

Book Review

Review of the book *An Ethical Literary Criticism of Dr Han Suyin's Autobiography: Braving Irrationality*, by Florence Kuek. Routledge, 2025, 130 pp. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003466918>; eBook ISBN9781003466918.

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Dr. Kuek deserves commendation for work which meets the requirements of rigorous intellectual inquiry, logical argumentation, and knowledge through reasoned discourse and analysis.

This review will not focus on the subject matter of ethical literary method and theory which is the theme of the book and its foreword provided by Nie Zhenzhao, a pioneer in the field which examines literature beyond its contribution to the arts and humanities.

My stance is as a historian and a political analyst who has long followed the geo-political developments surrounding China – developments that formed the foundational basis for Han Suyin's life and writings, and whose analysis constitute a central focus of this study.

Suyin was an extraordinarily prolific writer with more than 40 published books, numerous essays and an extensive array of non-fiction during a 50-year writing career. For the book, Dr. Kuek has made the right decision in focusing on Suyin's autobiographical works - *The Crippled Tree* (1965), *A Mortal Flower* (1966), *Birdless Summer* (1968), *My House Has Two Doors* (1980) and *Wind in My Sleeve* (1992). The study, originally undertaken as her doctoral dissertation, has now culminated in this significant publication.

The introductory chapter is exemplary in its ability to weave Han Suyin's personal narrative – spanning her early and later life – into the broader narrative of unprecedented changes taking place within Chinese society. It situates her story against the backdrop of Western and Japanese incursions, each power intent on carving out portions of China for its own gain. This attempt to bring down and divide China continues today and testifies to the relevance of Suyin's writing for

the present and coming generations.

The subsequent chapters of the book explore the ethical dimensions and considerations that emerge throughout Suyin's autobiographical writing. Drawing on Suyin's sense of identity, consciousness and moral choice, Kuek examines how ethics not only permeates her lived experience but also shapes the stories and narratives she crafts in her works.

Kuek's concluding chapter, though persuasive in its attempt to explain the different stages and experiences of Suyin's life and how they were manifested in her writing and career development is marred by her assertion that Suyin may have seen herself or acted as "a mouthpiece" for China (see pp. 104, 108).

The charge that Suyin was a "mouthpiece", that is, a person speaking on behalf of another group or organization or representing the opinions or policies of a government, has frequently been levelled against Suyin by political critics and Western media commentators' intent on smearing her name and diminishing the value of her writing and public activities.

There is no evidence that Suyin was ever a "mouthpiece" or "apologist" for China. She was a fiercely independent individual who, in her own journey in life, saw the need and importance of the emergence of "a new China". That she chose to voice and write copiously in praise of the new China did not make her a mouthpiece in any way.

It certainly did not deflect Suyin from expressing concern and criticism of policies and shortcomings of the Chinese Communist Party in her writing and public appearances. A chapter or lengthy discussion of the Western ideological and racial pressure, disrespect, criticism and bias that Suyin encountered and responded to after the initial success of her early books would not have been out of place in Kuek's book. This could have produced a more nuanced and balanced understanding of how and why Suyin responded through her writing and other activities to brave the ideological "irrationalities" that plagued and impinged on her life and her world - continuing even today.

An underrated literary giant, Han Suyin was a pioneering giant crossing, challenging and overcoming racial, gender, political and ideological barriers not just in literature but also in life. This close-up and admirable study by Kuek of the pen and life of an extraordinary person, a formidable intellect, a gifted prolific writer and an underrated literary and global personality should be followed up by other scholars.

Perhaps the most disappointing omission of this otherwise excellent book for local readers is the relatively little attention given to evaluation of the time Suyin spent in Malaya and Singapore. The period from 1952 to 1964 saw her work as a doctor in Johor and as a social activist deeply involved in local socio-political causes in Singapore and Malaya. Her time in this part of the world was marked by the publication of several acclaimed novels. The one for which she is most remembered and famous, *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, was made into a hit movie but it was not based on her life in Malaya.

The most acclaimed work, drawing on her time here, is her 1956 novel, *And The Rain My Drink*. Many see it as a pivotal work in post-colonial literature. Not only does it offer a nuanced critique of British colonialism during the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960), its significance has been said to span political, historical, cultural, and literary domains.

The publication of this book, her work in the newly established Nanyang University, her criticism of British colonialism, and ultimately, a speech she made criticising the merger of Singapore with Malaya to form Malaysia, led to Suyin being declared *persona non grata* by the Singapore and Malayan authorities and to being banned from both countries. It appears that these bans were never lifted as she never returned to Malaysia and Singapore - two countries which played a transformative role in her life.

Departing from the conventional scope of a book review, I must note that our country has not accorded Suyin the recognition she deserves. I have provided a fuller discussion of how and why Han Suyin merits a more prominent place in Malaysian history on the recent occasion of Kuek's book launch.¹

If Suyin and her work have been underrated abroad, she has been treated worse and marginalized more in the official history and narratives of Malaysia and Singapore. This to me is because she was probably the most prominent and outspoken anti-colonial, leftist intellectual and personality of her time in modern Malaysia.

Han Suyin - her writings, activities, and contributions in this region – deserve far greater recognition within Malaysia. It is to be hoped that Kuek's book will prompt the relevant authorities to accord her the acknowledgement and respect that have long been overdue.

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Notes

1 See <https://m.aliran.com/thinking-allowed-online/the-underrated-giant-why-han-suyin-deserves-a-place-in-malaysian-history#:~:text=It%20exposed%20the%20brutality%20of,oppression%20rather%20than%20mere%20extrem>