

Rosalie or not Rosalie: Han Suyin's Ethical Identity and Ethical Choices in the *Crippled Tree* Series

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Abstract This paper tracks the identity and choices of Rosalie Chou based on Dr Han Suyin's autobiographical series. Han Suyin had rejected her maiden name Rosalie Chou, but learned later that she was to embrace it after all, since it marked a significant period of her regretful past. Nevertheless, the adoption of a Chinese pseudonym "Han Suyin" was also necessary for the reconstruction of her new identity. By revisiting identified ethical chaos and confusion in her family saga, as well as delineating competing moral imperatives against Eurasians in China during the 20th century, Han Suyin showcased a reconstruction of the ethical order in her world. The accounts of Rosalie evoked the ethical consciousness of any reader who would like to stand for her in her cultural displacement and identity complex at a time and locality where the East clashes with the West.

Key words ethical literary criticism; identity; choice; Han Suyin; Eurasian; 20th century China

Introduction

A decade after her relatively not-so-successful debut novel, *Destination Chungking*, China-born Eurasian physician-author Han Suyin suddenly gained worldwide readership due to her sentimental semi-autobiographical novel *A Many-Splendoured Thing*. The novel was also popularised by an Oscar-award winning film with an almost

identical title, "Love is a Many-Splendored Thing." Based on her real-life love story with the Australian journalist Ian Morrison in Hong Kong, *A Many-Splendored Thing* portrayed an intriguing cross-cultural romance, along with the multi-faceted East-West conflicts of that era. Notable tensions in the novel include: the jarringly different lifestyles of the European middle-classes as compared to the Chinese commoners; the great ideological divide between Christian missionaries and the Chinese locals; the pride of the Chinese people against the arrogance of the Westerners; etc. The overtone of the novel revealed a constant search by Ian and Suyin for "a place for (them) both." The search evoked questions of ethics, politics and society. As intense as their romantic relationship might be, there were no social and legal provisions at the time for the couple to be together. Ian was a married Australian war correspondent, while Suyin was a widow of a Kuomintang general, who temporarily resided in Hong Kong, but was determined to return to China whenever the political scenario allowed it.

In the subsequent decades, Han Suyin's soul-searching attempts persisted. She published a 5-volume autobiographical series, elaborating East-West conflicts via the microcosm of her family saga, and — from the perspective of this writer — with a central *ethical* theme: The search for a legitimate place for "Rosalie Matilda Kuanghu Chou" to thrive with dignity. "Rosalie Chou" was Han Suyin's christened maiden name. In the concluding chapter of the entire series, "The End and the Beginning," the then 60-plus years-old Suyin concluded that she became who she was due to the shaping memories of the poverty of the Old China, which was marked by the overworked rickshaw coolie, dead babies wrapped in newspapers, and blind junior beggars (*PH*, 314-315). Though regarded as a work of the leftist, Han Suyin's autobiographical series provided valuable snapshots of the emerging Modern China in the presence of the Western powers. Her five books, listed according to the timeframe of the storyline, as well as their respective year of publications, are: *The Crippled Tree* (abbreviation *CT* : 1885-1928, pub. 1965), *Mortal Flower* (*MF* : 1928-1938; pub. 1966), *Birdless Summer* (*BS* : 1938-1948; pub. 1968), *My House has Two Doors* (*HTD* : 1948-1965; pub. 1980), and *Phoenix Harvest* (*PH* : 1966-1980; pub. 1980).

Being born and raised in Henan and Peking respectively, Rosalie Chou encountered intertwined ethical issues due to ethnic polarisation, racial sentiments and gender stereotypes. The writer of this paper finds the post-colonialism and feminist theories insufficient to provide an in-depth study of Han Suyin and her literary world.¹ In fact, Han Suyin's literary portrayals of females were generally more "wifely" than feminist. Also, her dismissal of victim mentality in her autobiography, particularly her commentary regarding the predicaments of her mother and her brother in cross-cultural experiences as well as the self-strengthening power of the Chinese people in national building, had altogether served as the best internal evidence against critics

who tried to coin her writings in the post-colonial categories. On the other hand, the *ethical literary criticism* (ELC) that was strongly propagated by Prof. Zhenzhao Nie in 2004, appears more useful and appropriate in examining the ethical lines and knots of Rosalie Chou (Han Suyin)'s life stories, yielding a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of her 5-volume autobiography.

Ethical literary criticism is a literary research approach that combines literary analysis and ethical criticism. Professor Nie, chief proponent of the criticism, emphasises that the integral nature of literature is *ethics*, rather than aesthetics. The value of world literature is not its power to entertain, but its function to facilitate the understanding of human life and society in the light of social ethics.² Ethics is the mother of literature. The epics of Homer establish the ethical tradition in the Greco-European literature. Even as great world literature never fails to provide inspiring moral references to the material and spiritual life of mankind, literary criticism today should elevate literature that could stand the test of ELC. Quality literary work evokes the common experience of man's desire for moral perfection. ELC attempts to observe, analyse and expound various ethical issues in the simulated world of literature, in order to generate attention to viable ethical questions in real life.

The source of understanding, explaining and critiquing literature lies in its ethical and historical contexts. ELC does not make use of modern-day morality to judge events of a certain literary setting, for it would be a subjective moral judgment against a "false autonomy situation." One who employs ELC would have to enter the particular historical and social setting of the literature. One may even act as the advocate³ for a certain character in the literature so as to comprehend the unique social-historical backdrop of the persons and events in the literary world. This approach leans towards Aristotle's view in studying human ethics via the simulated world of literature, rather than the Platonic moral criticism that critiques literature from the real time via subjective moral standards of the critiquing personnel.⁴

The *Crippled Tree* autobiographical series delineates the lifelong process of Rosalie Chou's self-rejection, self-acceptance and self-completion, reflecting her mode of survival through bold identity claims and debatable ethical choices at a given time and specific locality where the East clashed harshly with the West, i.e., 20th century China. This paper thus attempts to examine Rosalie Chou's identity complex and life choices via a prism of ethical dimensions, namely taboo breaking, ethical chaos, ethical confusion, ethical consciousness, ethical identity, ethical choice and ethical reconstruction. These dimensions are also key terms of the ELC. The qualifier here, "ethical," is not anchored on any subjective or modern day moral judgment. In fact, the debate of what is "right" and what is "wrong" is not what ELC purports. What interests ELC is the explanation of why and how the events of a certain

literature happened the way it did. Hence, this paper would try to provide the logic of the behaviours and choices of the protagonist, Rosalie Chou (in *CT* and *MF*) who later becomes Han Suyin (in *BS*, *HTD* and *PH*), with reference to the objective ethical framework of the time period as it is written.

That said, this writer also wants to clarify that the paper is not approaching the study on Han Suyin via a “historical discipline,” but rather, it is using biographical and literary information in Han Suyin’s literature as the “critical instrument” to understand the works produced by the author.⁵ Also, it should be clear that Rosalie Chou as the “*arkhe anypothetos*,” the unique personality of the literary artefact, is the proper subject of this literary study.

Taboo Breaking: It Pays to Commit the Forbidden

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 “illegitimate” for one to be born and live as a Eurasian in China. To trace it, the “crippled” family tree of Rosalie Chou started from her not-being-blessed mixed parentage, the union of Hakka Chinese Chou Yentung with 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 Denis. The young couple eloped, and when they returned to the Denis, Marguerite was pregnant and demanded to marry her Chinese beau. The scandal was hardly tolerated. The Denis 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 Yentung back to China (*CT* 197). The couple, however, stood firm with their choice for each other. They were able to find a sympathiser to minister their matrimony in a rush. Yentung’s side of the family in Chengdu telegraphed to give their unwilling consent: “Inform Yentung marriage permitted” (201). However, the consequence of a mixed marriage had far-reaching effects, especially when the couple relocated to Yentung’s home province Szechuan, China in 1913. Marguerite, who gave up her Belgian passport and decided to identify with her Chinese husband in every way — “I want to be a Chinese” (204) — was humiliated and scorned by the Chinese locals. Even on the street, there was an attempt by a twelve year-old boy to humiliate her by urinating on her skirt (278). As a result, Marguerite never recovered from the bitterness of rejection. She turned into a ferocious woman even to her husband, and eventually left Yentung for Europe in 1949 (280).

Interestingly, her strong-willed daughter Rosalie repeated the same identity choice years later, “I want to be Chinese, like you, like Papa” (403) despite the awkwardness of her appearance and mannerism as compared to the Chinese locals.

Like her mother Marguerite, Rosalie was not afraid to breach the cultural taboos and religious sanctions during her era.⁶ But Rosalie's worldview was quite different from her mother. Born in China and having discarded Catholicism, Rosalie adopted "China" as her new religion.⁷ She tried to authenticate her "Chinese" identity via her marriage to Colonel Pao: "Pao became the personification of China to me" (*BS* 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" (25). Unfortunately, Pao turned out to be a severe abuser. Rosalie was harmed physically and emotionally throughout her eight years of marriage to Pao. The miserable marriage ended when Pao died in the war front. Even though Rosalie lost Pao, her assumption that she could validate her Chinese identity through marriage did work to a certain extent. It was because of Pao that Rosalie somehow had a higher claim to speak on behalf of the Chinese people as an in-group member. Yet it was also due to Pao that Rosalie Chou, a widow of a prominent Kuomintang member, was to leave China to look for her new home due to her dubious political identity. The ethical environment of the era compelled Rosalie to move to countries other than China, i.e., any country where she could possibly bloom and live with dignity.

Upon completion of her L.R.C.P, M.R.C.S, and M.B.B.S degrees, with honors in surgery and pathology from the School of Medicine, University of London, Rosalie decided to return to Hong Kong, "the gateway to China" (343-344). In her own words, she could not live "in peace" in England "while tremendous China, like the phoenix, was being reborn from the consuming pyres of the massive conflict" (350). Widowed with an adopted daughter Yungmei, Rosalie fell head over heels in love with a dashing white journalist, Ian Morrison, in Hong Kong. To Rosalie, Ian was more akin to the Asian man, rather than any Caucasian who might revel in the white man's burden (*HTD* 29-30). There was great respect and sensibility in their romance. However, their relationship was also hindered by Ian's estranged wife in Australia, who refused to divorce. Besides, Ian could not find a satisfying way to dismiss his duty to his children. To complicate the matter, Rosalie's firm decision to return to communist China whenever possible, naturally forfeited the inclusion of Ian in her further plan, for Ian was a war correspondent of *The Times*, the leading magazine of the democratic West. Their affair ended in 1950 when Ian was killed in the Korean war. Even if Ian had lived, their dream to be together was deemed to shatter as Ian was the last man whom Rosalie could legitimately marry.

Ethical Chaos: Foreignness is Deadly

When Rosalie's mother, Marguerite, accompanied her husband Yentung back to the conservative province of Szechuan, she was overjoyed that her Chinese dreams would

finally materialize: a Chinese prince, a Chinese pavilion, the beautiful landscape and lovable people. However, while Yentung deeply appreciated her love, Marguerite's foreignness was a big problem upon her relocation to China. During the early 20th century, the unexposed community in Southern Chinese provinces perceived oneness and cohesiveness as matters of life and death. Authenticity and purity of Chinese customs had to be guarded. "The Hakkas say they are the true people of Han, and that they have escaped degenerate habits brought by foreign rule" (CT 25). To them, any alien element ought to be uprooted. Under such moral imperatives, the villagers were ready to commit detestable group bullying. They would "punish" Marguerite for her mere existence in their territory. One day, when Yentung was working away at the railroad, a bunch of ruthless bandits ransacked the house in which this poor foreign wife resided. The burglars also decapitated her cook and hanged his head in the garden to showcase their violence. Not only did the local community completely ignore the decapitated head that was left hanging in Marguerite's garden, their young men, women and children mocked and harassed Marguerite on a daily basis behind that head-hanging tree. It was grave ethical chaos. "Enough, enough, ... I have had enough!" Marguerite screamed as the verbal attacks by the Chinese crowd "Foreign devil, foreign devil, foreign devil" took its toll on her (1-2). The message was clear in the air: Foreigner, get out of our (Chinese) territory!

About a decade later, Rosalie eye-witnessed yet another racial brutality, but this time, the ethnic identity of the aggressor and the victim inter-changed. 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, 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 — a few days after the incident, Rosalie could not help but to throw a terrible tantrum in the street (MF 31). She totally understood the utter loneliness of her brother. Being a Eurasian, there was none to care, and so George became an outcast socially and emotionally. He belonged nowhere. Acting out his frustration upon a readily available target on the street, the Chinese rickshaw coolie, was easy. But it did not soothe the desperation that was raging in one's divided psyche. Rosalie recognised and identified with that predicament of the mind. But she would not condone her brother's turning into a villain among the community of the don't-haves. Since day one, she had willed herself to wrestle with the emptiness within until she could have a breakthrough. She did not know how and when the battle would be over. Nobody had ever shown her what was the *right* way to do so, or if there was any *right* way to do it. "I had to do it, to live with myself, to be myself, and to continue growing, where others had stopped. I would not be a crippled tree,... At least I would

greet the tomorrow I had not made, even if it killed me” (CT 18). An alien could kill or be killed. Foreignness could be deadly. Ethical chaos could be the cause of insanity, unless one fights against it with good courage and great determination.

Ethical Confusion: Eurasians are Lesser Beings

Rosalie’s father Yentung, being a Chinese engineer who worked under Belgian supervisors, had never earned salary comparable to that of a European, even though he was performing the same tasks. Rosalie’s mother Marguerite, being married to a Chinese, was discriminated against and despised by wives of the Europeans. Yentung and Marguerite endured the racial biasness and hoped to raise their family quietly. But one incident before the birth of Rosalie permanently broke up their family: the death of their second son Gabriel Sea Orchid, due to, again, racial discrimination. As the socio-political situation in Chengdu was turbulent at the time, Yentung and Marguerite had sent their first-born Son of Spring to his grandparents in Belgium earlier. Sea Orchid thus became a much-welcomed baby. Moreover, Sea Orchid was regarded as the most beautiful baby in the eyes of his mother. He was christened Gabriel, meaning Messenger from Heaven, or Angel.

Along the Lunghai Railway where Yentung worked, European families were able to visit the doctor at his home anytime. Marguerite, wife of a Chinese, could only see the doctor at his morning clinic. One evening, baby Sea Orchid suffered massive convulsions. Yentung was out on the railway. As no immediate help was available, Marguerite desperately brought the dying baby in her arms to the French doctor’s home. Her effort was in vain, as the doctor’s wife who answered the door did not consent with the visit, “Get out, you and your filthy halfcaste brat, get out of my house” (304). It was a nerve-wracking evening. Marguerite could not challenge the deadlock in the European-Chinese ties at the time. Her angel baby died the next morning. After Yentung’s return from the railway, he took care of the burial quietly. None of the European engineers or the doctor sent their condolences. The ethical confusion of whether a Eurasian is a human life or a lesser life was left unattended to.

The confusion and discrimination against the mixed bloods was even canonised. Rosalie recalled a book that had haunted her, entitled *Races of the World*. The book taught that the white race was most distinguished due to their significant brain weight. “... the brain of the average white man weighs one thousand six hundred grammes, that of the yellow man one thousand four hundred, the red man’s brain weighs one thousand three hundred and forty and the black man round about one thousand two hundred...” (MF 129). The book also claimed that the mixed bloods were “prone to mental imbalance, hysteria, alcoholism, generally of weak character and untrustworthy” (MF 129). Being classified as a degenerated species, young Rosalie

prayed fearfully for immunity from losing her brain, as well as a miracle to survive the suggested fate of regressing into a lesser being (129). Could a Eurasian young lady pursue her medical ambition in such an environment? Rosalie's contemporaries, Olga and Hilda, repeatedly condemned her for trying to be different than other domesticated Eurasian girls, "You'll never make it, you'll never make it, you just haven't got the brains" (134). But Rosalie wanted to challenge the unchallengeable. She would eventually become the benchmark of "Eurasians with the brains."

Ethical Consciousness: De-naming as Antidote to the Curse of Life

After the demise of Rosalie's second brother Gabriel, Sea Orchid, her mother Marguerite indulged in alcoholism and was totally unprepared for the birth of Rosalie. Even though Rosalie was her first daughter, Marguerite refused to look at this baby girl after the delivery. Treating Rosalie like an illegitimate child, Marguerite cursed, "Take that halfcaste brat away. It is not my child" (CT 304). Marguerite did not attend to the baby for an entire week, so much so that Rosalie was both suffering from jaundice and starving from malnutrition. Though the servant tried to feed her with some rice-water and diluted condensed milk, baby Rosalie was practically left to survive on her own. "Die, die!" Marguerite indulged in drinking, and kept calling out for the deceased baby, Sea Orchid. Rosalie's father finally intervened. On the eighth day of Rosalie's birth, Yentung slapped the wife, hitting her and putting the baby in her arms, "Are you going to feed her or not? She is your child" (350). It was the first and last time Marguerite had ever been ill-treated by her loving husband in that manner. Subsequently, the mother-daughter relationship between Marguerite and Rosalie became prone to rivalry than a loving bond.

Besides being named "that half caste brat," Rosalie was also called "the Wicked One" by her birth mother (317, 322). As Rosalie recollected, "Mama never really forgave her daughter for having taken Sea Orchid's place. She tried hard to love her, and she did her best, but no one can escape the unconscious, unexplained resentment for which only circumstance is responsible" (305). The love of one's mother is one of the basic needs as described in Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs. Deprived of the love of her mother, Rosalie felt abandoned. She had to thrive on her own. To add to the pain, she could never forget the "Big Hurt," namely the hurt related to her unwelcome birth (282). Managing her mother had always been one of the biggest predicaments during her youth. After many failed attempts, Rosalie knew that she would never be able to satisfy her mother. She finally decided *not* to go on as her mother's Rosalie. A sensitive and sensible girl, Rosalie would always be conscious about the curse of "illegitimacy" regarding her existence.

Rosalie's full maiden name was Rosalie Matilda Kuanghu Chou. She was named

after her grandmother, Matilda Rosalie Leenders, with the variation of having two Chinese names at the end of the string of names. “Kuanghu” was her personal name in Chinese, meaning the “light of the moon,” for it was on the Harvest Festival day that she was born. “Chou” was her last name from the father. As bicultural as the name may sound, Rosalie rejected “Rosalie” as her name. “Rosalie, who did not want to be named Rosalie, crawled still farther away from the house...” (CT 319). Even as a preteen, Rosalie consciously chose to become Rosalie-no-longer. She wanted to be “another, not hamstrung Rosalie” (MF 38). She needed a name that marked the new beginning of Rosalie the doctor-to-be. One day, she had the new name for herself: Josephine. She announced it proudly to the mom, “From today I am Josephine.” But her mother laughed about it, “Why that was the name of my servant, my maid, Josephine.” She was also ridiculed by her sisters Tiza and Marianne, “Josephine, Josephine the servant, your name is Josephine the servant” (39). She was upset, but not crushed. Josephine-Rosalie had developed resilience to adversity at home. She was ready for unkind words and discouraging manners. She would live on. She would assert a new “she,” a new identity in the forming. De-naming was her new found device, an antidote to the curse of her birth and her very existence.

The buoyant spirit of Josephine-Rosalie was necessary for her new belief. Within her, she saw herself sharing a future alongside the nation that she had gradually identified herself with in total — China. During her adolescence, she had been hearing pronouncements of China’s doom, “China is finished,” “This is the end,” “There is no hope for China” (40). Yet this Josephine-Rosalie would not lose hope regarding China. In fact, she started to assert a tenacity that many others did not have. With dignity and moral courage, she was ready to go against all odds in order to greet the day of light, namely the day of transformation for China, and for herself. Although it took Rosalie a long time to figure out what to fight for, she finally got it altogether (32). Through a long period of soul searching and re-identification of herself, Rosalie was able to reconstruct the ethical order of her world through the recreation of herself. Instead of resorting to a victimized mentality or alienating herself from the Chinese community, she took on an active role as a contributing member to China and the Chinese. She eventually adopted a name that characterised who she wanted herself to be: “Han Suyin.” Literally, “Han Suyin” means the plain voice of the Han people. The family name “Han (韩),” homophone of “Hanzu (汉族),” was deliberately chosen by Rosalie Chou to project her ethical identity of being a member of the majority Chinese.

Ethical Identity: Re-defining the Determinatives

One’s *ethical* identity is differentiated from *metaphysical* identity. Metaphysics is

concerned with what constitutes a person, e.g., body and soul, and whether a person could be identified as the same person at all times, i.e., if a person could be X at a time, but Y at another, what makes X and Y the same person? *Ethical identity*, on the other hand, is the definition for the “core” self or “true” self of a person, a determinative of one's precise individualism: What makes X (or X+Y in different stages) a certain person, rather than another individual. In Rosalie Chou's case, examining her ethical identity means the observation of what makes the person X Rosalie Chou, rather than George Chou or Tiza Chou. In other words, the ethical identity of Rosalie Chou is what makes Rosalie Chou the exact person who she is, which basically could be answered from two dimensions: Descriptively, what are the core traits and values that define who Rosalie Chou is? Normatively, what are the core traits and values that *should* define who Rosalie Chou is.

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 suggesting 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 become secondary in her socialisation. Her patients as well as her social circle would recognise her as a highly sought-after *doctor*, rather than a Eurasian lady. Also, because of her professional qualifications, any negative preconception regarding her as a female or her “Eurasian” background would automatically be re-evaluated. In her fourth book, *My House has Two Doors*, she recollected how easily she overcame gender discrimination in the medical profession when she first opened her own clinic in Johor Baharu Malaysia. A male doctor warned her then, “You won't have any patients. People don't like women doctors.” Contrary to his stereotyped opinion, Dr. Chow (Rosalie)'s patients increased phenomenally. Besides getting patients from the city, her fame brought her patients from distant rubber estates (*HTD* 100-102). Eventually, whether a “pure-blood” or not, she received the appointment by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to be the Consultant on China Affairs.

In many ways, Rosalie's ethical identity was predominantly shaped and determined by her ideal self. Unlike her mother who only saw a secure future for Eurasian women in marriage, Rosalie was convinced of her capability to rise above gender discrimination and ethnic rivalry. Even at the age of 14 (or younger), Rosalie had envisioned that “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” (*CT* 348). Young Rosalie thought that an egg a day would cure

blindness, as she learned that from her mother. It was during a vacation at the home of a deceased doctor that Rosalie was first exposed to medical books. Having read those books, and being able to diagnose the diseases suffered by each family member, Rosalie instinctively knew that she would be a doctor in future (*MF* 16), and she eventually became a recognised doctor, as she had already seen herself becoming so.

Unlike her younger sister Tiza Chou the “Loved One,” Rosalie the “Wicked One” (nick-named by her mother) was not feminine and domesticated like any other European girls. While Tiza naturally became what a Eurasian girl “ought to be,” Rosalie found it difficult to be acquainted with the Western element in her dual-identity. Even as she learned to observe the Western courtesies of “saying yes madams, curtsying, holding a fork, and laughing socially,” she felt that it would be more truthful to herself if she could be a part of “the squalor,” namely, China of the time (*CT* 363). Rosalie, who refused to be the mommy’s Rosalie, remembered — and an old photograph supported the fact — that she was fairly loved by her father. Father called her Meme, meaning “Little Sister.” He held her, a baby then, in his arms, and she was bundled in the flowered blanket which had been Sea Orchid’s blanket (305). Hence, even in the midst of identity crisis, “Who am I, what am I?... What is to *be*?” (320), Rosalie Chou figured out gradually that she wanted to be Chinese, “like Papa” (403). “This is Hsinyang in Honan, and Papa is Chinese and Mama is Belgian, and I am Rosalie or so they call me, but really, I am not Rosalie. I am me... And who was me?” (326).

All in all, the sense of ideal self and internalisation of convictions about her “Chineseness” served to determine the further development of Rosalie’s ethical self. Her elder brother George eliminated his Chinese name after marrying a European lady, Helene, for he did not want his children to have any reference to the Chinese (*MF* 279). Unlike George, Rosalie’s ethical identity remained clear: She was going to be “Han Suyin.” She identified herself with the Hakkas, and the Hans, the majority Chinese.

Ethical Reconstruction: Repairing the “Railroad”

Young Rosalie was certain of one thing: that the trains would not run if her father was not at his office desk (*MF* 10). She fully identified herself with her father’s whole-hearted commitment to his career. She could tell that “if love can be measured by vulnerability, my father was vulnerable to my mother, his wife, except in one thing: the railway” (32). She witnessed how her father battled with the constant threats and malicious interruptions of the railroad by the warlords, the soldiers, and the war. As a young girl, she remembered vividly that during one of her visits to her father’s railway office, she could tell distinctively that something serious was hovering over the

office, "Papa, what is the matter?" At the back of her mind, she could discern that the uneasiness in the air was due to some socio-political upheavals, "perhaps once again the railway line was cut. Another war..." Her father's colleague, Mr. Hua, shivered in his winter overcoat and said wearily, "We are never finished, never. What is going to happen now? Are we going to stand up and fight? Or no?" (213). Nevertheless, Rosalie had high regards about her father who "had coped with war and destruction, and kept the railways running, patching them up, making do" (*PH* 313).

Like father like daughter. The father's unswerving dedication to the welfare of the railway left a life-long impression upon Rosalie. Rosalie's mother Marguerite rejected China due to its poverty. Rosalie's elder brother resented China due to his failure in social assimilation. But Rosalie envisioned a life living for China. Gradually, she figured out that she could not and would not 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. In this I have been, all unknown to myself, a Chinese intellectual of my generation of my time. All my reactions, everything I have done, have always been conditioned by this inner prompting of the heart, of which I am only now fully aware. (314)

Yentung Chou guarded China's railways during his entire life time. Inheriting the legacy of her father, Han Suyin (the grown-up Rosalie Chou as stated in *MF*, 192) diligently guarded the goodwill of China as a non-diplomat individual at an international level via her pen and her public lectures. "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).⁸ But I could not do otherwise..." (*PH* 316).

Ethical Choice: "To Be" versus the "Ought to Be"

One's ethnicity is given upon birth. People were born to be Chinese, English, etc. But in Rosalie's case, she *chose* to be Chinese. Inheriting two ethnic and cultural backgrounds was both a blessing and a curse for her. While young, she was enrolled in a Chinese school in the morning, and a French convent in the afternoon. At home, her meals would be a European breakfast, a Chinese lunch and a European supper. Occasionally, Rosalie's mother even mixed macaroni and Chinese noodles in her cooking. Yet managing the duality was not easy. Rosalie always felt that she had "an *other* life, a saving otherness which was also *self*" (*CT* 352). From time to time, she fell victim to the pressure of two clashing and non-communicating worlds. She vividly recalled the sheer loneliness while attending Yenching University for an entrance

exam in 1933:

I was the only girl in European dress. I stood in a corner and lit a cigarette. I was alone. No one else stood alone; everyone went about in groups of twos or threes... Suddenly I saw myself, appallingly different, and I wanted to get on my bicycle and ride away, but this could not be done. So I lit another cigarette and puffed furiously. I must have looked so arrogant, puffy because I was so frightened, and fear makes one put on a face, obstinate and defensive. (*MF* 228)

The ethical atmosphere in which she was did not encourage her to model after the Europeans. Instead, choosing to be “Chinese” probably kept her from perpetual displacement. Also, believing in the future of China even during turbulent times gave Rosalie the moral courage to live her own yet-to-be-proven life. “‘But you do know why’ (said that other self in me). ‘Because you cannot live without China, you dumb so-and so. Maybe you cannot live *in* China, maybe you are only a Eurasian, a dirty half-caste, as some people say, but you cannot live *without* China. For without China you die. I simply die, inside of you’” (*MF* 360).

Rosalie Chou had learnt to greet each day with courage and embrace “a continuity between what was and what is” (*CT* 19). She had to be ready to be all the Rosalies and all the different Rosalies to-be (371). Because of her persistence in choosing China and to be really Chinese at heart, she secured for herself a future that when she were to look back, Rosalie Chou had become a phantom, which stood transfixed with Han Suyin in her prime days (*BS* 1).

China was Han Suyin (Rosalie Chou)’s “religion” and object of her lifelong devotion. She was perpetually obsessed by China, a “phoenix reborn from its ashes,” a nation with a promising future after shedding off “outmoded postulates” (*PH* 302). Nevertheless, Han Suyin’s choice of self-identification with anything Chinese was a stark contrast to her own siblings and other Eurasians who tried hard to be Europeans. The community that had brought her up did not produce some “Rosalie ought-to-be.” Rather, quite the contrary, Rosalie asserted her own worldview and eventually became her self-determined “to be,” namely, Han Suyin. Despite occasional confusion, Rosalie distinctively knew who and what would be hindering her to become “Han Suyin-to-be.” Painfully, she broke off the friendship with Meiling because Meiling loathed “those ugly poor people” on the street (*CT* 369). When China was at war with Japan in 1938, Rosalie abandoned her boyfriend and her scholarship, as well as her medical studies at University of Brussels so as to return to China as soon as she could, “... I have sixty pounds with me and I am going back, going back, going back, and now I know that there is no love, no other love, that there will never be any love

stronger than this, which has no name, which I did not know was in me, stronger than anything else” (362). Years later, after becoming a certified surgeon in England, and practically a widow of an ex-Kuomintang colonel, she again bid farewell to Europe in order to head back to Hong Kong, the island city adjacent to China.

Due to her close connection with Chou En Lai and other Chinese officials, Han Suyin boldly claimed that she was an “insider” of China’s affairs, while other non-Chinese were on the “outside, not inside” (*HTD* 184). When China was completely closed to the Western world between 1949 and 1970, she was among the few who were allowed to visit China. When married a second time — this time to Englishman Leonard Comber, Han Suyin was offered a permanent residence in Malaya by the founding father of Malaya, Tunku Abdul Rahman. Yet, she declined the offer decisively, as Malaya would not be a conducive place for her to continue her advocacy for China (*HTD* 485). After her third marriage, Han Suyin and her husband Colonel Vincent Ruthnaswamy, who resided in Lausanne, Switzerland, frequented Hong Kong. In 1970, due to Han Suyin, Vincent became the first non-diplomat Indian to visit China since 1959 (*PH* 149).

In 1958, Han Suyin ended her medical practice after the success of her novel *The Mountain is Young* (*HTD* 271-272). Turning into a full time novelist, historian and lecturer (275, 283, 291), Han Suyin also assumed the role of East-West culture envoy at the period of time when China had “not one friend in the world” (274). She visited many provinces in China, including the interior areas. Even though initially condemned as “agents of American imperialism (in China)” together with Pearl Buck (*PH* 90), Han Suyin was finally acknowledged as one who brought the understanding of the West to the Chinese. Outside China, she was recognised as a non-diplomat advocate for China. The overseas Chinese in America and Canada had regarded her as their earnest consultant especially when Chou En Lai passed away in 1976 (279). The BBC rang her up when Chiang Ching, the leader of the Gang of Four, was arrested (293).

Due to Han Suyin’s ethical choice in challenging and reconstructing how things “ought to be,” she finally had a breakthrough against the curse of life upon her bicultural, mixed-racial and weaker-sex background. Her international presence includes New York, Chicago, DC, Paris, London, Italy, Phnom Penh, India, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, Japan, Algeria, Yugoslavia, New Delhi, Kazakhstan, Outer Mongolia and Mexico (9, 13, 15, 91, 92, 148, 157, 164, 166, 193, 202, 231, 248). In one of her public lectures in London, Han Suyin emphasised the importance of science and morality. For her, the modern “putting *me* first” way of life was erroneous. Instead, she proposed unselfishness and serving others — more specifically, “serving the people” — as the core value of human society.⁹

Conclusion

Narrative is inseparable from ethics. Han Suyin's autobiography depicts how a certain ethical environment could be detrimental to a person's rightful claims to live. It also evokes the ethical consciousness of any reader to wanting to stand for Rosalie Chou — Han Suyin, the protagonist of the story, in her cultural displacement and identity complex. In Han Suyin's extensive 5-volume autobiography series, the readers are invited to witness how Rosalie Chou resets the determinants of her ethical identity. Besides, one could also trek down the path with her as she exercises her ethical choice to self-determine the "Rosalie to-be," rather than conforming to the social expectation for her to become a certain cookie-cutter "Rosalie ought-to-be."

"This book¹⁰ is about the fixed star of my self-completion, the one I had to follow despite all hazards" (*PH* 313). It seems that memoir-writing was Rosalie-Han Suyin's systematic way of unravelling the entangled ethical knots of all she had been through. From the two-cents worth of this writer, the central theme of Han Suyin's life lies in her successful attempts in reconstructing the ethical order of her world. She had resolved at some point to accept the fact that her family tree was crippled. But at the same time, she also exercised her will power to make the "crippled tree" thrive. "For although the tree was crippled, it has gone on living, and who knows but that its fruit shall be sweeter and better than that of any other?" (*CT* 306). Her breakthroughs include: first, her ability in defusing the curse of her illegitimate existence in the family as well as the community where she was brought up; next, her success in challenging the ethical norms of her era and thus successfully transpired from a despised mixed-blood underdog to a highly sought-after female medical professional and author; third, the rebirth of her new "dual-identity," that it was no longer a matter of the East-West, but rather, a reconciliation of the Yesterday-Today, i.e., Rosalie-Han Suyin in one piece. Last but not least, against all the well-meaning advice and life examples of European housewives, Rosalie-Han Suyin had also succeeded in creating a brand of herself, a class of her own. She became a signature high-achieving Eurasian, who was also a proud citizen of the world.

Through long episodes of painful soul-searching as a Eurasian, intertwined with the quests of "what was the real China?" (*MF* 26) and "what was the true soul of China?" (265), Rosalie of the yesteryears had gradually evolved into today's Han Suyin. Rosalie achieved her self-completion process in her final, grown-up version, namely, Han Suyin — "the plain voice of the Chinese majority." Though not without effort, she thrived gracefully and with dignity, attested especially by her accounts in *Phoenix Harvest*, the fifth book of her autobiographical series.

Hence, Rosalie or not Rosalie? The answer is a paradox of both yes and no. It is a

“yes,” because Rosalie Chou lived. She lived throughout Han Suyin’s autobiography. Even as Rosalie lived with a new name Han Suyin, the spirit and flesh of Rosalie was not dead in spite of the new identification. However, it is also a “no,” for even though Rosalie was the “yesterday” of Han Suyin, it was a discrete “self” which had already given way to the “other,” the preferred self. This other self was a new creation, known as “Han Suyin” at the international platform. Originally a Hakka-Belgian Eurasian, Han Suyin became truly international, making the whole world her home.¹¹ The “whole world became my home, until my roots extended and broadened to encompass the round earth” (*PH* 313). Deliberately, Han Suyin chose to be a diva reborn. She saw Rosalie as a phantom, the shadow of Han Suyin’s past (*BS* 9). Han Suyin passed away at her home in Lausanne, Switzerland on 2 November, 2012, and would always be remembered for her colourful personality as well as her purposeful life as the clarion voice of 20th century China, where cultures and conflicting moral parameters met.¹²

Notes

1. Among others, Wang Xuding’s (1996) PhD thesis entitled “Of Bridge Construction: A Critical Study of Han Suyin’s Historical and Autobiographical Writings” provides one of the most extensive accounts on Han Suyin in post-colonial perspectives, i.e., the invading Western powers in China; Han’s dominating mother lording over Han’s father; Joseph Hers’ attempts of control over Rosalie Chou (Han Suyin), etc. Articles that treat Han Suyin as a female subject are numerable. Notable articles include Helen Buss’s feminist approach on the subject matter: “The Autobiographies of Han Suyin: A Female Post-colonial Subjectivity” (1992).
2. For the full exposition of the Ethical Literary Criticism (ELC), see Nie, *Wenxue Lunlixue Piping ji Qita*, 2012, especially pages 33-48 regarding exploring ELC as a new direction, and pages 3-15 regarding the fundamentals of ELC and its key terms. In fact, in the West, moral philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty, as well as literature critics like S. L. Goldberg, Wayne C. Booth, David Parker and his colleagues, had already been campaigning for a resurgence of ethics in literary criticism during the last two decades of the 20th century. David Parker’s monograph *Ethics, Theory and the Novel* (*ETN*, 1994) drew attention to “the virtual absence of explicit ethical interest in contemporary literary discourse,” particularly due to the damage of the decade-old post-structuralist theory at the time (*ETN*, 4, 32, 195). He also showcased the use of “ethical criticism” in critiquing five novels, namely, *Middlemarch*, *Anna Karenina*, *The White Peacock*, *Women in Love*, and *Lady Chatterley*. In the book Parker co-edited with Jane Adamson and Richard Freadman, *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy and Theory* (1998), however, the focus of using ethics in the reading and criticism of literature was lost. Discussions revolved largely around moral philosophy, rather than a further development on the idea of ELC. Also, it was not entirely clear whether their proposition of the “ethical criticism” leaned more towards the Platonian moral

criticism, or the Aristotelian school of literary criticism. Hence, when Dr Zhenzhao Nie presented a firm proposition for ELC in 2004, followed by his careful delineation of the key terms of ELC in 2010, the ELC approach finally took shape.

3. See Nie, page 12. Nie reminds that ethical standards vary from one period of time to another. Hence, it would be most appropriate to enter into the particular time and space of a literature in order to make ethical observations in order to derive viable research findings. When a critic assumes the role of an advocate for a certain character in the literature, he or she would be able to understand the ethical environment of the said literary world.

4. Platonic moral criticism rejects Homer's depiction of the anthropomorphic gods. According to him, deity should not err. Wicked gods should never appear in literature. Plato disapproves of free expressions of moral ideas in literature as he could not see the demarcation between the simulated literary world and the real world. Aristotle, on the other hand, views the literary world apart from the real world. He allows a certain literary world to exist under its unique simulated setting. Aristotle's ethical criticism is thus, closer to literature itself, as it gives attention to the historical and literary contexts of the literature in view. See Nie, page 52.

5. As a historical discipline, biography makes use of any work an author has written as the source for revealing about the author's life. On the other hand, as a critical instrument, biographical information is used to understand the works produced by the author. The focus is not on the life of the author per se, but on his or her work. This approach also pays attention to the appreciation of the aesthetic and functional values of the works. See "Biography in Literary Criticism" in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature* edited by Garry L. Hagberg and Walter Jost (2010).

6. Apparent taboos and conflicts between moral imperatives of different cultures often evoke ethical dilemma or ethical paradox. Han Suyin's (Rosalie Chou) autobiographies reflected several ethical phenomena that were pressing on the need for an ethical reconstruction and related choices on her part.

7. Han Suyin said that she could not figure out her obsession about China until she heard an analysis twenty years later that coined China as the *religion* of the Chinese intellectuals, "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" (*CT*, 115).

8. The words within brackets here are additions by the writer of this article.

9. Han Suyin's recorded speech in London, "The Thought of Chairman Mao and the Chinese People," delivered in 1972.

10. "This book" refers to *Phoenix Harvest*, book five in Han Suyin's 5-volume autobiography series.

11. Guan Huimei's masters dissertation, "The World is my Homeland — An Exploration of Han Suyin's Autobiography" expounds the process of Han Suyin's evolving from a struggling dual-identity female to a proud citizen of the world.

12. This work was part of the research findings regarding Hakkas in Malaysia, funded by the Short-Term Research Fund, University of Malaya [UMRG/RP006-2012C].

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