberated during those days, as she was among the very few with access to China. Hence, she ceased her medical practice after working as a physician for a full ten years from 1948 to 1958:

> I wound up the clinic gradually, without haste. I had come to the end of my childhood longing. The medical me was being replaced by another me who fused medical diagnosis. With social and historical perception. There were too many "me"s jostling, each one occupied with a single activity; I must merge them, and one or a few of them must be dismissed. It was impossible to continue doctoring all day, writing at night, and doing what I now wanted to do: document myself fully on China, the Chinese Revolution. There was simply not enough time in the day.
>
> (Han 1982a, 405)

As a full-time writer, she ventured into many more local literati and learned activities. In 1957, when she was still phasing out from her medical profession, she joined the Malaysian Sociological Research Institute and witnessed the emergence of a local Malay magazine named *Intisari* (Han 1982, 283, 286). Influenced by her journalist friend Alex Josey and sociologist Shirle Gordon, she started contributing opinion papers to, among others, the *Eastern World*, a London-based newsletter (Han 1982, 284). Having resided in Malaya for more than a decade, Han Suyin took notice of the characteristics of local literature. She promoted Malayan Chinese literature, which stood out in content and expression from its counterpart in Mainland China:

> I was, by then, researching into Malayan Chinese literature. My contacts with Chinese scholars in Malaya had made me discover that there existed an extensive body of essays, novels, criticism, and poetry by Malayan Chinese

> authors different in content and feeling from Chinese literature proper. There were two excellent Chinese newspapers in Malaya and Singapore with a wide coverage of world events. There were some very good journalists who spoke superb English and Malay as well as Chinese, and I had had some lively meetings with them . . . Some years later I would collect and help to publish the first compendium in English on Malayan Chinese literature.
>
> (Han 1982a, 105–106)

Han Suyin was especially vocal about her idea of a multilingual and inclusive literature for Malaya in her article "The Creation of a Malayan Literature" (Han 1957, 20–21). Her opinion largely stemmed from her local experience with the multicultural society she lived in, where the four "main streams of languages" were Malay, Chinese, Tamil, and English (Han 1964, 8). Her inclusive position on the literary languages of a nation is quite consistent with her inclusive idea of accepting all people who form a community, as evident in her published works and public lectures.

3.3 Ethical Dilemma: The Paradox of a "Two-Door" House

An individual with a multiple *ethical identity* naturally would face a traumatising *ethical dilemma* that could not be easily resolved due to the multiple references the individual has to make. *Ethical dilemma* refers to the mental conflict an individual suffers when the individual cannot resolve a problem without choosing between two mutually exclusive options. The situation could be unsettling, as both options carry their respective moral imperatives. Compliance with one will cause a violation of the other. Ethical literary criticism defines *ethical dilemmas* as "situations in which paradoxical moral choices are made" (Nie 2024, 214).

The narrative of Han Suyin's life was definitely not linear. In fact, it was like a constant switch between the past and the present. The past was not left behind at a point of memory, but it could be "back here" anytime, intruding into the current state of the life of a person. What was more bizarre was that the switch was also happening between the two worlds of her bifurcated identity. From her teen years, The then Rosalie had already seen her life as a "two-door" house. While others would only understand and perceive her from one perspective, she had another identity that they refused to recognise:

> And my heart shall know what it is not to be one, yet not two, for ever almost, for my *house of life* has *two doors*, and the people that walk into it by one door do not use the other, and everything has to be kept apart from everything else. I alone use both, use all, grasping the keys to both to open and shut my house at will.
>
> (Han 1965, 281)

Individuals of bifurcated backgrounds often share a common experience. "What unites them is their place between two worlds that simultaneously claim and reject them, render them visible and invisible" (Ling 1990, 131). Amy Ling's book *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* points out that the paradoxical between-worlds condition plays significant roles in shaping the respective self-concept and writing style, with distinctive self-reflexiveness (Ling 1990, 132).

While renaming might help Rosalie to determine her new life direction, she nevertheless suffered the *dilemma* of not knowing which world she was in at times. The ideal world where Rosalie had wished she could be left alone and undisturbed was deemed surreal.

> In Rosalie 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 by the world's incoherence.
>
> (Han 1965, 369)

Rosalie found it difficult not to be able to live according to how she redefined herself and interacted with others in a non-discriminating manner. The dilemma between getting all things sorted out and letting them remain contradictory became her way of life: "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 to remain substantial" (Han 1965). She accepted the dilemma of seeking things straightened out and living in the "discomfort of always being partly wrong." She accepted the state of "a cozy semi-blindness" versus the state of confronting every tint of "the pricking clarity of doubt" (Han 1965).

The same coping skill of living in incoherence transpired as she became a young working adult at the Peking Union Medical Centre (P.U.M.C.):

> 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.
>
> (Han 1966, 130)

Instead of pandering to her need for stability and security, Han Suyin's perspective of that "lack of cohesiveness" helped her survive. Her rationality lay in her total acceptance of the irrationality and inconsistency in life. Even as

she struggled continuously with her own stability, Han Suyin, who had lofty aims of contributing to society, had already had the vision of being a leader in the international arena.

> 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, another 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.
>
> (Han 1966)

Little would she know at that point that she would become an apologist for the Chinese Revolution to readers across all continents. Her vision came alongside her concern for the fragmentation of different people who lived in the same global village. At the same time, she admitted having her struggles. Sometimes, she would even behave in a way that mimicked the bad examples around her:

> 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 Eurasians 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. I would hear, unperturbed, the vilest insults hurled upon the Chinese; *but* the next day or week, I would insult in turn, blindly, some European or other.
>
> (Han 1966, 131)

An obvious *dilemma* in Han Suyin's life was the identification and justification of her whereabouts. It had always seemed that Han Suyin was suited for another place other than her homeland China, but she always felt she was meant to live in the country she was born and raised in. Both the second and third volumes of her autobiography ended with her dilemma of whether to give up what she was pursuing in Europe to travel back to China, although she felt she could not contribute much to China. Even so, in *A Mortal Flower*, when the Japanese had invaded Shanghai and were targeting Nanking, she abandoned her medical studies at Brussels University, bade farewell to her grandfather, her boyfriend Louis, the scholarship board, and returned to China (Han 1966, 340). It was against all reason and logic.

Choosing here or there, choosing between the "two ways of life, two selves, two destinies," Han Suyin agonised, worrying that she might not be able to bear the uncertainty of her future: "Was I right to go? Was I wrong?

Would I retrace my steps?" (Han 1966, 360). As she reasoned with herself, she was halfway through her medical studies because she wanted to be a doctor to uplift the sick, poor, and needy. However, she never knew that her plans would temporarily turn into a "butterfly dream" as the cities of China were falling to the Japanese, and she was incapable of offering any practical help to alleviate the situation.

The last chapter of *Birdless Summer* is a repeat of an almost similar episode that happened a decade earlier. By then, Han Suyin had already been married and widowed with her adopted daughter, Yungmei, and worked for a year as a house surgeon at the Royal Free Hospital in London. This time, China's civil war ended with a tornado-triumphant revolution of the communists. China was changing its government. The Kuomintang and foreigners had to leave for Taiwan and Hong Kong, respectively. Han Suyin faced a dilemma again: return to the East, or remain in England after her housemanship?

> why was I again leaving safety, gentleness, a certain career, and now dragging Yungmei with me – what was I going to? And why this inexorable push to go? And would it once again be the hell? Had I learned nothing?
>
> (Han 1968, 349)

A related dilemma was that she could neither return to China nor be a citizen of China after 1949 due to her half-foreigner identity and her first marriage to ex-Kuomintang general Tang Pao-Huang. She had to reside in Hong Kong, working at Gordon King's Obstetrics and Gynaecology Department at the Queen Mary Hospital while waiting for the lifting of the prohibition for her to return to Sichuan.

There are two tiers in the historical development in Han Suyin's *autoethnography*. The first is the individual story during the era, especially her family history. Second, at the macrocosm, Han Suyin chronicled the dilemma of her birth country, China. The topic of the Chinese soul surfaces several times in her autobiography. To recapitulate, Han Suyin first recorded the confusion of the Chinese elites regarding the identity and whereabouts of China and Chinese civilisation in the second volume of her autobiography, *A Mortal Flower*. While non-Chinese intellectuals reminisced about the fading glory of ancient China, the "Westernised" Chinese appeared unmoved about the frustrating socio-economic shape of China at that time. The reason was that they, who carried "impeccable accents from Paris or New York," remained "safe in the International Settlement" (Han 1966, 265); they did not see what she saw, that not only was China underdeveloped but China also battled poverty, labour exploitation, and other teething issues. The future of China was at stake, despite her glorious past. Han Suyin saw how uninformed and unconcerned these elites were. Their discussions regarding the "soul" of China yielded answers that were "profoundly shallow, (like) a wide stream of murky idiocy, a gargle of myths" (Han 1966, 265).

On the contrary, Han Suyin had kept abreast of the latest developments in China. As an international student studying medicine in Brussels, she delivered 128 public lectures throughout Belgium and France between October 1937 and July 1938 to refute the Western perception that Japan's invasion of China was to "preserve China from Communism" (Han 1966, 341). She was recruited by the Committee for Aid to China formed by the Belgians, which sponsored lectures, meetings, and film shows to inform and rally public opinion for China. The Committee was an associate body of the National Salvation League for China that was formed in May 1936.

Han Suyin's patriotic actions stemmed from her belief that "salvation for China" would have to come from *within*, from the Chinese people themselves. In Mao's language, China's salvation lay on the strength within China, namely, the peasantry of China, who occupied 90% of the land. She wrote, "From the very beginning Mao's strength was that he looked for China's salvation not *outside*, but *inside* China" (Han 1966, 82). The activities of college students in Brussels alerted the ambassador. Students were told "to study." When summoned for a face-to-face session with the ambassador, Han Suyin asked, "Don't we want to save China?" In fact, in Han Suyin's consciousness, China then was "a slave country, everyone's slave" (Han 1965, 216). In some way, Han Suyin probably saw herself picking up the rationale of the Chinese Self-Strengthening Movement that had been passed on half a century before.

Even in the early volumes of Han Suyin's autobiographies, Rosalie (Han Suyin's maiden name) recorded a positive attitude that the worst economy could be morphed into a new welcoming development:

> So often I heard China's doom pronounced: "China is: finished." "This is the end." "There is no hope for China." And yet its anticipated death throes became the quaking of new life; the unburied dead hosted the new-born; and we, the semi-blind who sought the light, long deluded by false promises and lying prophets, have lived to see the transformation which in turn transformed us.
>
> (Han 1966, 40)

Another few decades later, Han Suyin was ready to dismiss her medical profession to become a full-time writer and Chinese apologist. To refute the anti-communist and anti-Maoist watching Western community, Han Suyin decided to end her dilemma in Chinese policy judgment. She chose to herald the historical correctness of the Chinese Communist Party by giving China a radical rebirth but minimising any condemnation of the human disasters caused by the mistakenly adopted policies. Han Suyin named the radicalisation of modern China as the "World Revolution." Indeed, the rise of Communist China was a significant historical reference point in the 20th century: "Today the East is Red, the future has entered our present, has transformed

it long before its own advent . . . The mistral sings its name and its name is Revolution, World Revolution" (Han 1985, 5).

In 1994, Han Suyin published *Eldest Son: Zhou Enlai and the Making of Modern China* as an accolade for Zhou's vision of technocratic moderation, which was never truly communist, thus contributing to China's dream of building "a socialist modern civilisation-state with a Chinese character" through his successors, such as Deng Xiaoping. Besides, Han Suyin's *Morning Deluge* and *Wind in the Tower*, which were her voluntary "hagiographies" of Mao, present a different voice from the appropriated academic work. She intended to make communism in China, as well as the entire trying process of the Chinese Revolution, somewhat "palatable to even her bourgeois readers in the West" (Paul 2012) for the sake of the rising new China.

3.4 Alienation of China's Youth and National Soul-Searching

Han Suyin's autobiography paid significant attention to the youth of China. She was concerned about the debate on the continuity or discontinuity of Chinese tradition, revolution, and her spirit and way of life (Han 1982, 495). In *Wind in My Sleeve*, she opined that China's path to modernisation was not without setbacks. Disagreeing with Ding Ling and other writers of eminence who applauded the success of China's socialist system, Han Suyin argued that the issue of youth alienation could be intricate. For her, the disinterest of the youth should be a high priority for the policymakers to tackle (Han 1992, 91).

Any attempt to make everyone understand China's choice to modernise would be challenging. To begin with, the process was confusing. Not all attempts by the communist government were successful. Han Suyin remarked, "that immense Chinese pendulum, going right-left, left-right, all through the history of Revolution" (Han 1982, 387). "China's pendulum is swinging . . . It always overswings" (Han 1982, 499). It was quite certain that the youths of that era would find their socio-political climax uncertain and disappointing. The anti-intelligentsia wave and the Cultural Revolution changed the lives of some of China's best brains, including Lao She (Han 1982, 42). The Great Leap Forward failed, as "the whole point of agricultural mechanisation suffered a defeat" without the backing of sufficient capital accumulation (Han 1982, 509). One of Han Suyin's interviewees was Gladys Yang, a noted English translator of Chinese literature who married renowned Chinese translator Hsienyi (Xianyi) Yang. The Yangs survived the scrutiny from the authorities during the Hundred Flowers. Han Suyin documented Gladys' journey of reconciling with herself after the suffering:

> I watched myself become other, sprout another me, a personality which no longer suffered alienation. I did, in a way, become someone else, but not

> altogether; in the end, I chose what adapted me and I remain myself . . . Now I am able to see things in several ways at once.
>
> (Han 1982a, 398)

In Han Suyin's autobiography, the ability to perceive things from multiple perspectives was one of the coping skills that she resorted to. Nevertheless, the young generation of the late 20th century had to grapple with their emotional and spiritual agony, the unfortunate consequence of the Cultural Revolution. Her interviewees said, "We feel a big black hole inside our spirit. The heart has gone out of us; it is not easy to patch up this vacancy" (Han 1985, 303). Han Suyin's autobiography noted that defeatism, cynicism, and fear of a return to tyranny were looming at the time.

Since the late Qing dynasty, China has never been united. Liang Qichao, Dr. Sun Yat-sen, and Mao Zedong had all exclaimed that the divided China was far too difficult to be patched together (Wang 2013). However, the evolvement of the new concepts of "country" or "nation" (*guojia* 国家), community (*shehui* 社会), and society (*tuanti* 团体) turned out to be transformative for China (Wang 2013, 97). Besides, the main concern of the May Fourth literature about how one should live one's life (*rensheng* 人生) was well-received among the youths (Han 1985, 99).

Reformist Chen Duxiu (1879–1942) and Chinese thinker Qian Mu (1895–1990) had both paid attention to the high suicide rate of Chinese youths in their respective articles. Chen wrote "About Suicide – Change of the Mind and Youth Suicides" (Chen 1920), while Qian had an article entitled "Lamenting for Sun Yidi" (Qian 1934, 1–2). Qian alerted society that youth alienation could cost lives. The youths' anxiety due to their unclear life directions and meaninglessness was a grave issue. Thus, the philosophy of dedicating oneself to the "salvation" of one's country should be promoted, as it could give direction to the youths. As the logic goes, pursuing "salvation" for the struggling nation was bringing salvation upon oneself, namely, "*jiu guo jiushi jiu ziji.*"

Wang Fanshen's article "The Nature of Boredom" argues that there was an intricate correlation between youth alienation and the rise of communism. Both paved the way for the civil readiness for modern China's social reengineering (Wang 2013, 86–131). Wang saw how the introduction of "-ism" and related structural organisation had helped rational Chinese youths understand the world around them and the cosmos within them. Whether one chose to attempt to "save" China through education or via the advancement of science and technology, the rectification of the problems at the macro level would eventually relate to the *raison d'être* and meaning of life of the Chinese youths themselves. When one can see meaning in life, one would be able to locate one's position in human history (Wang 2013, 108). Such was the logic that had motivated many Chinese youths during China's most trying time. "Save the nation, saving oneself" as life's goal was irresistible. Therefore, it was not

surprising that the Chinese youths saw that communism and the Communist Party could facilitate possible changes for the welfare of the country and did not hold back from becoming party members. Moreover, for some of them, political activities that were motivated by altruism and patriotism naturally weighed more than their uncertain love life or frustrations of another kind (Wang 2013, 117).

Concerned about the well-being of China and the future of the nation, Han Suyin asked herself fundamental questions, such as "What is the real Chinese?" and "What is the true soul of China?" (Han 1966, 265). Her thoughts on China were intensified by the indifferent Westerners and returning overseas Chinese. They also tried to give their opinions about the China they perceived, but none were serious about the topic. Han Suyin was unhappy about their apathy and indifference:

> "The real China." "What was the real China?" They talked about the mysterious, inscrutable mystery of China, not only Europeans, but the Chinese themselves, these Westernised intellectuals in their long Chinese robes and impeccable accents from Paris or New York; talking of something impalpable and eternal, and sometimes complaining (because they were safe in the International Settlement) that Chiang Kai-shek did not allow freedom of debate. But soon they returned to the awesome question: "What was the True Soul of China?" . . . A fortnight passed and my ear began to hurt.
>
> (Han 1966, 264)

China's overall backwardness during that time posed a stark contrast to her past wealth. With an average life expectancy of around 28 years and poor livelihood for local labourers and women at the mills in 1935, Han Suyin agonised over the massive poverty that called for urgent reforms. In fact, since her youth, she had aspired to contribute to China's future socio-economic growth:

> All she knew was this profound physical disturbance that went on growing and growing in her in spite of herself, something which became so strenuous that she cried out in her mind: "When I am big, I will do something so that there will not be a beggar left in China, and no child will be blind. One day each child in China will have an egg a day." An egg a day, according to Mama, prevented blindness.
>
> (Han 1965, 348)

Han Suyin did not like western perception of China. At the same time, she felt her own desperation about her uncertainty on what constituted the true China. It was difficult to see anything redeeming during that time, as foreign invasions and civil wars had impoverished China spiritually and materially. The nation was also greatly confused about its political direction.

When China lost her self-assumed position as the Middle Kingdom in the world, there was no other option but to mark her own unprecedented path to modernisation. From the 1840s to the 1940s, China was in chaos. Corruption and lethargy of the Qing governance caused major rebellions, such as the Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864), Nian Rebellion (1851–1868), Boxer Rebellion (1899–1901), and Xinhai Revolution, which eventually overthrew the Qing dynasty, leading to the establishment of the Republic of China. The New Cultural Movement (1915–1921), in particular, the May Fourth in 1919, introduced the Chinese youths to Western political philosophy, thus giving rise to the formation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) by Li Dazhao and his colleagues. In 1949, the Communists overpowered the Nationalists. Mao established the People's Republic of China. The economic experiment of China during the first three decades of rule by the CCP was rough. China introduced the adventurous Great Leap Forward (1958–1961), a centralised economy fashioned after that of the Soviet Union. Household agriculture was abolished in favour of collectives. Industrial development was strictly implemented and monitored by the government. Jobs were allocated, and wages were set. Consumer goods were rationed. This "highly centralised non-market, Soviet-type system" did not work for China (Perkins 1991). As observed by political economist Dwight Perkins, "enormous amounts of investment produced only modest increases in production or none at all. . . . In short, the Great Leap was a very expensive disaster." The famine from 1959 to 1961 caused about 30 million deaths.

After the failure of the Great Leap Forward, Mao had to improve his declining popularity. Hence, he sought to eradicate the elite group and experienced leaders in various fields who might bring back the "bourgeois element" or capitalism to China. The movement paralysed the already weak economy of China. Millions were subject to public humiliation, arbitrary imprisonment, property seizure, and so forth. Historical relics and artifacts were destroyed. The legacies of Ancient China were disregarded and condemned. China's overall economy sank again. After 1960, the government stopped publishing statistical data on economic performance. Analysts outside China found it difficult to piece together any data that leaked out. The gaps in related research continued after 1979 when new official data were released.

It would be difficult to understand China, especially during the two decades of almost complete silence from 1960 to 1979, except for the news coverage from within. Han Suyin's autobiography provided some of the "insider" perspectives of the Chinese leaders. In her meeting with Madam Gong Peng of China's Foreign Ministry in 1959, she had the "ah-ha" moment which only an insider perspective could provide on the political temperature in China: "I could not *understand* what I read outside; only when I read the Chinese newspapers and was steeped in China's own atmosphere did it all begin to make excellent sense. It did not make sense to me abroad" (Han 1982, 308).

During the Cold War era, it was considered treason for Westerners to attempt to enter the "Red" China. However, nothing could stop journalists Felix Greene and Edgar Snow from landing in China. Like Han Suyin, both were known as China sympathisers who had given a relatively rosy view of Communist China. Han Suyin found other voices that attempted to present Communist China as a new member of the global village in a positive light:

> Would we be able, Edgar Snow, Felix Greene and myself, to establish better understanding between China and the Western world, so that China would no longer be considered a threatening, hostile planet on its own? When would China be seen as she really was, neither Heaven nor Hell, but simply a very large country with an enormous number of hard-working, poor people, frighteningly poor, but indomitable in their determination to achieve prosperity and social justice and to get swiftly into the twentieth century?
>
> (Han 1982a, 352)

Han Suyin's meetings with Zhou Enlai helped to clarify China's position in international politics. For example, China's reservation regarding any fruitful outcome from the diplomacy between Soviet's Khrushchev and America's Eisenhower at Camp David in 1959 was based on China leaders' uncompromising allegiance to the fundamentals of communism. On the matter, Zhou told Han Suyin:

> Peace was concrete, not an abstract proposition, and there was no evidence that there would be disarmament; on the contrary. Compromise must have its limits, but it did not mean selling out the peoples of the Third World (China). If it does, then it is not peace, only submission and servility. We must decide now whether all the peoples of the world have *a right to their national liberation* or whether they will be slaves for a thousand years . . . on this point, we shall never compromise.
>
> (Han 1982a, 324)

Han Suyin recalled that Zhou's speech gave her another perspective on what Western journalism had referred to as "Chinese intransigence." The crux of the matter was the rise of new Chinese consciousness. China was now claiming her right to differ from the Western viewpoint, especially on matters pertaining to her political ideology and new national character.

Han Suyin's autobiography also covered materials that were otherwise silent in the Cold War era. While other materials only reported China's rifts and clashes at her borders with India and Russia during 1962–1964, it was interesting that Han Suyin named the Cold War as the period of China's resurgence, in contrast to the label of 1960–1961 as the period of survival

(Han 1982, 379–402, 432–463). Almost like the saying "where there is a will, there is a way," Han Suyin wrote that the discovery of crude oil during the Leap was one of the major factors that drove new economic growth (Han 1982, 432). In a hopeful tone, she wrote:

> In that Summer of 1962 China was resurgent. The hunger and the want of the three bad years, 1959–1961, were going, and in the air was the promise of a good autumn harvest despite renewed accounts of droughts and floods and insect plagues.
>
> (Han 1982a, 324)

Moreover, some of the industrial experiments yielded satisfactory results, for example, the steelworks at Anshan (Han 1985, 18).

In her autobiography, Han Suyin also provided rare information about the non-mainstream folks. For instance, she documented the contributions of returned overseas Chinese in the rebuilding of China after one of its biggest economic downturns after the Leap. She wrote: "Between 1959–1961 almost a million overseas Chinese had returned and been resettled. They had started pineapple, rubber, and coffee plantations in south China." However, Han Suyin noted that the wealth and showy character of these people eventually caused them to be one of the targets of scrutiny during the Cultural Revolution in 1966 (Han 1982, 433).

In the closing chapter of *My House Has Two Doors*, Han Suyin observed that China's pendulum had "over-swung." In the chapter entitled "Towards the Cultural Revolution: 1964–1965," she voiced her anxieties as she came across denouncements of leaders against youths having "bad habits of bourgeois" elements, anti-intellectual waves against the Soviet's revisionism, condemnations of aesthetics and material ease per se, and so forth (Han 1982, 498–499). Subsequently, the Cultural Revolution was described as the "lowering sky," "thunder and lightning," as well as "the storm" in *Phoenix Harvest*, the fifth volume of her autobiographical series. Han Suyin wrote about her anguish at the condemnation of the academia and elites by students, the disappearance of all musical instruments (Han 1985, 29), the "terrorism" of the Red Guards (Han 1985, 41), and so forth. She recorded how leftist writer Anna Louise Strong, known for her "Letters from China" for the American readership, was also appalled by the unbelievable damages that were done to the people (Han 1985, 113). However, even Louise believed that there was a price to pay for favourable changes: "Well, no use moaning. I suppose that's that, we've all got to make some sacrifices for a good cause" (Han 1985). While Louise's statement might be an understatement, another account of Han Suyin by another interviewee, Rewi Alley, a member of the Chinese Communist Party, gave a better perspective of how the Chinese coped with those trying years of man-made turmoil: "Well, one thing can be said: Where there's life there's hope" (Han 1985, 112). Han Suyin concluded that the people's will to survive was simply strong enough for them to thrive.

When prohibitions for new literature were lifted, new and progressive ideas found expression in new forms of novels, novellas, short stories, plays, and poetry. Despite the differences in political ideologies, Chinese writers, such as Mao Dun, Ba Jin, Xia Yan, Ding Ling, Bingxin Heart of Ice, Lao She, and several others, became the mouthpieces of the common people. The voices of the modern Chinese emerged in modern Chinese literature (Han 1992, 50–51). Here, Han Suyin paid attention to a genre known as the "literature of the wounded" (Han 1992, 32). Life could go on only when the afflicted could recover from their brokenness. One of the ways would be through the process of catharsis via literary means (Han 1992, 33). Han Suyin highlighted the necessity and legitimacy of the literature of the wounded, which would facilitate soul-searching during the era. Nonetheless, it was a period when many lives were sacrificed amid political power shifts due to contradictory ideologies that were appearing too unpredictably.

3.5 Role of an Individual in the Self-Strengthening Movement

Contemporary Chinese literature is imbued with the theme of national self-strengthening. Ever since the Qing dynasty weakened, Confucian scholar Gong Zizhen foreshadowed the revolution by renewing the reading of Chinese classical texts. Gong's "New Text Confucianism" had a great impact on his student, Kang Youwei, and Kang's student, Liang Qichao, who were key figures in shaping the idea of "renewing the people" among Chinese youths:

> There are two meanings of renewing. One is to improve what is *original* in the people and so renew it; the other is to adopt what is *originally lacking* in the people and so make a *new* people . . . Our people have been established as a nation on the Asian continent for several thousand years, and we must have some special characteristics that are grand, noble and perfect, and distinctly different from those of other races. We should preserve these characteristics and not let them be lost . . . If we wish to make our nation strong, we must investigate extensively the methods followed by other nations in becoming independent. We should select their superior points and appropriate them to make up for our own shortcomings . . . Thus, how to adapt and make up for what we originally lacked so that our people may be renewed should be deeply and carefully considered.
>
> (de Bary, and Richard Lufrano 2000, 289–291)

The notion of remaking a new Chinese people who inherited Chinese core values and yet were knowledgeable in technical know-how like the West was clearly stated here.

Liang was a reformist who believed in a systematic reform of China from all aspects –economically, politically, culturally, legally, educationally, and

socially. Contrary to the Yangwu school of the Self-Strengthening Movement, which believed solely in the empowerment of China from the aspects of her arsenal, factories, and shipyards, Liang, along with his friend Yan Fu, envisioned the creation of a new Chinese people via the strengthening of the body, enlightenment of the mind, and renewal of their morality. While Yan Fu was vigilant in translating Western literature into Chinese, with the conviction that learning from the West might strengthen China, Liang promoted a completely politically charged literary genre to sharpen the Chinese consciousness (Li 2007, vii). Han Suyin's idea of the "New People" in her autobiographical series reflected the spirit of the Self-Strengthening Movement. She was indebted to her Chinese tutor Teacher Wu, who inculcated political awakening in her: "If you want to learn Chinese, Miss Chou, you must also learn what is happening" (Han 1966, 154–155). Her second Chinese tutor, Teacher Wang, assigned her Liang Qichao's "The Pavilion of Iced Beverages," which was a collection of historical, socio-political, and literary essays. She thus became a dreamer for a new China on the international platform (Han 1966, 139).

Han Suyin wanted to achieve her dream for China in practical and attainable ways. She would first work through the constraints of her ethical identity by renaming and defusing the curse of condemnation of her *raison d'être*. She would deal with the painful issue of her fragmented self and incoherence between the ideal and real world. Through those growing pains, she continually sought for a better understanding and redefinition of her contesting "self," as well as the yet-to-be-redefined, modernised China.

3.6 Chapter Conclusion

A female professional and intellectual who had many accolades and achievements in life, Han Suyin did not enjoy an easy start in life. She had to fight against the odds, as revealed in her interview with the Royal BC Museum (Webster 1985). Eventually, Han Suyin discarded her perpetual struggle with her dual identity and assumed a new identity with a higher calling, namely, seeing herself as a world citizen who was accountable for the peace and harmony of the increasingly diverse global community. As an emigrant from China, Han Suyin's life spoke for many international migrants who led different lives, compared to others who had never ventured out of China. In 1982, she claimed her identity as a "world citizen" in *Phoenix Harvest*, where she said she was one of the 0.06% of international migrants from China. The Chinese emigration number tripled between the 20th and 21st century. With the dramatic growth of transnational migrants and as new ideas travelled rapidly through cyberspace, traditional perceptions about one's identity need reorientation. Anthropologist Erich Kolig commented, "In a sense everyone becomes diasporic" (Kolig et al., 2009). Han Suyin's tone in the final chapter of *Phoenix Harvest* sounds reassuring: Although a Chinese Eurasian in diaspora, she saw her life as a story of a "completed self" (Han 1985, 313). To a large extent,

her efforts in securing the world's acceptance of the cultural outliners and irregulars have finally paid off.

Han Suyin's oeuvre reflects a profound engagement with her bicultural identity. Through her narratives, she articulated the socio-political dynamics of her time, especially how the ethical environment inflicted upon her ethical identity and ethical dilemma as a Eurasian female. As a close observer and insider of China's socio-political development, she was also able to offer insights into the issues faced by Chinese youths during the period of China's socio-political radicalisation. Although she had already relocated to Lausanne, Switzerland, when writing *My House Has Two Doors*, *Phoenix Harvest*, and *Wind in My Sleeves*, the last three volumes of her autobiographical series, her conceptualisation of self and community was derived from rationality that was defined by the ethical environment of the mainland China, her beloved country.

Note

1 Han Suyin's clinic, Chow Dispensary, was located at 24, Jalan Ibrahim, Johor Bahru, which is a car park today. Clinics were known as dispensaries. Han's original family name was Chou, as in her autobiography, but her clinic spelled her family name as Chow, probably under the influence of local Cantonese dialect in Malaya.

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4 Ethical Choice and Issue of Legitimacy in Han Suyin's Autobiography

A Cherokee legend describes a battle of two "wolves" inside mankind: "Wickedness" and "Goodness." The wolf that one feeds will win. While the metaphor may have oversimplified one's ethical choice, it is a pertinent reminder that an individual is composed of the choices he or she has made.

This chapter explores who Han Suyin was, based on her ethical choices as revealed in her six-volume autobiographical series. It examines Han Suyin's identification with her homeland, her career, changes in vocational involvements, her romances, and marital decisions. As explained in the last chapter, Han Suyin's bifurcated identity and related complexities naturally involved complicated ethical entanglements, rationality, and irrationality. This chapter discusses "legitimacy" and "illegitimacy," two key terms to be included in Nie Zhenzhao's ethical literary criticism (ELC).

Legitimacy is generally understood as the quality or state of being legal. In the context of an ethical environment, ethical behaviours involving human society, customs, norms, and social expectations often define acceptable behaviours, antisocial acts, and sanctionable conduct. In this context, thus, *illegitimacy* includes committing taboos and wrongs in the eyes of the group or going against societal norms.

4.1 Ethical Choice and Issue of Legitimacy

To facilitate the discussion on "ethical choice," an ELC key term, its distinction with the general term "choice" should be clarified. First, making a *choice* is to decide between two or more *options* of direction and action. Second, an individual may make a *personal choice* out of his or her *free will*. The person's choice might be active, passive, or reactive. Next, based on the person's free will, a personal choice could be *rational* or *irrational*. A rational choice complies with human reasoning, while an irrational choice violates reason and human logic. At the same time, one might be aware that under certain circumstances and cultural settings, there is a norm for individual compliance. It warrants a "legitimate" decision-making pattern, namely, an *ethical choice*, which individuals are expected to comply and abide with. Nie Zhenzhao defines

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"ethical choice" as "the choice of individuals and a given social group, with its motives, processes, and consequences subject to the evaluation required by its ethical environment" (Nie 2024, 191).

An illustration of these terms would be the historical choice made by Colonel John Jacob Astor, a passenger of the *Titanic*. At a critical moment, Astor made the firm choice to give up his seat on the lifeboat to a woman. According to survivors' accounts compiled by Jay Henry Mowbray, Astor got his unwell young wife onto a lifeboat filled with women. Astor was allowed to get into the lifeboat, too, because she needed his care. However, as the lifeboat was being lowered and ready to touch the waters, Astor sprang to his feet to offer his seat to a woman who was running towards the lifeboat. He leapt over the rail to help the woman get into the boat. His poor wife screamed in protest, but Astor had resolved to abide by the "women and children first" principle (Mowbray 1912a, Chapter 9).

The "women and children first" principle was the code of conduct observed during the evacuation of *HMS Birkenhead* in 1860 and *Titanic* in 1912. Although not officially instituted in the Maritime Law, it would have been an *illegitimate choice* if Astor had remained on the lifeboat when there was a woman who needed rescue. He made an *ethical choice* to give up his spot on the lifeboat for the woman. His sacrifice badly affected his ailing wife, who changed "from a radiant bride to a sorrowing widow" (Mowbray 1912b, Chapter 12), but it was a *rational* and *legitimate* choice within the parameters of social expectations. An *ethical choice* is one's legitimate choice that complies with the conventions or any binding social contracts of a community.

4.2 Legitimate Choice of Her Forever "Fatherland"

Han Suyin did not use the term "motherland" or "fatherland" to refer to China. The term "motherland" appeared twice in the autobiographical series, but it was the term used by Premier Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping, respectively (Han 1982, 128, 1992, 81). However, this discussion uses the term "fatherland" as Han Suyin's notion of her birth country, China, carries the weight of Han Suyin's father in her autobiography. Han Suyin adored and admired her father for his lifetime contribution to the construction of railroads in the inner regions of China. Her feelings for him likely formed part of her homesick psyche.

Han Suyin's father, Chou Yentung, was an engineer with the Belgium company that participated in constructing and maintaining the Lunghai Railway in 1913. A conscientious and reliable worker, he never complained about his salary nor stole the company's stationery. Neither had he asked for a pay rise or filed a complaint with the company, although four of his eight children died in the little towns along the railways. His employer told Han Suyin, "Your father has never given us any trouble" (Han 1966, 190).

A diligent worker, a peace lover, and a devoted husband and father. That may not sound like a remarkable profile. However, for Han Suyin, her father was a fighter in his own right, as he was not fearful of restoring the portions of railways destroyed by the warlords, members of Kuomintang (Han 1966, 65), and the Japanese (Han 1966, 212–213). Never a communist, Yentung worked willingly when he was summoned to assist in rebuilding the coal mines in the interiors of China after 1949 (Han 1982, 25). He remained faithful to his calling as a railway builder in China, even when his wife, Marguerite, left him to live in Hong Kong and subsequently in the West (Han 1965, 334, 1966, 32, 249, 1982, 26) and his friend moved away after marrying an American lady (Han 1966, 19–20).

In Han Suyin's memory, her father's love was associated with the mooncakes of Beijing, which Chou pampered her with during her childhood. Even in her 40s, she was still craving the Beijing mooncakes, and when she lived abroad, Yentung still sent her the Beijing mooncakes. The Beijing mooncakes heightened her nostalgia for the clear white moon and soothed her with the melt-in-the-tongue texture (Han 1966, 151).

Besides the mooncakes, Yentung's role as a significant father figure to Han Suyin was symbolised by the rich courtyard that he had planted for the family. In Han Suyin's (1972) description, the flora and fauna in the courtyard were just fascinating:

> I return to our first house, the house in the Manchu quarter of Peking, where in the spring the courtyard burst with Judas tree magenta, and the lilac was mauve and white. My father had tended the laburnum already there and planted the vine. The vine was the only plant, apart from carnation pots, which my father transferred to the other houses; the lilac and the Judas tree were left behind. Also left behind was a pomegranate tree and a jasmine called Seven-mile Perfume, and of all the courtyard gardens this one had been the best.
>
> (Han 1966, 282)

A courtyard filled with Yentung's masterpieces was the place of solace for Han Suyin during her childhood. It was thus not difficult to see why she favoured her father over her mother all her life. When her mother left her father during his illness in 1948, she was most upset, especially when she read the letter from her sister Tiza, "Papa was ill when we left, but he's all right now. I think he had some sort of stroke" (Han 1982, 25). She could even imagine her father approving her mother's "abandonment" of him: "I could see Papa lying in bed, saying in his low, spent voice, a little breathless, 'Don't worry, I'll be all right'" (Han 1982). The manner Han Suyin fought for a visa to visit her left-alone father in Sichuan in 1956 was evidence of her longing for him. During this visit, she went through the old family photographs that Yentung had

kept in the old trunk that her mother had brought from Belgium as his bride. She learned that her father would occasionally spread the photographs on his bed and pined for his wife.

Han Suyin's father was her pillar, as far as "home" was concerned. She would relate "home" with the idea of one's "family," the "root," as well as a "spiritual" rest house. She said, "A man's life begins with his ancestors and is continued in his descendants. My father's life, and after my father my own life, begins with the Family" (Han 1965, 19). For Han Suyin, the family, including the extended family, formed the ecosystem for one to thrive in a certain environment. Although she had Belgian blood, Han Suyin placed herself in her father's genealogy and extended Chinese kin. In *The Crippled Tree*, Han Suyin embraced her father's point of view that it was a mistake to send her elder brother to Europe during his early childhood: "Without the Family; there was no place for him in China" (Han 1965, 277). She reasoned that when one had no strong sense of "the family," which referred to both one's biological and patriarchal family, one would have no sense of belonging to a "home." When it was so, one's next generation would also suffer the labyrinth of rootlessness. "When we took him away, we did not know we were condemning him and his children" (Han 1965).

Describing her family tree as "the crippled tree," Han Suyin was nevertheless proud of her half-Chinese identity, the Hakkas in Sichuan. Han Suyin said, "The tree is known by its roots. I had to go back to the *roots*" (Han 1965, 17). Han Suyin used the term "root" rather frequently when discussing her idea of "home." For her, "The future begins yesterday, for the tree as well as for man" (Han 1965), asserting that one can build one's life as far as one desires, but the reference point is always our origin.

Not on good terms with her European mother, Han Suyin saw herself more as the daughter of her father, a descendant of the Hakkas. As a Eurasian who endured the awkwardness of being a displaced person in her own birth country, she saw a similar displacement of her father's forebears – the Hakkas. The Hakkas were the "Guest People," displaced peasants who were moving *en masse*, seeking "a roof" over their heads. According to Han Suyin, the Hakkas were migratory people, yet they preserved a strong sense of attachment to the land. For instance, they never failed to bury their ancestors in the land they dwelt in. When migrating, they would take along their ancestors' bones, or ancestors' clothes or belongings when the bones could not be unearthed. The custom of taking along the ancestor's bones, as Han Suyin explained, was probably founded on the idea of land acquisition so that one could claim their new settlement (Han 1965, 19, 22–27). The deliberate reference to the etymology and the geographical movement of the Hakkas reflected an ethical dilemma that Han Suyin faced, suggesting she would always remain a "guest," never a host, in her own country.

Nevertheless, Han Suyin never doubted her Chinese roots and always regarded China as her legitimate homeland, even when she later married and

dwelt abroad (Han 1982, 37, 197, 202, 433), evident from her homesickness when she felt she was missing her locus of comfort. In *A Mortal Flower*, she resented the peaceful life she was enjoying while studying medicine in Belgium. Even the romance with her boyfriend Louis could not fill the vacuum in her heart. "Are you ill?" "Yes." "What is it?" "I was homesick" (Han 1966, 339).

Leaving behind her ideal boyfriend, Louis, and the medical school she had been very passionate about, Han Suyin returned "home." Leaping like the high-spirited Manchurian soldiers who were singing on their high notes, Han Suyin gushed, "My home is on the Sungari River / There are the most beautiful flowers and trees / The loveliest fields of golden wheat / There is my home" (Han 1966, 292).

Years later, when Han Suyin became an overseas "Chinese," she proposed the idea of a "spiritual home." She saw clearly that although she had become a citizen of another country, China could remain her "fatherland" and her spiritual home (Han 1982, 75). China was undoubtedly Han Suyin's first love, her "only religion" and spiritual reference. While her writer's and medical consultant profile became well-known internationally after the publication of her novel *The Mountain Is Young*, the notion of global citizenship blossomed in her, and she started calling the whole world her home. Yet China was always her spiritual home. Han Suyin saw herself as part of the intellectual Chinese elites, who cared for the "salvation" and well-being of China. Her autobiography is immensely filled with the notion of "saving" her country (Han 1965, 137, 164, 226, 1966, 350, 355, 357, 1968, 25, 35, 66, 78, 1982, 189, 321, 1985, 72), and even as a well-travelled woman, she just could not leave the land she cared so much:

> I have pursued my beautiful chimera with Chinese obstinacy; yet I have not ignored or cast away other gifts of living, other lands and peoples . . . Neither do I forget how much Europe and America, Australia and India, Southeast Asia and so many other lands gave me, enlarging my horizons, until the whole world became my home until my roots extended and broadened to encompass the round earth.
>
> (Han 1985, 313–314)

Reading Han Suyin's six-volume autobiographical series will enable the reader to discern how much the altruist notion of offering one's services for the betterment of the country was religiously ingrained in her as her mission.

4.3 Han Suyin's Legitimate Choice for Her Medical Career

Han Suyin was more popularly known as Dr. Chou between 1949 and 1964. Her pursuit of a medical career was, in her own words, "an ambition (that) only

increased by time and difficulties" (Han 1966, 279). During those 15 years, she worked tirelessly, dedicating herself to her medical career. Indeed, Han Suyin had always been grateful to Joseph Hers, the Belgian boss of her father's railway company who provided financial aid for her to begin her medical education in Brussels, Belgium. Although she did not complete her studies due to her abrupt decision to return to China, the exposure to European medical schools prepared her for her medical studies in London a few years later.

In *A Mortal Flower*, Han Suyin wrote: "But it is due to Hers that today I am Han Suyin, for he did give me the money that I needed when I needed it" (Han 1966, 192). Without Hers' persuasion of her parents to let her pursue her medical studies at Brussels University with a Belgian scholarship, Han Suyin would probably have always been trapped in an adverse environment entrenched in racial discrimination and bigotry against Eurasian females like her.

In 1935, Han Suyin's father, influenced by Han Suyin's mother, wrote to Hers to decline her Belgian scholarship. Hers paid a visit to the Chous and convinced them: "I think your daughter had better have her chance, Madame, she has proved her determination to study" (Han 1966, 274). Their conversation became quite interesting, as there was a clash of opinions on what the legitimate "vocation" for a young woman like Han Suyin would be. Han Suyin's mother, Marguerite, firmly believed that "it is not a vocation for a woman, it is not a life for a woman to be a doctor . . . A woman must marry and be happy." Hers countered her opinion with a diplomatic compliment, "Madame, not all women are destined by God to be a happy wife and mother as you are" (Han 1966).

Han Suyin found the statement devastating, for she had always been labelled as one whose looks would not qualify her as the romantic interest of any young man. Yet Hers' words helped with her situation, for her parents were nervous about giving her up for anything, marriage or no marriage. When Han Suyin's parents finally accepted Hers' proposal, she got the chance to travel and live abroad, helping to reorient and redefine her ethical identity, as the new university campus environment in Brussels was far more accommodating than her little Eurasian circle in China. Ironically, though a Eurasian, Han Suyin's legitimate identity was supposedly a national Chinese then. It warranted her speaking favourably for China even when living abroad. Truly, she was a daughter of China.

Two things confirmed the gut feelings of young Rosalie (Han Suyin) that she could be trained as a medical professional one day (Han 1966, 152). First, the access she had to reading medical books when she was 12, understanding all the contents, and her ability to apply the knowledge to diagnose illnesses. Second, a strong sense of humanity in her when she witnessed the dire poverty and medical needs in the neighbourhood during her preteen years.

Rosalie (Han Suyin) inherited her first medical books from a doctor who had passed away in an accident. During the summer of 1928, Han Suyin's

father, though not entirely certain of the future of his career in the changing political scenario, decided to take his family for a vacation at the seaside of Peitaiho (or Beidaihe). They stayed with Mrs. Glauber, who owned a few bungalows, one of which was bought over with its remaining furniture and medical books from the previous owner, the doctor who died in an accident. Han Suyin inherited all the medical books from the deceased, stating in *A Mortal Flower:* "I inherit the dead doctor's books, read them between a trance of sea and sand . . . At the end, I know that I, too, will be a doctor" (Han 1966, 16). There were reasons for such confidence in Rosalie; she could immediately apply the little medical knowledge she had gained via observing the symptoms of illnesses around her:

> But first I acquire, one by one, the diseases I read about . . . I begin to scan others for diseases. My sister Marianne suffers from scarlet fever; her arms, bitten by seaside mosquitoes, and covered in a rash, denote bubonic plague. It is kindest not to tell her, though I worry as I watch her for the more dreadful bubo to develop . . . My father, though absent, surely has enlarged tonsils and gangrene of the feet.
>
> (Han 1966, 16)

Medical knowledge with no passion for people would not yield good doctors. Rosalie had exactly what it took to make a compassionate and astute medical professional. How her heart responded to the miseries and sufferings of people when she was 12 transformed her into an altruist for all humanity during her adulthood:

> Coming home from school, passing by the church, one Friday in Lent, I saw again the blind children, standing, sitting, around the church gates. I discerned their rags tied with string . . . The time had come to announce my decision at home. "Mama, I am going to be a doctor." "Wash your face, you have dust all over you." The big dust winds of March were blowing, engulfing the city in sand. "I am going to be a doctor, Mama." Mama counted the stitches in her knitting. Papa returned from his office; the soup was placed on the table. "Papa, I am going to be a doctor." "A doctor? It's very difficult to be a doctor if you are a woman." "She is making up stories as usual," said Mama. "I am not dreaming," replied Rosalie-me. "I am going to be a doctor . . . I am going to be a doctor, and I will do something, so they won't be blind, they will see."
>
> (Han 1966, 37)

At 12, although not understood or supported by her family, Rosalie was determined and knew instinctively that she would be a doctor one day to relieve pain and bring hope to the sick. China, in those days, as she observed, was "a world of beggars, moribund continent, carrion land; yet the cadaver refused

to perish . . . its anticipated death throes became the quaking of new life; the unburied dead hosted the new-born" (Han 1966, 39–40). She wanted to be a part of the catalyst of change to end all curable pains.

Much later, when she started practising medicine, her dedication and meticulous attitude propelled her to be more than just an ordinary doctor. She paid attention to the differences between clinical conditions and book knowledge. She was more interested in holistic treatment than what was then practised by Western doctors. She developed her own art of healing and was especially careful with Asian women and children, given their differences from the Western subjects that Western medical sciences were based on:

> In January 1948 I qualified, first acquiring the L.R.C.P., M.R.C.S. degree, which allowed me to apply for a house job at the Royal Free Hospital. Besides working part-time in the Pathology Museum at Hunter Street I had also followed, during the last six months, courses at the School of Tropical Medicine and Public Health; for I wanted to prepare myself for diseases such as cholera and typhus, plague, and leprosy, almost unknown in Europe but which l had seen in China. Later I received the M.B.B.S. degree, with Honours in surgery and pathology. All through my medical studies, it seemed to me that other interpretations were possible than those which we learned, and which were delivered with formal seriousness . . . In internal medicine I was not comfortable with those consultants who saw the whole patient from the standpoint of one organ alone . . . I studied attentively Hans Selye's books on stress and psychosomatic diseases, which were now finding acceptance; and I was more and more inclined to feel that a study of "the total person" was indispensable to good treatment, whatever the complaint . . . Misconceptions were taught to us, based on partial knowledge. It was stated that acute rheumatic head disease "did not exist" in Asian lands; and neither did high blood pressure, because of the rice diet and "the more passive" temperament of Asians; both these myths have now been abandoned. The incompleteness of many diagnostic judgments worried me. Later, during the fifteen years that I practised medicine in Asia, among Chinese, Malay, and Indian populations, I was to discard a good deal of what I had been taught, having made my own mistakes, due to acting by the book rather than taking more time to see the person in his or her entirety. And mistakes, sometimes leading to the death or permanent crippling of the patient, remain with one, their guilt never dwindles. The mental component of every disease, the long deep roots of illness which reside in behaviour, attitude, reaction to events, in the person's acceptance or refusal to welcome suffering and dismay, failure and sorrow, as essential components of joy and happiness – this struck me as so important in the art of healing; and nowhere more perhaps than in dealing with women's ills, and also with children.
>
> (Han 1968, 343–344)

When operating her clinic in Johor Bahru in Peninsular Malaya, Dr. Chow (Dr. Chou), or Han Suyin, offered her medical services at the most affordable fees in town:

> I charged only three Malayan dollars for a complete examination, including urine and blood. Very soon my peculiarity (examining urine and blood; apparently none of my colleagues ever bothered) became well-known and I acquired a fascinated clientele just for that. My colleagues, all men, charged ten to fifteen dollars when they gave an injection. I charged five. I went to visit patients at home for my usual three dollars. It taught me much about actual living conditions.
>
> (Han 1982, 101)

Highly qualified, Han Suyin had struggled since the conception of her medical dream until the years past her housemanship. After working three years at Queen Mary Hospital in Hong Kong and a year at Johor Bahru General Hospital, Han Suyin had all she needed to open her own clinic in Johor Bahru in 1953. Her legitimacy of practising private medicine was, however, questioned by the first visitor to her clinic, Dr. Ismail, simply because she was a female:

> I started a private medical practice in Johore Bahru (or Johor Bahru) in the summer of 1953 . . . My first visitor was Dr Ismail, the sole Malay doctor in Johore (or Johor), and also a politician. He would give up his doctoring when independence came in 1957 and become Minister of the Interior. Dr Ismail looked at the shiny new autoclave I had bought. He said kindly, "You won't have any patients. People don't like women doctors." By the end of the first month, I had twenty patients a day, and by the second forty to fifty a day, more than any other doctor in Johore Bahru.
>
> (Han 1982, 100)

Han Suyin ran her clinic until 1964. During those years, she was loved, appreciated, and very well-respected by all her patients. One of her accolades, "Star of Salvation," was given by a grateful mother whose baby would have died if she had not given him intensive treatment (Han 1982, 100).

Being able to visit China almost every year after 1956, Han Suyin had great opportunities to make a first-hand assessment of the economic achievements, as well as the health conditions of the Chinese. During a radio interview, Han Suyin explained that she often paid attention to the pigs reared by the Chinese farmers during her field trips because the livestock's condition would reflect the locals' living standard (Swaim 1985). On one of her visits to Zhejiang (spelled as Chekiang in Han Suyin's works) province, she was very delighted with their lively pigs: "Never have I seen such splendid-looking, healthy pigs. I congratulate the official who looks after them" (Han 1985, 134). Serving as a consultant on China Affairs with the World Health Organization (WHO),

Han Suyin's research, such as her report on "Family Planning in China" (Han 1971), received high recognition. She also set up the Han Suyin Foundation and appointed experts to manage it to improve the health and wellness in China. Among others, the Han Suyin Foundation funded a scholar exchange programme in 1995 so that a few Chinese scientists could study the efficiency and safety of intermittent intake of iron supplements among Chinese preschool children (Liu et al. 1995, 2). Han Suyin had proven that it was a *legitimate choice* for her to be a medical professional. She earned herself the right to be a doctor and continued to excel in medical practice during her tenure as a doctor and physician. She was thus recognised as an "early physician in Asia" in *Women in Medicine: An Encyclopedia* which was compiled by Laura Lynn Windsor (Windwor 2002).

4.4 Legitimate Vocation as China's Advocate

Han Suyin started writing about China because of the encouragement of Marian Manly, her colleague in the hospital in Chengdu and who discovered Han Suyin's writing gift. Marian had written several poems and short stories but had always been turned down by the editors. They jointly produced Han Suyin's first book, *Destination Chungking*, and Marian embellished it with flowery language that served as "a beautiful veil drawn over events too appalling in their reality" (Han 1982, 56). Not entirely happy with the editing, she revealed:

> for the business of a writer is to grope and search, in agony and dismay, in despair and in discovery; and whatever was said or done, it was with *Destination Chungking* that I had begun on this long road, not knowing where it led.
>
> (Han 1968, 154)

Han Suyin was unsure of her writing ability when she first met publisher Jonathan Cape. She recalled that when she glanced at Cape's shelves of books written by various authors, she thought, "Was [Am] I really to take a place among these?" (Han 1968, 273). She told Cape about her doubts, as she only wanted "to be a doctor," to which he responded with reassuring encouragement that she should continue writing, so long as she felt inclined to "put things down on paper" (Han 1968).

Destination Chungking was published in 1942 in America. It did not sell well. The idealised theme of patriotism in the book, however, earned Chiang Kai-shek's praise. Dorothy Woodman, Kingsley Martin, J. B. Priestley, Nora Waln, Stafford Cripps, Isobel Cripps, and other China Campaign Committee members also praised the book for promoting a favourable image of China to assist them in their donation drive for monetary support and medical supplies for China's warfare (Han 1968, 153).

Han Suyin's husband, Pao, was totally upset with the patriotic undertone in the book. Instead, he was determined to punish Han Suyin for writing a "communist" book. His abusive behaviour was evident in Han Suyin's fear, as she waited for his outburst after reading her book: "It was evening, Pao settled down to read; I crept into bed, shivering with dread . . . waited, frozen stiff with terror. In the next room, quietly Pao read on" (Han 1968, 153).

There was reason for Pao's rage. Han Suyin's book ended with a hymn dedicated to the coolies. Pao, being trained to detect "intellectual subversion," a long tradition of dissent hidden in the literary form of praises, concluded that she was promoting communist ideas (Han 1968, 154). Pao physically abused Han Suyin to get her to stop the publication of the English edition of *Destination Chungking*. Han Suyin had to arrange to temporarily send away her adopted daughter, Yungmei, and her babysitter, Gillie. She then rang up Jonathan Cape for assistance, but Cape merely asked sympathetically, "How long has your husband been cruel to you?" (Han 1968, 283–284).

A decade later, Han Suyin published *A Many-Splendoured Thing* under the same publisher. Malcolm MacDonald, the High Commissioner of Southeast Asia, wrote the foreword. When Han Suyin met him, Malcolm said, "It's a splendid book. I wish someone would write a book like that about me" (Han 1982, 86). With the success of this semi-autobiographical novel, Han Suyin embarked on her autobiography series, starting with the publication of *The Crippled Tree* and *A Mortal Flower*, which included both the microcosm of her family saga and the macrocosm of the historical trajectory of modern China and her accounts of the power struggles between the Kuomintang and the Communists. Her writing ability was thus confirmed by Cape and MacDonald.

A Many-Splendoured Thing was further adapted into a Hollywood blockbuster, entitled *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*. Her popularity soared beyond her imagination. She was lauded for having "dared what was unimaginable," projecting a ferocious "Red" (Han Suyin with Chinese blood) in Hollywood, but she neither attended the film's premiere nor watched the movie when it was screened for 36 weeks in Singapore. She received many letters from Southeast Asia, with messages from those who wanted to trace relatives in China to opinions about solving amorous entanglements. However, Han Suyin took comfort in that her book's success could pay the medical bills of her ailing daughter, Yungmei (Han 1982, 230).

During the Cultural Revolution, Han Suyin's writing was challenged. *The Crippled Tree* and *A Mortal Flower* were denounced as "derogatory to China" (Han 1985, 48–49). To those questioning why China was likened to a crippled tree, Han Suyin patiently replied that a tree that withered in winter would revive in spring. There was hope for China, she added. As for the "mortal flower," Han Suyin reasoned that while flora and fauna might perish, new ones would mushroom quickly. Han Suyin's rebuttals did not appease her critics. Even the photograph of Mao in *A Mortal Flower* taken by Edgar Snow,

showing Mao wearing a pair of patched trousers, was denounced as part of the "counter-revolutionary conspiracy" to deride the country's premier. She, however, managed to survive the criticisms and continued writing and advocating for China. After all, she believed China had a bright future despite the prevailing chaos. Living in Hong Kong gave her the vantage point of being a legitimate China observer (Han 1985).

Besides earning a wide readership for her literature, Han Suyin also became a productive commentator and public speaker. Owing to her inquisitive nature, extensive knowledge as well more than two decades of experience as an overseas "Chinese" who had lived in Hong Kong and Malaya-Singapore, with first-hand insights into China via frequent "homecoming" visits, Han Suyin was reasonably equipped to speak and comment on almost any given topic, ranging from politics to economy, culture, race and ethnic relations, health, literature, and language. But above all, China was her favourite subject. As a high-profile guest lecturer at many universities, Han Suyin was also wrote for *Life*, *Holi Day*, *The Reporter*, *The New Yorker*, journals of the World Health Organization, and many Asian institutions (Palos Verdes Peninsula News 1967). She became a recognised advocate and a clarion voice for China because of her bold challenge against the *zeitgeist* of the time.

4.5 Lovers, Husbands, and Choice of Relationships

Romance and marriage were delicate subjects in Han Suyin's life. She was always told that she was not as beautiful as her sisters, Tiza and Marianne, and that she was "wicked" and "ugly." But when she reached adulthood, she realised she was fine-looking. In fact, her friends told her she "possessed a long-lasting handsomeness of body and feature which was to outlast her sisters" (Han 1965, 375). But during her early adolescence, she believed her mother's negative remarks about her appearance and the impossibility of finding love:

> Of course, you must work hard and be first in school, you WILL never be able to get married, you are too ugly. Look at you, how ugly you are. You'll never catch a man. You'll be lucky if someone marries you for your brains. But men don't like brains.
>
> (Han 1965)

Considered by her mother and elder brother to be an ugly girl when young, Rosalie Chou turned out to be very attractive. She had at least two serious lovers and three official marriages. Consciously or unconsciously, Han Suyin somehow loved China above her men. Her third husband, Vincent Ratnaswamy ("Vincent" in her autobiography), had to endure weeks and months of her absence as she travelled, chasing after her "magnificent obsession" to advocate and lecture in favour of China (Han 1985, 317).

It is interesting that Han Suyin used marriage to illustrate how China should be treated and regarded by her Western counterparts:

> Marriage should be, "and they married, and they worked hard at their marriage ever after" because you have to work hard at marriage to make it go. But if you get married with the kind of idea that is sometimes spread here, that the other person *must be* as *you think they must be*, otherwise there's something wrong with them, you're not going to get anywhere much with your marriage. But if, like the Chinese, you don't expect them to be necessarily ideal but neither do you expect them to be absolute demons, then you sit down and talk problems over.
>
> (Han 1972)

Her obsession with China affected her marriages. One man found her more like a "thinking machine" rather than a woman (Han 1982, 125).

Louis, Han Suyin's fiancé who was also her college mate, faithful companion, and the one who swore to wait for her while she left him for China, told her: "I love you so much, I will wait for you . . . I did not want to tell you, but I love you with my soul, all my soul" (Han 1966, 362). Louis's touching confession could not stop her from leaving him when she heard that Japan was invading China. Not knowing how she could contribute to her birth country, she felt utterly homesick and chose to give up her medical studies and lover to return to China. Instead of returning to a safer place, such as Kunming in the Yunnan province, Han Suyin chose to be in Wuhan, the central city where the anti-Japanese war was strategised, until they fled the city for a safer place (Han 1968, 27). Neither romantic interest nor the security of having a promising husband could stand between Han Suyin and China, especially when China was attacked. Han Suyin's "extravagant patriotism" and hope of saving China were mocked by her scholarship provider, Hers, who saw no logic in her giving up Louis, her grandfather, and the promising career upon completing her medical studies at Brussels University:

> when you do go back you will find yourself a stranger. A stranger. You are Eurasian, not Chinese. Like all émigrés, you want to be more Chinese than the Chinese themselves. God knows whether the Japanese won't have taken all of China by the time you get there.
>
> (Han 1966, 357)

Louis accepted Han Suyin's breakup with him "for the sake of China" (Han 1968, 123), remaining truly in love with her. Killed in Assam in a flying mission in 1944, he left all that he owned (£640) to Han Suyin (Han 1968, 312). But Han Suyin was married to Pao. She informed the Belgian solicitor at the Belgian Embassy that the money should be given to Louis's two sisters instead, which the solicitor did.

Another man with whom Han Suyin fell head over heels in love was Ian Morrison. After the demise of her abusive first husband, Pao, Han Suyin completed her bachelor's degree in medicine and surgery in London and worked at Queen Mary Hospital in Hong Kong. The affections Ian showered on her was an "enchantment" that brought healing to her lonely and deprived soul (Han 1985, 316). Unlike his father, George Morrison, Ian was not a Victorian man. He had trekked in the Gobi Desert and excavated the Dunhuang caves. His open-mindedness made him a different white man, unlike his hard-core arrogant father, as well as other Anglo-Saxon colleagues who had a superior mindset over Asians. Although he followed his father's vocation as a writer for *The Times*, Ian had an entirely different take on the hegemony of the West. He did not perceive things in black and white nor judged matters that he did not understand. He remained sympathetic about the solidarity of Asia and communism in China (Han 1982, 31). He wooed Han Suyin with his love and ignited all her romantic impulses. Any thought of Ian was sweet and tender:

> Spring came with honeyed fingers, cloyed us with sweetness; again the magic of resurrection in that fraudulent and so true marvel, the word, adding weight and colour to unreal substance. Lovely spring, seamed with delight, a dazzle we contrived to think perpetual.
>
> (Han 1982, 44)

However, Han Suyin knew the challenges of a future with Ian, who was married: "I never said we had a future together, only at present" (Han 1982, 44). His Australian wife and children were residing in Singapore. Ian could not divorce his wife, as he needed to fulfill his duty as a father to his children. Even if he obtained the divorce, he would be excluded from Han Suyin's plan, for she wanted to return to communist China while he was a war correspondent for *The Times*, the leading magazine of the democratic West. Their unity would evoke questions about ethics, politics, and society. Their dating spot, the rocky pier of Hong Kong, was probably the only place where they could savour their romance without prejudice.

Clearly, it was *illegitimate* for Ian and Han Suyin to be together. Their affair ended in 1950 when Ian was killed while reporting on the Korean War. While Ian had a special place in Han Suyin's memory, she did not mourn for him as much as when Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai died in 1976. In the fifth volume of her autobiography, *Phoenix Harvest*, she wrote, "Even today (four years later) I weep for him, for not even Ian Morrison, nor even my father, have I mourned so long" (Han 1985, 278).

Han Suyin's life goal was to promote China in the international arena. Having discarded Catholicism, China became her "religion," as expressed by some of the Chinese intellectuals whom she acquainted herself with: "But this is what has always been: our only religion, our only love, is China, and that is why China has persisted, endured, survived, and is reborn again and again,

throughout the millennia" (Han 1982, 115). An Eurasian born and raised in China, Han Suyin tried to authenticate her "Chinese" identity through her first marriage (to Pao). In *Birdless Summer*, she wrote, "Pao became the personification of China to me" (Han 1968, 21). "Pao was Chinese; engaged to him, I was recognised at last (so I imagined) by China, and it was for China, not for a man, that I had left Europe" (Han 1968, 25).

In *Phoenix Harvest*, Han Suyin stated that she married Pao because she assumed (wrongly) that he would be her life partner and comrade in service of their country, China (Han 1985, 315). While Pao fitted into Han Suyin's patriotic image, he was not the right man for her. After marrying Pao, she was abused, belittled, and intimidated, being a "feudalistic man" who could not accept her past, especially her premarital sex with foreign boyfriends before marriage. Her daily confessions in her journals could not eradicate his perception of her impurity. The manner Pao treated Han Suyin was almost psychopathic at times, issuing conflicting orders like the following: "'You must not talk to these people'; 'I don't want you to laugh'; 'You must not look so sad'; 'You must refuse to dance'; 'You must dance'; 'Why don't you talk?'" and so on (Han 1968, 274). He never apologised for beating her, either in public or at home.

Initially, Han Suyin thought it helpful to play down her European disposition. "I was too European; I must learn to become more Chinese. People were talking about me. They called me 'mixed blood.' That could only be saved by the practice of ancient virtues" (Han 1968, 48). She tried to be Chinese by being virtuous and utterly obedient to Pao. She tried not to contradict anything he said, lest he severely punished her. Whenever she complained when he hit her, he would retort that she was not a virgin bride in the first place.

After many years of physical and emotional abuse, Han Suyin finally realised she had been mistreated all the while. She had to re-examine all her assumptions about Pao and the China she had (mis)understood:

> For China was not Pao, not the cruelty I had witnessed and endured . . . 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.
>
> (Han 1968, 350)

It was partially due to Han Suyin's disillusion with Pao and other corrupt elitists of the Kuomintang regime that she started to put hope in communism in China, that the political agenda of the Reds was more aligned with the interest and welfare of the commoners.

Pao had asked Han Suyin to commit suicide in case he died on the battlefield. It had been a practice of conservative Chinese since the Ming dynasty that chaste widows take their lives to preserve their "purity" for their husbands, and this would also accrue virtue to their family. In 1947, Pao died

during the Nationalist-Communist civil wars. Han Suyin did not commit suicide. She had not promised Pao that she would kill herself to be an "exemplary," a "chaste" widow (Han 1968, 317). Furthermore, she could not accept the fact that Pao had died in a civil war against her fellow countrymen and not in a battle against the invading Japanese (Han 1968, 130), maintaining: Why should she end her own life for such a cause? (Han 1968, 316–317).

Han Suyin's second husband, Leonard Comber, walked into her life when he checked a patient into her casualty department at Queen Mary Hospital, Hong Kong. He was an assistant superintendent at the Special Branch in Malaya. Comber was talented in languages and knew several, including Urdu, Hindu, and Cantonese. He was learning Chinese when they first met (Han 1982, 60). Han Suyin's adopted daughter, Yungmei, liked him, but Han Suyin did not love him. She told him bluntly that if she married him, it was merely to secure a home for Yungmei. Her confession did not stop Comber from marrying her, although he was concerned that her ultimate dream was to return to China. He asked her, "Are you still thinking of going to China?" Han Suyin replied promptly, "Yes, of course. I'll never give up" (Han 1982, 64–65). They got married anyway. It was a marriage of convenience. Not long after joining Comber in Malaya, Han Suyin was offered Malayan permanent residence by the founding father of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman. However, she turned it down decisively, for she did not see Malaya as a conducive place for her advocacy for China (Han 1982, 485).

While Han Suyin's medical career and vocation as a writer flourished in Malaya, her marriage to Comber crumbled. Comber had strong desires for intimacy with his wife. Han Suyin, however, was suffering sexual reticence and wanted abstinence. So although Comber could provide Han Suyin and her daughter a home, he did not win her heart, for he neither shared nor understood her longing for her dream home, China.

Before Comber and Han Suyin divorced, Han Suyin met Indian Colonel Vincent Ratnaswamy, who would become her third husband.

> Vincent never asked me about China. I just said briefly, "There is more dust to settle before I make up my mind. . . . No one else ever left me alone about China; everyone wanted an arbitrary, total judgment; phrases, cliches; they could not understand that verbalising was castration."
>
> (Han 1982, 237)

As a result of Vincent's total acceptance of Han Suyin's idiosyncrasies and support for her public promotion of China, he became her best life partner. Han Suyin described him as the good earth in which she could take root and grow. With him, she could make travel plans to China without being questioned. She wrote:

> And so I grew well and young and beautiful and I said, "I am going back to China next year, and the next, and the next, until . . ." And the earthbound

> presence of Vincent would keep my feet on earth, and make dreams move and shape words; his absence as potent (even more so) than his presence, but unthinkable if not interspersed with presence.
>
> (Han 1982)

With Vincent, time was relative. He said, "I'll wait for you, whether you come back from China or don't come back . . . always with me now, until I die" (Han 1985, 238).

Through Han Suyin's three marriages, she experienced clashes between her idea of legitimacy and that of each of her husbands. Throughout her years of marriage to Pao, her total submission to his feudalistic Chinese mentality only encouraged his male dominance and wife beatings. As Han Suyin was not a virgin at marriage, it "legitimised" Pao's physical bullying in the name of re-educating her on matters pertaining to virtue (Han 1985, 315). Han Suyin's autobiography confirmed some social issues in 20th-century China. Besides wife beating, bartering of brides, usury, mistress-taking by old cadres, rapes, and female infanticide were common practices, especially in the rural regions (Han 1985, 238, 298). In fact, social researchers noticed the high suicide rate among young rural women. Their research shows that many of these suicides and attempted suicides were not caused by mental illness or economic difficulties but by "impulsive decisions made in the aftermath of spousal or family conflicts, often involving a physically abusive husband, with the added factor of readily available lethal pesticides" (Hershatter 2007, 49).

Despite Pao's contempt of Han Suyin due to her "illegitimate" past, namely, her sexual contacts with foreign boyfriends before marriage, Han Suyin had always been faithful to him, as she honoured the legitimacy and sanctity of their marriage. In fact, in Han Suyin's reflection, she was glad that she had remained submissive to him:

> I married on a misunderstanding: that Pao and I would serve China together, Then I discovered what "feudalism" meant. I lived it. For seven years I endured the illogicality, the madness of a feudal mind and its self-torturing anger and its reasoning by symbolism. For seven years Pao tried to "remould" me . . . He scarred me forever, deep down in my woman being. I never completely recovered, but today how grateful I am to him, how grateful! His training so well enabled me to understand China in all its many ambiguities and contradictory facets.
>
> (Han 1985, 315)

Another facet of contradictions of perceptions about the legitimacy of marriage is related to mixed marriages between couples of different ethnic backgrounds. Han Suyin recalled that before the end of the Cultural Revolution, mixed marriages were still regarded by the Chinese as taboo, violating social norms. After 1977, with Premier Deng Xiaoping's open remark endorsing the

eligibility of marriages between foreigners and Chinese, there was increasing public acceptance of mixed marriages (Han 1985, 237).

When Han Suyin married Pao, she probably did not see it as a mixed marriage because she was a Eurasian with a hard-core Chinese heart. She was hoping that Pao could further authenticate her Chinese identity and that they both could serve the country together as children of China. However, when she chose to marry Englishman Comber and subsequently married Indian Colonel Vincent Ratnaswamy, she saw mixed marriages as legitimate. Moreover, although Han Suyin prioritised her vocation as the unofficial spokesperson for China above her love relationships, she needed a legitimate marriage. While her marriage to Comber did not work out, she abided by the law of the land and did not marry Vincent until the divorce from Comber was official.

4.6 Chapter Summary

Legitimacy is one of the benchmarks of man's rationality in the ordering of society. Violating the communal sense of legitimacy will invite undesirable consequences for the individuals who commit it. Han Suyin's accounts reveal how she interpreted and negotiated for the reinterpretation of the definition of legitimacy held by the community. Her magnanimity shines through her autobiography, forgiving those who had committed gross injustice to her in the name of "legitimacy," as they defined it. Her wisdom in making rational choices throughout the changing situations in her ethical environment was remarkable.

Despite living abroad most of her life, Han Suyin chose China as her legitimate homeland and "fatherland." The men in her life had to be her conduit of love for China, and her lifetime vocation was to be the mouthpiece of China. Her extensive six-volume autobiography and her other works reflect her determination to project emerging Communist China positively to the world. As "a daughter of China" in the diaspora, Han Suyin indeed went the extra mile in her service to her beloved China.

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5 Han Suyin's Ethical Consciousness and Imagery of a Recreated China in Han Suyin's Autobiography

Modern studies on "consciousness," such as that expounded by Descartes, Locke, and Hume, extend beyond the discussions of man's general "experience" and further examine its introspective aspects, including the unconscious processes of cognition, especially on one's perception, reactive awareness, and decision-making (Jaynes 1976, 21–47). While there is a primary, rather automated reactional consciousness, there is also a slower, reasoning self that asserts one's beliefs and decisions based on one's agency (Jaynes 1976, 21–22). Literary studies have devoted attention to the stream of consciousness technique that presents a character's fluid and natural flow of thought processes, including overlapping sensory impressions, non-concrete ideas, and changing focal thoughts.

While creative writing employs consciousness as a literary device to present the inner world of characters reacting to their encounters, in non-fictional autobiographical writing, one may also come across autobiographers who narrate with mixed storylines, namely, narratives that do not compartmentalise one's lived experiences and the state of affairs of the time. Han Suyin's six-volume autobiographical series, for instance, superimposes and juxtaposes narratologies, her clear conscience, and her ethical consciousness. Adopting a two-track writing style with a slight blurring between the two, she consistently informed her transformation amid the changing socio-political and economic environment of the era.

In the ethical literary criticism (ELC) approach of Chinese Professor Nie Zhenzhao, the *ethical environment* or ethical context refers to "the historical context of literary works" (Nie 2024, 211). ELC reminds readers to analyse and interpret literature in its specific context and literary environment rather than approach the people and events in the texts outside their historical and ethical environments. Thus, the ethical consciousness embedded in Han Suyin's autobiography will be examined in relation to the *ethical environment* of the subject.

This discussion begins by providing a working definition of *ethical consciousness*, the key term. *Ethical consciousness* refers to one's

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self-awareness and awareness of others in one's social context, akin to Sartre's ontological view of human consciousness as the combination of "being-in-itself" (*en-soi*) and "being-for-itself" (*pour-soi*), as well as the Marxist concept of social consciousness, which identifies the social dimension of men as the determining factor of their consciousness (Mark 1859, Preface).

5.1 Consciousness Awakening in Han Suyin's Autobiography

Much can be learned from Han Suyin, who was rejected as a youth but nevertheless emerged as a gritty, determined life conqueror. Her autobiography series permeates with themes that lay bare the facts of life. Against the backdrop of China's modern history, she wrote with a conscience that resonated deeply with her readers. Given Han Suyin's unique identity as a half-Chinese, half-European female raised in early 20th-century China, her self-identification with the Chinese shaped her ethical consciousness. Perceived as non-Chinese by the locals, her autobiographical writing exudes a consciousness that is contrary to the works of other non-ethnic Chinese foreigners, like Pearl S. Buck, a daughter of American missionaries in China. Her belief in the necessity of the revolution of the people, rather than social transformation via democratic leadership, sets her apart from other international observers of China, as encapsulated in the many conversations in her work (Han 1968, 234–235). A closer examination of the enveloping and anchor themes may reveal the undertones of her thought processes as presented in her autobiographical accounts.

5.1.1 Perceived Crippleness and the Agony of Death

Han Suyin's *The Crippled Tree* started and ended with the theme of "death." The beginning of the book depicts the *murder* of the house chef. The book ends with heightened suspension, depicting the upcoming *inhumane executions* of two underaged Communist suspects. The murder of her chef is her household matter, but the executions of suspects reveal the ideological conflicts. This two-track writing mode, vis-a-vis the narrative about Han Suyin's family saga alongside the narrative about China, is rather consistent throughout the volumes in her autobiography.

Sandwiched between the theme of death at the beginning and the ending of the book is the imagery of "crippleness," namely, a seeming analogy of the *crippleness* in Han Suyin's family saga, and the *humiliation* and colonisation of China by Western powers. She was definitely making a statement with the crippled tree imagery.

Excerpts that reveal the anchor theme in *The Crippled Tree* are as follows:

> I am nothing if not persistent: persistence is needed when one wants to bare the *crippled* tree and study its mishap.
>
> (Han 1965, 289)

> And now Rosalie was nearly eleven, a peevish, irritable eleven, overworked, overtired, no blossom-fragrant youth but a *crippled* vigor propelled into the already future though unknown ingrate years that were coming, the years of growing up; and in and out in awkward, ungainly strength that loses before it wins when the seeing childhood eye and ear abdicate, and this change was terror . . . Who am I, what am I . . . why am I as I am . . . Am I going mad?
>
> (Han 1965, 444)

The word "crippled" occurs four times in the book. Only two are quoted here. Rosalie's (Han's maiden name) account of *crippleness* in her early life is both startling and revealing.

5.1.2 Poverty amid Extravagance Awakens New Consciousness

The second book in Han Suyin's autobiographical series, *A Mortal Flower*, starts with the theme of the "wedding" of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek and Miss Soong Mei-ling and ends with the counter-theme of "separation," namely, that between Rosalie (young Han Suyin) with her European boyfriend. Their breaking off was not due to fading love between them but Rosalie's determination to return to pre-war China. The juxtaposition of blissfulness and curses or the switching of hope and suffering is the constant phenomenon of this and all subsequent volumes.

Patriotism and consciousness to "save China" form the main ethical themes throughout this book. The autobiographer's disdainful description of the wealth of the Kuomintang (Nationalist) leaders in contrast with the high *mortality* rate and the deteriorating socio-economic state of China suggests her perception of how wrong things were and why there were repercussions among the people of China.

An excerpt that reveals the anchor theme in *A Mortal Flower* is as follows:

> Tan Leeton, who personally took part in the student demonstrations of December that year (1935), later told me his own story:
>
> We were not all Communists, . . . but we were *patriots*; the call was what we had been waiting for, and from then on all of us began to look towards Yenan, towards Mao Tse-tung. Though many of us never became

> Communists, we now realised that our only hope to *save our country* lay in Yenan, not in Nanking; in Mao Tse-tung, not in Chiang Kai-shek.
>
> (Han 1966, 323)

The use of "patriot" occurs 30 times in the book. Han Suyin included many individual professions of this nature and conversations on the topic in her autobiography. The *patriotism* and the people's aspiration to *save China* that she captured were aligned with her personal conviction, and she professed it openly in interviews and public platforms, besides her writings.

5.1.3 Juxtaposition of the Past and the Current

The *Birdless Summer* starts with Rosalie's revisit to Marseilles, recounting her mixed feelings as she found her past "self" overlapping with her current *reconstructed identity* as Han Suyin. The book ends with her anxieties and deliberations over her decision to trade her secure career in England for an unknown undertaking in the Far East.

While warfare and large-scale destructions were looming in China, Han Suyin asserted her strong will to thrive by means of *redefinition* and *reorientation*. In this book, the end of Han Suyin's first marriage and the beginning of her second mark the changing seasons of her life. At the national level, the impending Sino-Japanese war fuelled the rise of Chinese nationalism. Han Suyin anticipated an energised people who would build a new nation despite the great setbacks of warfare, famine, and poverty.

An excerpt that reveals the anchor theme in *Birdless Summer* is as follows:

> The bone-pounding heat of summer and the Japanese bombers left us; the great clefts of the mountains let go of their swollen waters, the sky's dismal glare gave way and the Chialing river sparkled like a new sky . . . All about Chunking, after the summer destruction, there was the hammer sound of rebuilding as new shacks and new houses went up. Inflation also took a new leap; rice was in short supply.
>
> (Han 1968, 208)

The words "build," "rebuild," and "reconstruct" occur 20 times in *Birdless Summer,* charging it with a tone and energy that is slightly different from her first two books in her autobiographical series.

5.1.4 Paradox of Duality

Han Suyin's *My House Two Doors* begins with her return to Hong Kong as her transient home in 1949. Unable to re-enter Communist China, she had

to continue living in several *in-between lands* for the next two decades until she finally found a permanent address in Lausanne, Switzerland. A widow of an ex-Kuomintang general who dreamed of returning to China every single day of her life, Han Suyin's ethical dilemma escalated at this point.

This volume is infused with the *paradox of duality*. She fell in love, but her love ended with the demise of her lover. She remarried but chose to end this second marriage. She was once a follower of her demised husband, a leader of the Kuomintang, but now she professed that she had become a follower of Zhou Enlai, or "Chou En Lai," as spelled in her book. At the end of the book, the theme of "death" emerges again: Wang Wanchun, a very congenial and bubbly journalist friend of Han Suyin, died suddenly. It was not clear whether Wang was murdered or committed suicide, but Han Suyin believed Wang's correspondences with her might have endangered him, for he might have been accused of "having illicit relations with a foreigner." Han Suyin knew that although she was born and raised in China – a legitimate Chinese advocate – she was not spared the label of an unwelcomed "foreigner" in China. She was treated like Pearl S. Buck, who was denounced as "malicious" by the Chinese (Han 1982, 523).

An excerpt that reveals the anchor theme in *My House Two Doors* is as follows:

> 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 from and towards China.
>
> (Han 1982, 136)

The words "duality" and "opposite" appear five times in *My House Two Doors*. The oxymoron of opposites in unity is prevalent as one of the undertones in Han Suyin's autobiography. In fact, from the onset of her autobiographical series, she had also expressed, "From the start was *duality*, another life, a saving otherness which was also self" (Han 1965, 352).

5.1.5 Endurance through Setbacks

Han Suyin's *Phoenix Harvest* begins with her recollection of one of the greatest *socio-political setbacks* in the newly formed China, namely, the Cultural Revolution. None could give politically correct justifications for this political upheaval that caused the deaths of many elitists. Neither could Han Suyin. Even the leaders of the country had to avoid making public statements due to their precarious firefighting positions at that time.

"Endurance" emerges as the main theme here. The ever-hopeful Han Suyin countered the frustration and confusion of the era with *exaltations* of Chinese leaders, such as Zhou Enlai, Chen Yi, and Kung Peng, who practised servant leadership and led exemplary lives as dedicated public servants. Nevertheless, Han Suyin's frequent visits to China gradually earned her the credibility

to become a self-appointed, non-diplomat China expert, paving the way for her rise as a highly sought-after public speaker on matters relating to China.

An excerpt that reveals the anchor theme in *Phoenix Harvest* is as follows:

> Thus Chou Enlai suddenly transformed their doubts and questionings and their torments into something quite different. Just as the Long March, with its losses and sufferings and agony had been metamorphosed into an epic of human *endurance* and triumph, so the wretchedness, and the puzzling punishments, acquired meaning and nobility. They were not senseless ordeals, time wasted, never to return; they became part of this creation, the creation of a new and better world. And this was fulfilment.
>
> (Han 1985, 237)

The words "endure" and "endurance" occur 15 times in *Phoenix Harvest*. Even as Han Suyin reported the setbacks of the nation she loved, her hopeful attitude surfaced as the theme of *endurance* to weather all challenges of the time.

5.1.6 Stature and Integrity

The sixth book in Han Suyin's autobiographical series, *Wind in My Sleeves,* rings with the themes of *continual change and challenges* as well as a proud sense of *self-completion*. It introduces the new political stability of China with the rise of Deng Xiaoping. The beginning pays posthumous respect to Zhou Enlai, which also marked the end of the rule of the Gang of the Four. While the title of the book seems to suggest an eventual tone of restfulness, Han Suyin documented that mounting tasks of *restoration* were underway. The ending pages of the book are filled with major *national crises* that China faced in 1991, namely, the big floods in North China that caused the evacuation of 10 million people and the economic slum triggered by the complete disintegration of the Soviet Union, China's biggest trading partner.

To counter the dismal tone of these adversities, Han Suyin offered her interview with Chinese Premier Jiang Zemin, who asserted that China was always prepared to face any challenges of that nature.

Excerpts from the last few paragraphs of *Wind in My Sleeves* are as follows:

> General Secretary Jiang Zemin is tired. He has lost a good deal of weight since I last saw him in September 1989. He has been traveling a great deal through the land and through the flooded areas. He has also been sitting up nights, holding meetings to study that other earthshaking event, the breakup of the USSR. But when I use the word "another volcanic upheaval," he gently corrects me. "We were prepared for it a long while ago . . . but not at the speed with which the whole structure disintegrated."
>
> . . . And then, because this is a friendly chat, we talk of poets and poetry.
>
> (Han 1992, 228–229)

Citing a poem by Robert Frost in the ending lines of the book, Han Suyin seemed to highlight man's willpower and the possibility of creating a better future via the power of hope and love. Excerpts of *Wind in My Sleeves* reveal a poetic line that seemed to mesmerise her, chosen as the title of the book:

> After bowing to Zhou Yang's remains, I walk to my father's grave. He was no revolutionary . . . He only believed in railways, railways for China, and he built them for decades. He used to write bits of poetry on slips of paper and bury them in his flowerpots. Perhaps that is why his flowers thrived so extraordinarily well. I remember one line of poetry, in his strong Sichuan accent:
>
> Only the clear *wind filling his sleeves*
>
> An honest official, father explained, that at the end of his life, had no treasure, had amassed no gain . . . only the emptiness of *wind* swelling in his sleeves. The large sleeves of the gowns of those days were used as pockets.
>
> I speak to Papa, lying quietly under the gravestone. I too, shall have only the *wind in my sleeves* at the end.
>
> (Han 1992, 194)

Naming her sixth autobiographical book *Wind in My Sleeves*, a phrase adapted from her father's favourite poem, reveals Han Suyin's heart was at rest after years of strenuous efforts to combat the irrationality of all sorts, reinforce her appreciation of her Chinese cultural roots, and preserve her fond memory of her father, an unsung hero who invested his entire life in building railroads for his modernising country.

5.2 Ethical Reconstruction: Aligning with the Save-China Consciousness

Defusing the perceived crippleness was Han Suyin's first literary attempt at the reconstruction of the ethical order of her world. China was Han Suyin's birthplace and country of origin, "China to me was of course my father and mother" (Han 1965, 16). Despite its great desolation at that time, with vivid imageries of the overworked rickshaw coolies, dead babies wrapped in newspapers, and blind beggars clawing and whining everywhere (Han 1985, 314), Han Suyin had a vision: this withered, "crippled" tree "revives with the spring" (Han 1985, 48).

> The shrewd winter morning frost, intruding like a murderer on the run had given place to clear sunlight. Ascending light-bodied, furs discarded, I felt like entering the blue sky, so clear the air, free of that fertile darkness, that grey canopy of mist and mildew and sousing rain which encloses the fruitful plain and keeps it green despite the winter, so that the swallow never really leaves.
>
> (Han 1965, 86)

The period 1938–1948 saw the rise of "China-consciousness," the Sino-Japanese war, and Chinese nationalism. Owing to the ongoing cold war between the Communist and Democrat axis, East-West relations became rather strained. China was put on the watch by the international powers, especially the West led by the United States of America. Han Suyin, who was reading Chinese newspaper under the tutelage of her Chinese tutor, was anxious about her future and was convinced that it was closely connected with the fate of China. Marrying Tang Pao-Huang was one of her actions in response to her own China's consciousness.

Many saw the Japanese attack on Wuhan in 1938 as China's doom. Han Suyin worked alongside the medical staff of the Red Cross until Pao brought her with him to a war-free zone. Due to the rapid fall of Wuhan, Canton, Shanghai, and then Nanking, Han Suyin eventually had to relocate with Pao to London as a diplomat family of the Kuomintang. In 1947, Pao died on the battlefield in Manchuria during Kuomintang's onslaught against the People's Liberation Army (Han 1985, 328). By then, Han Suyin had sailed through her studies, graduated with L.R.C.P. and M.R.C.S., and completed her housemanship. Taking Yungmei, her adopted daughter, with her, she made the strategic move to Hong Kong, hoping to be close to her spiritual home, China. By then, she had already foretold the emergence of *Red* China, which would rise "like the phoenix, was being reborn from the consuming pyres of the massive conflict" (Han 1968, 350). In her analogy, numerous birdless summers might have been the incubation period of China, but this long-suffering ancient country would soon rise up as a modern nation of new strength.

5.3 "Salvation" of China, "Salvation" of Self

In the larger scenario, China was modernising unsteadily. After decades of warfare and civil upheavals, China found herself at the crossroads between the old and new, traditional framework in modern contexts, and materialised dreams of people's revolution coupled with the baggage of feudal superstructures. All in all, "the monarch disappeared but constitutional government did not supplant it" (Fairbank 1968, 47). There were the effects of famines, but there were also celebrations of successful harvests. Against the daunting uniformity, living conditions improved gradually. The Cultural Revolution was devastating, but it opened ways for self-correcting measures. Mechanisation of agriculture was carried out, but it still allowed feudal, small producers' patterns. Premier Zhou Enlai's "readjustment" policy took place, and the reigning Communist government examined their mistakes during the Great Leap Forward. Various cities in China started to bustle with life, and China's report cards were getting better. Han Suyin sprang with her hopeful tone in her report, "history, whether we like it or not, shrugs off the notions of Good and Evil. Only endurance and success count, alas, for history; and good work well done has an immortality of its own" (Han 1982, 56). With great enthusiasm,

she documented China's entry into the United Nations in 1971 and President Richard Nixon's visit to China in February 1972 in *Phoenix Harvest* (Han 1985, 217).

In his study of modern Chinese political thought, Professor Benjamin Schwartz made a reference point of the left out of "Western individualism" and "individual's public spirit" from among the works by renowned Chinese translator Yan Fu (1853–1921), who diligently contextualised Western classics of liberalism into one with Chinese characteristics (Fairbank 1968, 44–45). Han Suyin was highly interested in China's intellectual development during her time. Resembling China as a phoenix reborn from its ashes, she described the emergence of the "thinking generation," a collective self in the land (Han 1982, 303). These were the ones who would analyse the past of China in retrospect and set the country's future in a better perspective. These Chinese youths did not take in Western individualism in total. Their shared mentality was a public consciousness or "public spirit" that sought to channel all wealth and resources to the collective ends of the nation.

The history of modern China had just taken a new turn, but Han Suyin was already quite contented with her own becoming and what China as a nation had attained there and then. If in the Christmas carols the star of Bethlehem had led the magi to the child Jesus, China was described as the "fixed star" that Han Suyin followed to complete herself in *Phoenix Harvest* (Han 1985, 313). She described her "self-completion" as a process of following the "fixed star" in the universe of people, and her fixed star was none other than her beloved birthland China. China was clearly her religion through and through. China, a long-suffering nation, had recreated herself – a new from the old, now presenting herself as an increasingly competent partner in the East-West exchange.

As reported by Han Suyin, President Richard Nixon of the United States flew from Washington, D.C. to Beijing in 1972 to end 22 years of non-communication and foster an unprecedented USA-China tie. As the years went by, leaders among the first generation of the Chinese Revolution passed away one by one. These were those who had created the history of contemporary China via the establishment of the Communist Party, defeating the Japanese, overthrowing the opposition, and completing the historic Long March (Han 1992, 5). Premier Zhou Enlai passed away on January 5, 1976, followed by Mao Zedong on September 9. Deng Xiaoping was still in power, but the second generation rose to continue the pursuit of better economic distribution for the people of the land.

In *Wind in My Sleeves*, Han Suyin chronicled in a way that saw herself among this second generation searching for "a new philosophy to live by" (Han 1992, 19). She depicted how this generation faced their doubts with courage and learned foreign languages to expand their horizon of thinking. Embracing new values and new orientations is a natural by-product of economic reforms. Han Suyin identified a "generation gap" between the different

age groups in new learning but saw it as a good sign of maturity. "this phrase is a solace; plaster to hide the proliferating ulcer; it accepts the incomprehension, the confusion, the crisis of belief as if nothing need be done" (Han 1992, 20). Han Suyin had also become well-settled with her Eurasian identity and projected it as the prototype of a *world citizen*: "it was an asset, not an inferiority, to be multicultural, to be the world of the future" (Han 1992, 16).

China had already been moving forward with her four modernisations, i.e., agriculture, industry, science and technology, and defence. With the proven change of the superstructure of the state authority, alongside the economic reforms, Premier Deng Xiaoping became the "Man of the Year" on the international platform. His "socialism with Chinese characteristics" became footage of the miraculous economic success of China (Han 1992, 73). There was a socio-political setback in 1989 due to the tragic Tiananmen incident. It was a timely self-checking call to the root issue of youth agitation. China would approach its economic development on its own terms. Residing in Switzerland, Han Suyin continued to be a lifelong cultural envoy for China. Resolved, she became a happy "pendulum, oscillating, forever swinging back and forth, between China and the rest of the world" (Han 1992, 186).

5.4 A Recreated China: Reborn Phoenix, Fixed Star, New People

Han Suyin's autobiography is permeated with the seamless switch of accounts regarding her own life and the historical development of modern China. Often labelled as a leftist and an ardent writer of Mao's regime, Han Suyin's accounts of China are deemed valuable, as her narrative shed insights into the rationale and perspective of a native-born and pro-Red person. In *My House Has Two Doors*, she fondly remembered her conversation with Simon Hua.

> "China is the religion of every educated Chinese," I insisted. "It was so for your father, for mine. It must be so for us too."
>
> You are so Chinese in a way, said Simon. All your reactions and your feelings . . . sometimes I feel that it is for you who have never left China, and who live here and that it is I, who came here in 1951, who is the foreigner.
>
> 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.
>
> (Han 1982, 372–373)

Han Suyin's consciousness resonated with the Chinese consciousness of that time. During the early part of the 20th century, the development of the nation swung like a pendulum between iconoclasm towards the cultural heritage of

the Chinese past (Lin 1979, 3) and legacy preservation, such as Chinese cultural roots and Confucianism. There were debates about the "new learning" of the West. The movement became a catalyst of the late Ching modernisation drive and eventually resulted in the collapse of the imperial system in 1911 (Furth 2002, 13).

The Western idea of "modern" prescribes a "temporal consciousness of the present in reaction against the past" (Lee 2002, 191). The Chinese concept of modernity, instead, is "present-oriented" and "forward-looking." Leo Oou-fan Lee remarked that since the late Qing dynasty, there was a "new" content in socio-political consciousness (Lee 2002, 191). The Self-Strengthening Movement from 1898 to 1919 witnessed the efforts of Chinese thinkers to move and advance beyond their traditional Sino-centric worldview. There was a "reform anew" (*wei-xin* or *wei-hsin*) movement in 1898. Then there was the Liang Qichao (Liang Chi-chao) concept of New People (*xin-min* or *hsin-min*) (Lee 2002). After the outrage over the Versailles Treaty in 1911, a new sense of Chinese consciousness and sovereignty was awakened. Marxism and socialism became the main references for young thinkers of the era. Two capable leaders, Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao, formed the Communist Party of China in 1921.

Subsequently, there was the May Fourth movement, which manifested in the New Youth, New Culture, and New Literature, with the epithet "*xin* (or *hsin*)" pushing its agenda for China to progress into a "modern" nation. "Modernity" in China thus "connotes not only a preoccupation with the present but a forward-looking search for 'newness'" (Lee 2002). May Fourth thus became one of the first epochs that marked a revolutionary break for modern mainlanders from their past feudalistic mindset. Nevertheless, the iconoclastic thrust in May Fourth permanently shaped the consciousness of Chinese nationalism. Unlike the growth of "nationalism" in the West, Chinese national consciousness did not emerge solely due to the internal social structure but also due to the external pressure from the time China was compelled to deal with the Western powers.

> After the sudden change in China's position, traditional Chinese culture and polity no longer was viewed as the universal model for the world . . . there was lacking any potentially viable and powerful alternative system or symbol that could be resurrected in the name of national identity.
>
> (Lin 1979, 62–63)

Initiated by the Chinese intelligentsia and then strongly mobilised by the masses until 1927, May Fourth paved the way for the people of China to self-determine their trajectory, which essentially went towards socialism, a consciousness that came to birth due to iconoclasm and demanded change.

The Communists had not gained enough power then. The ruling regime then was the Nationalist Party led by Chiang Kai-shek. Chiang's regime

strongly opposed the iconoclastic movement. He launched the New Life Movement in the 1930s, hoping to resurrect Confucian teaching, especially the emphasis on the individual's role in self-cultivation and good moralism. The movement finally dwindled in 1949 during China's civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists.

Despite the confusion and messiness of the political swings, China underwent three successful revolutions during the 20th century and has since moved on with the daunting task of effecting a "complete economic, social and political transformation of a giant country encompassing almost a quarter of the world's population" (Cook 2001, 1). The three revolutions in China were the following: the ending of the feudalistic dynasty era by Dr. Sun Yat-sen in 1911, the firm footing of Communist governance by Mao Zedong in 1949, and the economic reform that was initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 (Cook 2001).

China's track record is impressive, considering that Britain launched its industrial revolution when its population was about 15 million, Japan's Meiji Restoration pursued modernisation involving 30 million people, and the United States and Russia launched their industrial economic programmes when they had about 60 to 70 million population during the late 19th century. China, a desperately poor, underdeveloped country that had experienced exploitation by Chinese wealthy elites and foreigners, was able to carry out her own "industrial revolution among a billion people" (Cook and Murray 2001, 2). The task was unprecedented. Yet China had to pursue it with her strength and within a relatively short period. By the turn of the 21st century, the People's Republic of China celebrated its 50th national day on a high note after achieving considerable economic success and socio-political stability under the steady leadership of the Party.

By 1992, Han Suyin had published all six volumes. Expressing her intense feelings for China, she used the analogy of a *born-again phoenix* to portray this recreated nation:

> I could not explain that even if l could not live in the New China the Revolution would bring forth, a *phoenix* reborn and the sound of its beauteous wings filling the air for me . . . I longed for the absent forest where the newborn *phoenix* would sing, and I would hear its wings beat the air.
>
> (Han 1982, 9)

The *phoenix* is an auspicious bird in Graeco-Roman and Chinese references. The legends typically alluded to a mythical bird that could be born again even after being decomposed by fire. As Han Suyin clearly illustrated, this "*phoenix*" rose from the messiness of great conflicts. Han Suyin ascribed the notion of an "overcomer" to the new China. In *Phoenix Harvest*, Han Suyin described China during 1976–1979 as the "*phoenix* China." With a regretful tone, Han Suyin recalled how the nation wrestled with and was relieved from

Table 5.1 All Mentions of "New" in *Wind in My Sleeve*

Word Study	*Page Numbers in* Wind in My Sleeve
New concepts/values	15, 19 (new philosophy), 33, 39 (new paths to explore new ideas), 65 (new panoramas of perceptions), 74, 78, 92, 95
New confidence	16, 20, 49 (new beginning), 52, 110, 120 (renewed vigour), 186, 183 (new trust in the government)
New economy/business	125, 138, 139, 210, 218
New generation of leaders	105, 106, 175, 195
New image	19 (new fashion), 68
New legal system	75 (new law), 81 (new contract system), 140, 141
New literature	20, 32, 46 (new poetry)
New machinery/technology/ infrastructure	54, 64, 65, 116, 118, 122
New people	87 (4th generation), 95, 106, 152, 163 (new demands)
New society	30 (new healthcare), 82, 85 (one-child family), 90, 152 (new rich entrepreneurs)
New townships	83, 150, 153, 215
New university	53, 95
New vocabulary	14 (new themes), 16 (context), 189 (new words, e.g., guitar)
New way of life/sub-culture	48 (new films), 83 (new TV sets), 93 (new icons), 100 (new hygienically wrapped chopsticks)

the issues of her entangling past, such as the Gang of Four, and moved on with some clarity of self-knowledge and self-empowerment (Han 1985, 301). Figuratively, she wrote: "China: *phoenix* reborn from its ashes; but *the fire has seared us all*, and some of us most grievously. A few scholars and artists are very bitter, because of the wasted years" (Han 1985, 302).

Han Suyin saw that a new generation that would accept *change* would be ready for new possibilities. In her writing, China was alive as a new nation with "new people." Using the tree-planting project by Miss Sun, the leader of a handicapped group, as an example, Han Suyin demonstrated the imagery of a new people who came forth from a new corporate spirit of "self-help," "self-respect," and "self-initiation" (Han 1992, 110). She wrote, old shames gone, and a renewed confidence emerged, "as if a new day, bright with promise, is here" (Han 1992, 16, 52). A list of "new" things caught Han Suyin's attention during her brief visits to China between 1977 and 1991, listed in *Wind in My Sleeve*:

5.5 Ideals of East-West Relations: Equality, Respect for Originality, Continuity

Han Suyin took it upon herself to be the cultural envoy and non-government spokesperson of China for several reasons. First, China was the place she was

born and raised; China was her "obsession." Second, she felt that there should be some justice given to the new emerging Communist China, even when the West did not accept it. She found that Western media and writers did not reconcile with the new China or have a new vocabulary to describe this rising nation. She was not happy with the use of words such as "bellicose," "mad aggressivity," and "Russian ultimatum":

> But all of a sudden the current talk of China's "bellicose, mad aggressivity" somehow rang false. However, no new words had been coined in the Western vocabulary to describe what China was doing. Hence one "expert" even tried to invent a "Russian ultimatum" to China, forgetting that the Moscow press was just as surprised as those in London, Washington, and Paris.
>
> (Han 1982, 339)

Judging from Han Suyin's tone, at least three themes surface as Han Suyin's consciousness for a better prospect of East-West relations – equality, originality, and continuity.

- Equality

Equality was definitely Han Suyin's biggest concern. Using Voyant Tools, the word cloud derived from the corpus of terms or phrases that are paired with her mentioning of "equal/equality" relating it to *people* or *race* in her texts is as follows:

As shown in Figure 5.1, throughout the six volumes, Han Suyin raised the concept of "equality" between races and peoples with her frequent use of "equal" or equality, and among these, ideas associated with "brotherhood,"

Figure 5.1 Word Cloud Derived from the Corpus of Terms Paired with "Equal/Equality" Concerning People or Race in Han Suyin's Texts

Source: https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=046f5fe05329d906a8bf5a32975d49fe

Figure 5.2 Word Cloud Derived from the Corpus of Terms Paired with "Equal/Equality" Concerning the Nations in Han Suyin's Texts

Source: https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=591cccaf87c2a84d631586fa691bd67f

"freedom," "equal treatment," "equal before the law," and "no longer handicapped" were vigorously advocated.

A rather similar word cloud is formed when examining "equal/equality" with words/terms related to countries or *nations*:

Here, the hierarchical differences between the Chinese and White clergy are sensitively highlighted in Han Suyin's autobiographical accounts. The full coding matrix of words/terms that appear in-text with "equal/equality" in Han Suyin's texts is as follows:

Han Suyin was very concerned about China's sovereignty, a concept that closely connotes "equality" of a country among all the nations. It appears at least three times in her autobiographical series (Han 1965, 148, 1966, 46, 1982, 215). From the onset, in *The Crippled Tree*, Han Suyin documented the aggression of the Western powers in China following the Opium War. She denounced the "decades of violence" (Han 1965, 257) by Western gun powers, especially the wanton looting and burning down of the grand old Summer Palace, which caused widespread destruction and with great consequences internationally. Regrettably, this historical dark spot still has negative repercussions in the manner China and the Chinese people perceive the West today.

It is, therefore, not difficult to comprehend where Han Suyin stood in East-West relations as far as China was concerned throughout the 30-odd years when she chronicled her autobiographical series. Citing Dick Wilson, Han Suyin said in her *China in the Year 2001*, "Where China is concerned, we have in the past, formed the habit of ignoring her, ignoring what she really thought and felt. We preferred our own build-up, our own fanciful images" (Wilson 1966; Han 1967, 1). Somewhat foresighted, Wilson remarked, "Whoever understands China . . . holds the key to world politics during the next five centuries" (Wilson 1966, 12). Even as Han Suyin appealed for legitimate and

Table 5.2 Words/Terms that Appear In-Text with "Equal/Equality" in Han Suyin's Six-Volume Autobiographical Series

People/Race		*Gender*		*Nations*	
• freedom • equality • brotherhood	*CT* 178	• equality of spirit • professional women	*MT* 241	• equality • French Catholic clergy • Catholic clergy in China	*CT* 108
• freedom of assembly and speech • equal treatment	*MT* 100	• equality for women • women • ancestral virtue marriage	*BS* 49	• equality • friendship • peace	*MT* 141
• equal terms • Eurasian • Chinese	*MT* 126	• equality of women • chastity • remarry	*BS* 133	• diplomats • guarantee equal opportunities	*MT* 153
• liberty • brotherhood • equality • revolution	*MT* 234	• equality • Long March • marital law • Teng Yingchao, wife of Premier Chou Enlai • Kang Keching, wife of Marshal Chu Teh	*HTD* 179	• Open Door Policy • rights • privileges	*MT* 154
• equality • dignity • security	*MT* 496	• equality • men • women	*HTD* 262	• equal status • China • United States • Britain • great power • extraterritorial rights	*BS* 223
• equal • all men	*PH* 23	• equals housewives	*HTD* 313	• equals • Africans • whites	*HTD* 88
• equals • no longer handicapped	*PH* 118	• equality • *The Yang Family Women Warriors*	*HTD* 503	• equality • liberalism • hypocrisy	*HTD* 220
• equality • equal before the law • justice • all men • all citizens	*PH* 306	• equals • women • husband of a new kind	*PH* 209	• equal among all nations • rightful place	*HTD* 352
• equal terms	*WMS* 134	• equality • women	*PH* 261	• equality • justice • Socialist revolution • a better world	*PH* 117
		• women as equal citizens	*PH* 299	• equal share of the world's resources • equality • fraternity	*PH* 249 *WMS* 227

Note: The Crippled Tree (CT), *A Mortal Flower (MT)*, *Birdless Summer (BS)*, *My House Has Two Doors (HTD)*, *Phoenix Harvest (PH)*, *Wind in My Sleeves (WMS)*

equal rights for China to pursue modernisation and rise in her timing and in her own way, China, a nation-state by definition, would pull herself together to compete in the global market on *equal* terms with the rest of the world, albeit with Chinese characteristics.

- Respect for originality

Besides "equality," respect for a people's or nation's cultural *originality* and socio-political choice was another cherished value and proposition in Han Suyin's literature. In *Asia Today: Two Outlooks*, she recounted that China had not only replaced Japan in economic development but it had also become among "the first non-white power(s) to grow strong on her *own* resources and efforts" (Han 1969, 5). She asserted that China's changing force stemmed "from within," which no military pacts and policies could create otherwise. She ascribed the driving force behind the Taiping and Nian Uprisings (1851–67), the Boxer Uprising (1899–1900), and Sun Yat-sen's revolutionary movement that turned China into a republic (1911) country today to its *inner-directedness*, driven by the power of its people (Han 1969, 7).

She argued that like many other world civilisations, China had always been *original* and powerfully creative (Han 1969, 47). She demonstrated how because of China's enduring culture, China remained "China" after having been through the challenges of political ideologies and waves of Western sub-culture. She showcased Mao Zedong's epoch of socio-economic revolution, which was developed from the Marxist-Leninist framework, but with a revisionism that retained "complete (Chinese) *originality*" (Han 1969, 485) and differed from Trotsky's "permanent revolution" (Han 1969, 49). Despite technical failures, setbacks, and dire predictions from international observers, Deng Xiaoping's "socialism with Chinese characteristics" that followed created an earth-shaking political success.

Appreciating China's *originality* would illuminate the interpretation of her socio-political evolvement. Han Suyin highlighted that it was not until China had shown progress in modern times that people from the other side of the globe "began to recognise that there was a Chinese way of doing things, of thinking, of acting" (Han 1982, 339) and that it should not be viewed as negative as the criticism in the Western media.

- Continuity

Resolved not to be a stunted, crippled tree, Han Suyin firmly believed in continual growth each day, with courage and grit. "The future begins yesterday, for the tree as well as for man" (Han 1965, 17). Clearly, Han Suyin cherished the *continuity* of one's life path. She said:

> But I had to do it, to live with myself, to be myself, and to continue growing, where others had stopped.
>
> (Han 1965, 18)

In that, Han Suyin illustrated how she thrived each day and how her autobiography-writing helped her to pursue a "continuity between what is and what was . . . by the relentless logic of each day lived with courage, within the enormous scope that the word 'day' implies" (Han 1965, 19). Indeed, to have the courage to greet another day and the reason for one to usher in the next morning gives one the determination not to give up on oneself and one's environment. Continuing to live means continuing to fight on, especially when the ethical environment is far from conducive.

She regarded the preservation of the original characteristics of the respective cultures and ethnicities. A Chinese Hakka by origin from her father, Han Suyin appraised the Hakkas as the true Chinese. She especially mentioned how they had maintained their indigenous character and stayed away from any "degenerate habits" (Han 1965, 25). Above that, she also ascribed *continuity* as a welcome aspect of modern China:

> In the new peace, order, and security come to China today . . . many were now eager to relate the past to the present, not because the past was good, but because no one can afford to forget the yesterday which gave birth to today. (Han 1965, 34)

Even as Han Suyin strongly advocated for radical change and progress by the way of revolutions, as experienced by China in the fast-changing 20th century, she remained a firm believer in *continuity*, rather than discontinuity, in many ways.

"Change, but also continuity," she insisted (Han 1985, 309). For her, there must be *continuity* in discontinuity in the following domains: one's life journey (Han 1965, 18–19, 1968, 20, 310), family (Han 1965, 30, 31, 77), and city and nation (Han 1966, 148, 1982, 312, 331, 436, 475, 494–495, 508, 1985, 12, 26, 141, 213–214, 293, 309, 312, 1992, 39, 82, 88, 100, 190, 197, 203, 206).

Figure 5.3 Word Cloud Derived from the Corpus of Terms Paired with "Continuity/Continue/Continuing" in Han Suyin's Texts

Source: https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=02377c9c781f23f84cbb5e869a112855

On the continuity of China as a nation, Han Suyin associated it frequently with the roles of the Party, revolutionary moves, and retaining traditional legacy, shown in the following word cloud analytics of the 83 in-text words/terms that appear along with "continuity/continue/continuing" in her autobiographical accounts:

Uprooting the past was not Han Suyin's idea. Examining the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, she wrote:

> For the next four years, until the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, I would travel my fill, . . . to see the new and the old, the traditional and the revolutionary side by side; travel in and out of time and within China's time, which is her *continuum* of being.
>
> (Han 1985, 436)

For Han Suyin, a sense of responsibility and the burden of charting the path for tomorrow lay upon the younger generation (Han 1992, 23, 25). To *continue* the history of modern China, those with self-control, a sense of humour, and a capacity for forgiveness would be needed (Han 1992, 27). Celebrating the *continuity* of a modernising and evolving nation that has a millennium-old civilisation like China would entail an open heart in accepting her history and society, as well as her rebirth in the modern day.

5.6 Chapter Conclusion

Even as "the world needs the artist who records, with dispassionate compassion" (Han 1965, 17), Han Suyin enthusiastically played her role of East-West cultural envoy. In her memoirs, she aptly defused the perceived crippleness of the East in the eyes of the West and stubbornly instilled hope amidst the deadlock in East-West relations. During wars and instabilities, she wrote profusely about the opportunities for China to reorientate and rebuild. Facing the flooding of Western ideologies and values, she proposed a Chinese philosophy of change to dissolve and adapt the competing elements. In Han Suyin's account of the recreated modern China, radical changes, dialectics, and the people's will to live were among the elements of the evolution. Her model of East-West relations encompassed three concepts: observe the principle of equality, appreciate China's originality, and celebrate her continuity.

Han Suyin adored Mao Zedong's ethical framework, which purported that humanity was "still in its infancy," and thus, China had a role in "bringing a much greater contribution to humanity . . . than they have so far." She said, "The process of the humanisation of man is the one which resists brutality and animality, depersonalisation and the return to barbarism" (Han 1967, 247). Han Suyin saw herself as a faithful narrator who sought to promote peace and understanding. She wanted her writings to help people evaluate China as she was, rather than seeing her with biased presumptions (Han 1992, 232).

I feel that due to Han Suyin's resentment of Confucianism, she did not provide any positive reference to it when dealing with East-West relations. Nonetheless, the Confucian ethics of reciprocity "Do not do to *others* what *you* do not *want* for *yourself*" might be most appropriate in East-West diplomatic policy. If the West had not violated the solidarity, or cast any unnecessary distrust in the East, the past East-West relations would not have been coined in postcolonial terms, such as the oppressed versus the oppressor and so on. If the East and the West abided by the biblical adage "As ye that men would do to you, do ye also to them likewise," East-West relations in the future would be brighter. Han Suyin's records of how modern China evolved showed that China's rise to power was a by-product of her self-strengthening efforts to cater to her own socio-economic needs, not due to any hidden agenda against other powers. While some might resent her leftist undertone, Han Suyin's "insider" approach to writing provides valuable information and alternative views for English readers worldwide on the making of modern China.

Han Suyin's arguments might not soothe the concerns of those who believed in Samuel Huntington's theory regarding the clashes of civilisations or America's long-standing fear of the rise of China. Nevertheless, her literary efforts should not be easily dismissed, for her memoirs promote a great sense of self-respect, a genuine love for one's motherland, as well as a shared responsibility for the future of humanity: "this new amplitude reinforced all other loves, made caring for not only China but all the peoples of the world, coherent, evident" (Han 1992, 6). By campaigning for her beloved China, Han Suyin was encouraging the *esprit de corps* and *camaraderie* among the world's citizens to treat East-West interactions more tenderly, especially when bias easily preceded all sound judgments.

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Conclusion

Han Suyin, a "Daughter of China" and Global Citizen

This book examines Han Suyin's autobiographical series through lens of Nie Zhenzhao's Ethical Literary Criticism – "a critical methodology for reading, analysing, and interpreting literature from an ethical perspective" (Nie 2024, 185). Chapter 1 of the book introduces Han Suyin's life, her era, and her autobiography. The ethical environment she lived in warrants ELC as an appropriate apolitical approach to discussing the changing times recounted in her autobiography. Chapter 2 highlights the "irrationality" running through Han Suyin's autobiography, depicting the unreasonableness and lost humanity of her time. Chapter 3 presents the introspective aspects of Han Suyin's stories in *The Crippled Tree* series, namely, the ethical identity of "to be" versus "ought to be," ethical dilemma and the "two-door" paradox, and the soul-searching that constitutes an autoethnography. Chapter 4 discusses "ethical choice," a key term in ELC, and the legitimacy of her choices. "Legitimacy" and "illegitimacy" are ELC's key notions. Chapter 5 presents the layers of consciousness in each of Han Suyin's six-volume autobiographical series, including Han Suyin's perception of the Chinese consciousness displayed in China's difficult path to modernisation. Chapter 6, the concluding chapter, demonstrates how a rejected Eurasian female defied all odds to reclaim her rightful place on the global scene.

Acknowledged as "a daughter of China" (Li 2012, 48–49), Han Suyin was a faithful advocate for China (Jiang and Huang 2012). To some extent, her romanticism and faithfulness towards her birth country, China, defined who she eventually became, despite the many more years she spent in Southeast Asia and in the West. Her autobiography started as a memory of her "crippled" family tree against the backdrop of a struggling nation rising from the aftermath of complicated East-West entanglements. Reading the subsequent volumes, one will appreciate Han Suyin's long and arduous journey to braving irrationality and attaining self-completion. Her autobiographical series situated in the 20th century recounts defining times – when world wars erupted and East-West encounters impacted history. Compared with Nobel Prize literary laureate Pearl Buck (1892–1973), who brought the world's attention to China through her artistic depiction of early 20th-century rural life in China,

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Han Suyin succeeded in presenting the legitimacy of China's self-conception and self-determination of her destiny, overcoming challenges through radical times in the second half of the 20th century. More than that, Han Suyin's fervour in professing her faith in China and "fatherland" (Han 1982, 115) was eloquently conveyed in the stirring volumes.

Han Suyin's life experiences, as presented in the autobiographical series, demonstrate, among others, the following themes: a renegotiated ethical identity, justified ethical choices, subjective group rationality, perpetual state of ethical dilemma, and endless ethical entanglements. Discussing these themes will validate the appropriateness of using ELC to examine Han Suyin's *The Crippled Tree* autobiographical series.

6.1 Renegotiated Ethical Identity: World Citizenship *versus* Racial Bigotry

Conformity and normalisation would be the expectation of any conventional society of minorities among them. However, from the life experience of China-born Eurasian physician and author Han Suyin, genuine acceptance of minorities and sideliners warrants deliberate socio-political will, which might be the trajectory for shaping an inclusive modern global village in the future.

To recapitulate, since young, Han Suyin's identifiable physical appearance as a Eurasian female made her stand out, deterring her from becoming an in-group member of the local Chinese. Her autobiography depicts unavoidable identity issues due to bigotry and societal rejection. While her problem could potentially be discussed further through the lenses of "race" and "racism," this discussion argues that the concepts of "minority" or "minority group" are useful to deliberate over her *ethical identity*, a key term in ELC.

Ethical identity, elaborated in Chapter 3, is the objective identity of an individual "in relation to" other human beings under a given circumstance in a certain environment. Nie Zhenzhao, proponent of ELC, asserted: "identity is first and foremost *ethical,* for the very reason that identity is defined by the many relationships one cultivates, be it of social or cultural community" (Nie 2024, 196). Han Suyin's ethical identity as a Eurasian person is one of the thorns in her flesh, as she found herself discriminated against by either side of her parents' ethnicity and criticised by the respective ethnic community. As a Eurasian, she was a *minority* in her community. "Minority" as a racial group could be defined by the difference in their number as compared to the dominant group (Dworkin and Dworkin 1976, 12). The dominant group could be a politically dominant group, while the minority might be the sideliners in political strength. Also, "minority" could simply mean a cultural group apart from the main population. The connotation of being a "minority" could assume different definitions in any particular social setting and can be defined or categorised according to four qualities, namely, (a) identifiability,

(b) differential power, (c) differential and pejorative treatment, and (d) group awareness (Dworkin and Dworkin 1976).

Physical identifiability often marks a "foreigner" as distinct from the community. Han Suyin could not forget how "appallingly different" she was from the others, in terms of appearance, when she sat the entrance examination at Yenching University (Han 1966, 228). Decades later, in 1965, when she revisited China, a Chinese cadre still could not accept her due to her foreign appearance and told her apologetically: "With a face like yours, any Chinese child would be frightened of you" (Han 1968, 76). The remark stabbed her soul, which she described as a "nightmare" (Han 1968). The imagery of rejection that she had was "the vision of a far city, nebulous smoke, the vision of a corpse on the road" (Han 1968).

Next, minorities normally experience *differential power from* the majority group which, in comparison, asserts "greater use of resources" (Dworkin and Dworkin 1976, 19). Here, the minority group has less power than the salient group. The majority might not be the powerful group, as evident in the history of South Africa during the apartheid, although normally, the majority wield more power, which they sometimes exercise to their advantage on the minority group and create a dependent, colonial-type relationship between them. In Han Suyin's family experience, the Eurasians were considered weaker by the local Chinese, who judged them as "impure" and half-bred. In *The Crippled Tree*, the European doctor in their city would not offer medical attention to their non-European patients the way they attended to Europeans, and it unfortunately led to the death of Sea Orchid, Han Suyin's second brother (Han 1965, 302–305, 335). During Han Suyin's first marriage, when she lived in England with her first husband before World War II, condescending labels like the "half-caste," "the Anglo-Indian," "the chi-chi," and "the not-quite" were used against Eurasians (Han 1968, 281).

Often, minority groups, due to their vulnerability as the weaker group in the differential power, endure discrimination or the prejudicial attitudes of the majority. The first three volumes of her autobiography and the previous chapters of this book show how the degrees of *differential* and *pejorative treatment* by others changed when Han Suyin's social status changed. In *A Mortal Flower*, volume two of the series, Rosalie (Han Suyin's maiden name) was a young lady entering Brussels University, "powerless," subject to the scrutiny and belittling of society. Her Eurasian minority identity frequently caused her embarrassment at college parties or informal social gatherings. However, the intellectual environment provided her with a neutral ground to share her thoughts, own her voice, and showcase her patriotism towards China in a foreign land. Before World War II, she was able to travel across Europe to give lectures to lobby for support for China against the invading Japanese via her network of the Sino-Belgian Friendship Association. In *My House Has Two Doors*, volume four of the series, Han Suyin had, by then, earned her medical

degree and served her housemanship in Hong Kong. There and then, her Eurasian identity became secondary to her newly earned professional identity. After Han Suyin opened her clinic in Malaya and became a prolific writer, her professional qualification as a doctor as well as her fame as a writer eventually brought her unanticipated high social prestige, as revealed in *Phoenix Harvest* and *Wind in My Sleeve*, volume five and volume six of her autobiography.

Researchers suggest that disadvantaged minority groups may cultivate a *group awareness* about their similarities, and commonality of their fate may also arise (Dworkin and Dworkin 1976, 21). The development of group awareness has been a topic of theoretical interest among social scientists. In Han Suyin's account, however, the group awareness did not help to alleviate her anxieties nor did it motivate her to strive for a better life. In fact, it might have worked in the opposite direction. She was conscious of *not* being one like them. The small Eurasian community that Han Suyin mingled with when she worked as a typist at Peking Union Medical Center (P.U.M.C.) was all about dresses, parties, drinks, husbands, boyfriends, skating, dancing, pony rides, and cars (Han 1966, 167–168). These Eurasian ladies, unfortunately, believed and continuously convinced themselves that they were intellectually deficient. They discouraged Han Suyin from pursuing her medical dream, commenting that Eurasians were "mentally *blocked* up there" (Han 1966, 137).

For Han Suyin to thrive beyond racial bigotry and Eurasian female stereotypes during her era, she must have the courage to break out by *renegotiating* and *redefining* her ethical identity. She did so by fighting for educational opportunities when they were not available to others. Even when university education was impossible for her, she pursued academic learning by hiring tutors using her limited salary as a typist. In other words, even as a minority individual, Han Suyin overcame the differential power and reinvented herself with a new *social prestige* when she was able to gather new social capital – education, occupation, and income later on in life. When she became a middle-class working individual, she found her new place and voice in society – a favourable ethical identity that she had not enjoyed when young.

As a prominent doctor, well-received writer, and sought-after public speaker, Han Suyin embraced the "salvation" of China as her own, as discussed in Chapter 5. Besides producing books that lauded Mao Zedong and Chou Enlai, she was instrumental in producing WHO's field reports about "Family Planning in China" (Han 1971a) and other regional research. Her public lectures promoted a positive image of China. Singapore journalist cum researcher Ina Zhang, who interviewed Han Suyin in Switzerland shortly before her passing, managed to compile a portion of her speaking list. Her lectures relating to China include "Yellow Peril Is Now Red" (February 2, 1954) at Cathay Restaurant Johor Bahru; "China As I Saw It" (November 20, 1956); "The Chinese Intellectuals and the Collective Society" (1957 January 25); "Medical Problems in China Today" (March 27, 1957) at Universiti Malaya; "Impressions of Recent Visit to China" (November 7, 1957) at the Foreign

Correspondents Association of Southeast Asia, Singapore; "I Think China's Commune Will Work" (June 1, 1960) at Singapore Junior Chamber of Commerce; and "The Educational System in China" (May 19, 1964) at National University Singapore (Zhang 2016). Besides the printed media records, videos or voice recordings of Han Suyin's interviews are still available online today, for instance, "The Many Faces of Asia," which took place on March 24, 1965, at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA Irv and Xiaoyan Drasnin Communication Archive).

With her renegotiated and new identity, Han Suyin shed her shadowy past – that helpless and rejected "Rosalie." She was the rightful "Han-Su-Yin," a "plain ('Su')" but a clarion "voice" for the Han people whom she loved. An ethnic minority, no doubt, she remained vocal on China affairs her entire life, whether in radio or TV interviews, whether she was with the BBC, the French media, and other newsgroups. Being an ethnic minority might have given Han Suyin (Rosalie) a disadvantaged start in life, but through education, rational career choice, and legitimate channels, Han Suyin rebranded herself as an exemplary global citizen with valuable contributions that promoted understanding between people.

6.2 Justified Ethical Choice: Patriotism as Pathway to Self-Completion

As discussed in Chapter 3, after choosing to forego medical practice in 1958, Han Suyin became a full-time novelist, historian, and lecturer while striving to promote the good name of Communist China in the West when China had "not one friend in the world" (Han 1982, 274). Although she could have enjoyed a peaceful life with her husband, Colonel Ruthnaswamy, she chose to re-enter China to reconnect with her father and Mainlanders from all walks of life – political leaders, journalists, writers, young cadres, university students, and the grassroots. Whether accepted as a returning "Chinese" or otherwise, she continued to present herself as a non-diplomat advocate for China, maintaining a close network with the BBC and foreign associations in North America and always commenting fondly about China, a nation that was as dear as life to her.

Ethical choice, as defined in ELC and elaborated in Chapter 4, is "subject to the evaluation required by its ethical environment" (Nie 2024, 191). The choices that Han Suyin made in her life were defined by a clear conscience and rationality despite living in a hostile environment. A trying environment does not necessarily produce underachievers and bitter individuals. In fact, in Han Suyin's case, the worst might have brought out the best in her. Advocating for China and promoting equality among people were among Han Suyin's mission in her life. China lacked international presence during her time, but Han Suyin persistently spoke about China, taking great pride in her country. Besides, she never stopped preaching on equality among people and altruism

in her writings or lectures. At the prime of her time, her international presence was felt in many places, like New York, Chicago, D.C., Paris, London, Italy, Phnom Penh, India, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, Japan, Algeria, Yugoslavia, New Delhi, Kazakhstan, Outer Mongolia, and Mexico (Han 1985, 9, 13, 15, 91–92, 148, 157, 164, 166, 193, 202, 231, 248).

Han Suyin's self-appointed role as the mouthpiece for China was, nonetheless, a manifestation of her patriotism and nationalism. *Nationalism* forges a group of people who share "a common heritage, of language, culture, and religion; and that its heritage, way of life, and ethnic identity are distinct from those of other groups." Nationalism as a shared spirit causes people to "believe that they ought to rule themselves and shape their own destinies and that they, therefore, should be in control of their social, economic, and political institutions" (Dworkin and Dworkin 1976, 120). After the Opium War and foreign invasions, China's nationalism was inevitably awakened. The "new people" concept proposed by Liang Qichao and other reformists had taken root among the educated middle-class. For instance, Han Suyin's Chinese tutors, Teacher Wu and Teacher Wang, were among many who closely followed the political development of their country China. This consciousness was deeply ingrained in Han Suyin, even when she furthered her studies at the University of Brussels, and it shaped her life choices and decisions.

As a "daughter of China" who lived abroad, Han Suyin was not part of the national movement of the Chinese youths in China. However, she never discarded her self-assigned role as a China advocate. For her, lobbying for positive international opinions on the rise of the "Red" China and so-called "Chinese Intransigence" during her time was a legitimate and ethical choice. To be patriotic was logical and rightful. She was proudly "a daughter of China" and the Chinese People's "friendship envoy." Her endeavours earned her an award from the Chinese People's Association of Friendship with Foreign Countries in 1996 (*China Daily* 2012).

6.3 Subjective Group Rationality: First-Person Plural Narrative

Researchers have brought attention to a hard-to-be-generalised but worth-considering proposition that a minority female would be "far more likely to define herself by tribal, national or cultural affiliation" (Wong 1998, 170). It has also been remarked that ethnic or tribal subjective group consciousness might outweigh gender considerations. Han Suyin exhibited a similar trait in her works. Interestingly, instead of speaking as a multivocal self, the "I"s, she presented the voices of "many." In *Phoenix Harvest*, she included records from her interviews with prominent writers persecuted during the Cultural Revolution, foreign correspondents, and people from all walks of life, such as "Miss H," Mr. and Mrs. Pei, and so forth (Han 1985, 97, 61).

It is debatable whether one could define a "community" and whether there could be an artificial definition because individuals often participate in simultaneous and overlapping communities, like their social, political, linguistic, and religious communities. However, the categorisation of a singular, unified, self-defining community would be very helpful for group identification and strategic socio-political positioning, especially in the presence of a confronting authority or majority ruling other groups.

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* defines a "nation" as "an imagined political community" (Anderson 1991, 6). He asserts, "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the *nation* is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 1991, 6–7). The idea of community, and especially that of the nation, was core in Han Suyin's deep sense of belonging. China was, therefore, the subject of Han Suyin's lifetime advocacy. A Eurasian minority in China, Han Suyin was a legitimate "Chinese." Her conversation with the widow of Dr. Sun Yat-sen, Madam Soong, affirmed her ethical identity. Madam Soong asked Han Suyin, "You still have not *returned* to live in China?" Han Suyin answered, "I think I can be of service even *abroad*" (Han 1985, 55). The notion of living "abroad" or returning to China makes China Han Suyin's home, whether her self-perception or as seen by others.

Group identification and a deep sense of belonging caused her to include the voices of the Chinese masses in the pages of her autobiography, especially in *Wind in My Sleeve*, the last volume in the series. The voices were not entirely uniform or without any conflicting sub-voices. But together, they formed a corporate appeal from the people of the era. Together, they spoke of an evolving new people of new China who survived all the self-scrutinising movements and wanted more for their common future. These were "tremendous convulsions" and the voices of the many had altogether facilitated Han Suyin's understanding of her own inconsistencies and complexities (Han 1985, 95). She remarked that the pendulum phenomenon in China – suddenly left, suddenly right – was altogether confusing. One thing was certain: there was a demarcation between the "Old China" before the May Fourth Movement in 1919 and China after that.

Han Suyin opined that the new China began with the radicalisation of Chinese thought. Using the first-person plural, Han Suyin documented the deep resentment of the Chinese people against foreign invaders as well as Chinese "feudalism" and corruption under Chiang Kai-shek's regime. She explained that the socialist movement led by Mao Zedong was seriously committed to the pursuit of national solidarity and a central government that systematically restructured China's economy to cater for the well-being of one of the largest populations in the world. She considered the socialist education movement as a "deep-reaching, soul-searching campaign" and collectivism rather than individuality the goal of its economic reform (Han 1982, 493). Han Suyin's

socio-political concept shaped her narrative model in the last few volumes of her autobiographical series. She was thinking in terms of the first-personal plural.

6.4 Perpetual State of Ethical Dilemma: Never a Host, Always a "Guest"

As if inheriting Hakka's itinerant nature from her father, Han Suyin stayed on different continents throughout her life. When her first husband died on the battlefield in China, she was residing in the UK. Not permitted to re-enter China between 1949 and 1956, Hong Kong became her transient home until she remarried and relocated to Malaya. After a decade, Han Suyin commuted between Hong Kong and Bangalore, India, until she and her third husband decided to reside in Lausanne, Switzerland. In 2008, a sculpture bearing Han Suyin's image was erected by the government of Canton of Valais, Switzerland, to duly recognise her prominent achievements in writing and being a cultural envoy between the East and the West (Chun 2009; Inauguration du buste de Han Suyin 2012). Switzerland was her last address.

In a perpetual state as a Chinese Eurasian in diaspora, Han Suyin was forever a Hakka, a "guest," in places she chose to reside, and never a host. The Hakka, literally the "Guest People," are acknowledged to be resilient people owing to the challenging living conditions. Han Suyin was immensely proud of her Hakka heritage: "I needed to find my family origins for my book, *The Crippled Tree*. And the root was here, in this province, among the Hakkas of Meihsien district" (Han 1982, 433). Han Suyin idolised her father, who had kept "the trains running" (Han 1966, 10). The railway had been prioritised over the comfort of Han Suyin's family: "If love can be measured by vulnerability, my father was vulnerable to my mother, his wife, except in one thing: the railway" (Han 1966, 32). Even at a young age, Han Suyin was aware of her father's battles against the constant threats and malicious interruptions of railroad operations by the warlords, the soldiers, and the war, but her father "kept the railways running, patching them up, making do" (Han 1985, 313).

Like father, like daughter. Han Suyin undoubtedly inherited her father's tenacity and spirit of endurance in pursuing her dream of being China's advocate. Her father's unwavering dedication to the railway left a lifelong impression on her. While her mother, Marguerite, rejected China due to its poverty and her elder brother resented China due to his failure in social assimilation, Han Suyin envisioned a life living *for* China. A daughter of her father, Han Suyin knew that she would never disown China:

> 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.
>
> (Han 1985, 314)

Chou Yentung guarded China's railways all his life. During the Japanese occupation in Tianjin and Beijing in 1937, he was arrested for a few days by the Japanese but released and ordered to work on the railway again (Han 1968, 90). Inheriting the legacy of her father to stay faithful to the country no matter the circumstances, Han Suyin proudly guarded the goodwill of her "fatherland" as a non-diplomat at an international level via her voice: "Sometimes I am told that I have sacrificed 'popularity and success' by 'giving up' writing love stories and novels, writing all too serious books (about China). But I could not do otherwise" (Han 1985, 316). China was her "fatherland," as discussed in detail in Chapter 5. China was Han Suyin's roots, her country of origin, and her ideological home, although it could not be a home address. Elsewhere, she was never a host, always a guest. Her mission defined the life of Dr. Han Suyin, a Chinese patriot in the perpetual diaspora.

6.5 Endless Entanglements: Ethical Knots After Knots

In Greek mythology, King Sisyphus was subject to the endless rolling of a huge boulder up a steep hill for eternity, a punishment for offending Zeus, king of the gods. In Han Suyin's autobiography, there is a similar notion of *endless struggles* in her life and the looming socio-economic challenges of China.

> In and out of the stations, with their lice crawl of cankered beggars and crippled soldiers assaulting the trains, beaten off, returning, the Flood, the *endless Flood of misery* that is China, and the trains grand, going through it lordly. The owl hoots of engines in the winged night, engines eating coal, drinking water, belching white smoke plumes straight like a general's helmet feathers, trains backing like horses, cantering forward with round enormous eyes. *Endless*, like *poverty*, like *hunger*, the talk of the trains, Papa's life, the family's life, Rosalie's life. Whenever Papa's friends come together, Uncle Liu the Lolo, Mr. Hua Namkwei, they talk of the trains, of the wars that cut the railways, of the money the trains make which goes to pay old debts, and of the Great Strikes of the railways, in 1924, 1925.
>
> (Han 1966, 13)

In its entirety, Han Suyin's autobiography unfolded an *endless* untying of the existing *ethical knots*, the forming of the new ethical knots and the subsequent untying of the new knots, and so on. The perpetual *ethical entanglements* and the *unending* efforts required to be free from entanglements could be discouraging to many. In her literature, this difficult loop could be found in both her life story as well as the condition of emerging China in the early 20th century. Without grit, resilience, and optimism to overcome all the roadblocks, Han Suyin's life would not have been so intriguing.

Readers of Han Suyin's *The Crippled Tree* series can discern a perpetual loop in her process of seeking acceptance and affirmation of her self-identity, namely, the process of rejecting herself as "Rosalie," embracing the undeniable existence of herself as "Rosalie," rejecting herself again, assuring herself again, and so on. She sought breakthroughs by adopting the "thinking beyond Rosalie" strategy like creating an *ideal* Rosalie with "Josephine" as her new name. That did not work, for it was the name of her maid, dismissed by her sisters as a silly idea. It was not until when she earned herself the professional title of Dr. Chou that she could embrace a respected identity as Han Suyin, China's mouthpiece.

Han Suyin's experience of not being an in-group member among the Chinese was a perpetual one: "Not a foreigner . . . sometimes a foreigner . . . not quite a foreigner . . . maybe a foreigner . . . a *perpetual* hummingbird hover for me" (Han 1992, 16). While she stated that she would not want that "foreigner-not foreigner" ethical identity to affect her inner peace, Han Suyin cared very much about it. In *Wind in My Sleeve*, the last volume of her autobiographical series, she acknowledged the emotional distance between her and the local Chinese: "Once again, it is the *foreigner* in me" (Han 1992, 122), highlighting her predicament.

6.6 Conclusion

ELC identifies the irrational component of man as the *animal nature* of man, while the humanistic or rational component of man is the *human nature* of man. This allegorical categorisation presents the problems of *ethics* and the *ethical relationship* between a man with another. This dualism of categorising human nature into human or animal nature will not please everyone. A potential opponent of ELC is MacCormack, who advocates deconstructing the idea of "human" and ceasing the use of the word "animal" in *Posthuman Ethics*. Presenting her *human* theory, MacCormack opposes the involvement of "animal" in the discussion of human nature (Becker 2013). Another opponent might be Richard Posner, who does not see the role of good literature in character transformation (Posner 1997, 1–27).

Despite opposing opinions, I believe in the potential of ELC as a sensible approach to critiquing literature. The analysis of Han Suyin's autobiographical texts in this book demonstrates its use and potential. Human dilemmas, identity complexes, or trying situations requiring ethical choices, as in Han Suyin's *The Cripple Tree* series, point to the difficult relational issues between one another, man and history. The most important remains: "how will one live" in the literature. It is in the simulated world of literature that one can be tamed to explore the ethical question of whether certain human psychology or behaviour is an act of a human being. Besides, it is in the ethical context of a narrative that one can reconnect with human emotions, such as fear, disgust, grief, relief, sorrow, or joy. ELC is one of the most practical and logical

approaches to examining and analysing the literary works of human beings, as the core of literature is none other than the *ethics* of man and the *ethical relationship* in human society.

Han Suyin's *ethical choice* warrants the moral courage of not modelling after her Eurasian peers, but choosing to be "Chinese" and pursuing the "salvation" of China probably kept her from an emotional vacuum, as well as perpetual spiritual displacement. Moreover, since her adolescent years, her faith in the future of China through turbulent times gave her the moral courage to pursue her yet-to-be-proven life on the right track. Her *rational mind* reaffirmed her *ethical choice* that eventually determined her *ethical identity* and her choice to be a true daughter of China.

Her life unfolds a renegotiated *ethical identity* by faithfully embracing "a continuity what was and what is" (Han 1965, 19), holding together "all the Rosalies and all the different Rosalies to-be" (Han 1965, 371). Her six-volume autobiographical series presented her persistent renegotiation, which resulted in her completed self, her "to-be." A voluminous series, her autobiographical account provides much food for thought, judging from her historical and personal reflection on differential issues faced by minority mixed-race individuals during the 20th century. Her life was puzzling yet logical, an oxymoron of rationality amidst irrationality.

One would have to agree that Han Suyin's autobiographical account signals a reality check on how men should treat one another. In her public lecture "Race Relations and the Third World," Han Suyin refuted differential attitudes and language used against the "coloured minority" and the weaker group in racial interaction (Han 1971b). Speaking from her experiences as a medical professional for 15 years, a well-travelled novelist, and a woman who had had three husbands – one Chinese, one English, and one Indian – Han Suyin felt that she earned her right to denounce ethnic discrimination and preach equality between people. Her clarion voice precedes many others who call for attention to the legitimacy and presence of the "mixed"s. Professor Scott Solomon, a biologist and science writer, once predicted that interracial marriage and integration would be on the rise. He showed how in highly diverse Asian urban cities, such as Singapore, the percentage of interracial marriages increased from 7.6% of all marriages in 1990 to 21.5% in 2015, while in the United States, mixed-race children increased from 1% of all births in 1970 to 10% in 2013. In Latin American countries, like Brazil, the population of mixed-race (identified as the "pardo") was as high as 43% of the total population, according to a 2010 census (Solomon 2017). In Malaysia, the 2017–2022 statistics show a rising trend of interracial marriages before COVID-19. Even throughout the pandemic years, the number did not dip below 13,833 marriages (Tan 2024). Han Suyin's autobiographical account has provided insights into attitudes towards the world's increasingly mixed community.

To conclude, this book has examined Han Suyin's autobiographical series from the lens of ethical literary criticism and introduced two new terms that

define acceptable behaviours, antisocial acts and sanctionable conduct – i.e., "legitimacy" and "illegitimacy" – into the corpus of its key terms. It delineates Han Suyin's strenuous renegotiation of her dubious identity through courageous life choices and unwavering role as the "voice" for the group she represented. At the same time, her rationale for the legitimacy of new China was a clarion call on the international platform. Her perpetual state of diaspora and settlement in the West did not detract her from speaking with a fierce consciousness. The opinions and accounts in Han Suyin's autobiography might remain controversial. Still, it is argued that her attempt to document her memories of people, places, and events during her lifetime is a remarkable demonstration of the depth of her sense and sensibility, encouraging new ways to think, feel, and reason. Her moral courage to untie the endless entanglements in her life truly set her apart from others. She was truly a woman ahead of her time, unconventional, untraditional, and unapologetic till the end. That is the charm of Dr. Han Suyin, a woman who braved irrationality and overcame impossibilities, achieving international prominence and remaining relevant in a changing world.

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