

## ■ Thinking from the Margins, Writing on the Forgotten: An Interview with Ho Sok Fong

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Ho Sok Fong, a Chinese Malaysian writer, was born in Kedah, Malaysia. She began publishing short stories in various Malaysian literary magazines during the 1980s and 1990s. After graduating from Universiti Sains Malaysia, she obtained a master's degree from National Chengchi University in Taiwan and later earned her PhD from Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Since 2000, she has been an active presence in Taiwan's major literary award circles.

Her fiction has been included in a range of anthologies, such as *Let's Not Talk About It Anymore: Contemporary Chinese Malaysian Fiction (1997–2003)* (2004), *Every Story Has to Begin: Contemporary Chinese Malaysian Fiction (2004–2012)* (2013), *Return to Malaya: Seventy Years of Chinese Malaysian Fiction (1937–2007)* (2019), and *Wild Mango: Contemporary Chinese Malaysian Fiction (2013–2016)* (2019). Her published works include the short story collections *Maze Carpet* (2012), *Lake Like a Mirror* (2014), and

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*Time Frontier* (2024), as well as the novel *To Shed* (2023).<sup>1</sup> *Lake Like a Mirror* has been translated into English by Natascha Bruce and into Japanese by Akane Oikawa. The English edition was shortlisted for the 2020 Warwick Prize for Women in Translation.

This interview centers on Ho's literary background and the concepts behind her works, touching on themes such as ethnicity, women's literature, and historical trauma.

The conversation was conducted in Chinese on February 28, 2025, via Facebook Messenger. After the initial draft was completed, Ho provided additional clarifications on a few segments. The interview was then translated into English. The final version was proofread and approved by both the interviewer and the interviewee.

Ting-hui HSIUNG: Before we begin the interview, I'd like to thank you for agreeing to this written conversation. While we're not speaking face to face, I believe the immediacy and convenience of Facebook Messenger still allow us to have a free and open exchange. Our interview happens to fall on February 28, which is a day of mourning and remembrance in Taiwan. Some of the topics we'll be discussing touch on collective trauma in Malaysia as well, so I find the timing of this interview a meaningful coincidence.

To start, I'd like to ask about the background of your writing. When it comes to women artists, it's almost inevitable that Virginia Woolf and her "room of one's own" will be brought up. Could you talk a bit about whether you have such a room—either metaphorically or in a literal sense?

HO Sok Fong: I began writing when I was around eleven or twelve. I started by scribbling stories in my notebook, imitating popular romance

<sup>1</sup> Except for *Maze Carpet*, *Lake Like a Mirror*, and *To Shed*, all English book titles here have been translated by the interviewer. The original Chinese titles are as follows: 《別再提起：馬華當代小說選（1997-2003）》(*Biezai tiqi: Mahua dangdai xiaoshuoxuan [1997-2003]*); *Let's Not Talk About It Anymore: Contemporary Chinese Malaysian Fiction [1997-2003]*), 《故事總要開始：馬華當代小說選（2004-2012）》(*Gushi zongyao kaishi: Mahua dangdai xiaoshuoxuan [2004-2012]*); *Every Story Has to Begin: Contemporary Chinese Malaysian Fiction [2004-2012]*), 《回到馬來亞：華馬小說七十年》(*Huidao Malaiya: Huama xiaoshuo qishi nian [1937-2007]*); *Return to Malaya: Seventy Years of Chinese Malaysian Fiction [1937-2007]*), 《野芒果：馬華當代小說選（2013-2016）》(*Ye mangguo: Mahua dangdai xiaoshuoxuan [2013-2016]*); *Wild Mango: Contemporary Chinese Malaysian Fiction [2013-2016]*), 《迷宮毯子》(*Migong tanzi; Maze Carpet*), 《湖面如鏡》(*Lake Like a Mirror*), 《時間邊境》(*Shijian bianjing; Time Frontier*), and 《蛻》(*Tui; To Shed*).

novels, and passing them around to classmates. When I started to take writing more seriously—as a conscious literary pursuit—it was never in a room of my own. I would squeeze onto the stairs to write—at least during the day, fewer family members were using them—or wait until after meals to move to the dining table. In the afternoons, if my parents weren't working on tailoring clothes, I would write on my father's sewing cutting table, which had a large lamp that offered good lighting. When I was asked to mind the store, I would take my notebook to sit near the sewing machine by the entrance, or at the glass display counter, writing or reading.

In a family with many children, it was impossible to have a room of one's own. But I would always find a corner in the house that I could occupy for a little while. The corners I wrote in would shift constantly. I was often interrupted, but when I was fully immersed, I could tune out the calls of my family or the sounds of the neighborhood. I began writing in secondary school. I remember my very first published piece appeared in the literary section of the *Malayan Thung Pau Daily News*. It was called "Existence"—a piece of very short prose, just over two hundred words, made up of feelings and abstract imagery, attempting to transcend the sense of loneliness. Woolf's room, of course, was claimed in response to the marginal conditions within institutional structures, faced by her mother, her female contemporaries, and herself in the aftermath of World War I. It was a demand for space to write, at the very least. Without women's writing, the kinds of experiences known only to women could never be expressed.



The stairway at home in 2015. Photo courtesy: Ho Sok Fong

HSIUNG: Writing as a child must have been quite different from writing now. At the very least, you probably have more space and time to work with these days. In light of that, what do you think are some of the unique circumstances or conditions of women's writing that need to be expressed or brought to light?

HO: I often leave the domestic space in search of places to write. I've moved frequently, rented rooms and apartments. At times I feel as though I have no fixed place to live. Every dwelling feels temporary. We—my husband and I—accumulate a lot of things, especially books. And there's often a faint, inexplicable feeling that it's time to move again.

This uncertainty isn't just material; it also stems from the feeling that the world is unstable. My friends often say that living in Malaysia, one can be satisfied, as long as one doesn't ask for much. I suppose what's meant by not asking for much here is: don't expect anything beyond the material. Indeed, this place does not stop anyone from pursuing material wealth or financial success. I know many Chinese Malaysians who are gifted entrepreneurs. Sometimes I even feel like someone like me hardly counts as Chinese.

But if one wishes to write, then one must confront memory, confront everything that one knows but can't say. Writers and readers need reading; they need to hone their craft and language. They need spaces for exchange and a vibrant cultural sphere to support an entire field of interactions and resonance. Simply put, this kind of support is the most extravagant of all—and it's hardly available here. It can't be quantified or evaluated as an "industry." Because the freedom to think, to feel, and to communicate within literary writing is in fact priceless. And yet, for a marginalized community whose cultural position remains unrecognized by the state, this kind of space can only be provided by the Chinese community and grassroots cultural organizations.

Every time I think of this, I feel a little melancholy. Of course, what I'm describing here isn't only a "women's issue." The survival issues faced by women across regions are shaped by differences in resource access, with all factors, including politics, ethnicity, and iden-

tity, somewhat blending together. On Facebook, I once wrote: the moment you begin to write, you own access to your room, where the uncertainty of economics, housing, location, and position immediately arises. For women of my generation, the challenges of self-realization are often more severe. Especially when a woman is in need of help, it can be difficult to tell whether support from other women is truly given in goodwill, or whether it carries hidden intentions. In the end, she may find herself turning instead to rely on men.

The point I was just making may not sound like a progressive feminist view to many, but I believe I must first identify the condition before I can write about it. Perhaps younger women are better off than I was—but perhaps they are still facing the same problems. The way the world treats women often makes us feel like strangers. I don't think this place—or anywhere in the world, really—can promise stability. But at the very least, here, there will be readers whose fates are tied to mine.

Yet, are there really more people reading and listening here than elsewhere? Perhaps not. Perhaps the person who reads you must, at the very least, have the capacity to understand modern or experimental works. And if, out of disappointment, one gives up on this place and turns one's hopes elsewhere, that too can lead to an even deeper sorrow. Even in that elsewhere, a writer may still feel marginalized and alone. Perhaps what I need to learn is to accept this as truth. The perfect reader, as imagined, doesn't exist. A writer must first let go of this hope when they write.

In this sense, the writing room may be more like a nomadic tent—invisible, the wall is barely there, yet somehow present. There might be some readers, carrying with them their own emotional needs, moved by something and finding their way in. If that happens, it's already more than enough. Perhaps that's the greatest thing literature can offer, just this. No matter where one goes—here or elsewhere—no matter who they are, it might all be the same. What a writer needs is simply to continue writing, to keep writing, until one day they can slip free from the external standards imposed upon them. The voice becomes freer, more capable of expressing the texture of the soul. The writing becomes more refined.

HSIUNG: Your response brings us to even broader questions—issues that aren't necessarily unique to "women writers" but touch on wider concerns. In an era when domestic and international travel is relatively accessible, does migration for a writer serve as an expansion of life experiences, or does it instead bring about a sense of rootlessness, uncertainty, and dislocation? You also briefly mentioned the difficulties of literary publishing, your views on literature itself, and the unspoken understanding between writer and reader.

Following this line of thought, I'd like to ask: how do you view literature as a topic or subject in and of itself? When one is labeled a "woman writer" or one's work is categorized as "women's literature," does that in itself become a topic for consideration? How do you perceive such identity-based labels?

In your previous response, you mentioned that literature relies on specific cultural and institutional circles for support. You've received several major literary awards, including the China Times Literary Award, the United Daily News Literary Prize, the annual Chiu Ko Fiction Prize, and grants from Taiwan's National Culture and Arts Foundation. How do you see the relationship between literary awards and the act of writing? And what impact do you think state-sponsored literary grants have on a writer's creative process?

HO: I believe that traveling, studying abroad, returning, then leaving again and returning again—all of this has made me realize that perhaps uncertainty is, in fact, the most truthful state of life. To own property, to be rooted—these may actually become limitations. Every departure seems to strip away some of the national narratives that have been constructed as "stable," and in that stripping away, more space is created. This might seem contradictory to the "complaints" I made earlier. But it's true. After that, it becomes harder to be deceived by collectively constructed narratives. The "liminal space" Homi Bhabha spoke of is the space where art begins to emerge—a space of chaos, instability, indefinability, a kind of crevice. It's only in recent years that I've come to fully embrace that. It may seem like a negative space, but it offers the possibility of liberation from fixed frameworks.



Guak Cempedak, Kedah. The fields near the house of Ho's grandmother in the old days, harvested after the Lunar New Year. Photo courtesy: Ho Sok Fong.

HSIUNG: This seems akin to the discussion around the identity of migrant or diasporic writers—navigating dual or even multiple affiliations. While it's possible that not one community fully recognizes you, that in-between position may also become a kind of strength—a resistance to being absorbed by any single narrative, and perhaps, an ability to see things with greater clarity.

HO: I think being able to declare oneself dedicated to women's literature or gender literature certainly allows for a clearer articulation of certain issues and concerns. As writers, we should certainly embrace the multiplicity of identities that resist fixed definitions or predetermined limits—yes, this kind of multiplicity is an advantage. She is freer. For instance, I don't reject invitations to speak on women's literature, its issues, because the perspective on gender has indeed been long obscured. The standards and boundaries set by gender are often crude and arrogant, though they are usually concealed through rhetorical means and seldom directly named. As a result, women often don't even realize that they are being suppressed by an artistic canon grounded in the male perspective.

In my own experience, even when my writing conveys lived experiences through gender consciousness, the work is often dismissed as too trivial, insufficiently realistic, or critiqued for “having prose that is too cold, not warm enough”—as though women must write

about love, self-sacrifice, maternal instincts, or express themselves in tender, endearing ways. It took me at least seven or eight years to begin contemplating: Could this be a gap created by gendered experience?

The male perspective becomes the metric by which artistic value is judged. When male writers explore themes of their own solitude, rootlessness, lovelessness, it is considered modern art. But when women write about their own solitude and fragmentation, it's seen as incoherent and meaningless. Yet the kind of solitude women endure—being cast in the role of the long-haired, naive, non-threatening gender—is something so profound that even Sartre, in all his existential philosophy, might not have been able to see or enter into it.

Gender issues still persist today. Say, for instance, yearning to release one's innate life force and become a better writer. Thus, we would need to shed the externally imposed standards and create new ones for ourselves, to find a method of writing that allows us to release our own energy into writing. Because the standards exemplified by canonical male writers may not suit you. If I had only looked to male literary traditions as my model, I likely would have ended up suppressing and becoming confused by my internal experiences, unable to explain where those strange, unnamable feelings came from.

I think Woolf put it perfectly: "Nothing has really happened until it has been described." If something happens but is never given voice—through language, writing, or sound—it is as if it never occurred. Sometimes, it feels as though our experiences only gain recognition once they've been written or articulated in some form. Unable to describe it, strange, unsettling feelings, the feelings of injury, those things that should have shocked our awareness, end up passing silently, as if they didn't matter. But of course, they do. They continue shrouding the soul in darkness.

Only literature can illuminate the murky and chaotic inner experience. It releases us from "ah, this indefinable sense of shame," which we want so badly to scrub away. Seen as shame because it cannot be voiced. But once something is written, once it becomes a readable text, you are no longer alone. In that sense, literature, the

thing we rely on to survive, is like magic. It allows women to realize that many of their feelings are neither trivial nor unworthy of being written about. In fact, they do belong within the realm of art. Only then can a woman be a writer.

Woolf also once said that the best writers—those who truly inspire—possess androgyny of the mind. I think this also suggests that when one escapes binary gender positioning, creation becomes freer, allowing writing to engage with multiple dimensions of concern. Not being defined allows for more diversity in expression, thought, and action, and for a sense of fulfillment in being able to experiment more.

Because we are multifaceted beings, not just what gendered expectations dictate. Because we accept that reality strikes us on many levels, and when we create, we naturally want to respond, push back, and interpret. At certain times, for instance, if I'm placed within the realm of women's issues in order to avoid political taboos—this implies that people see turning to women's literature as a safer alternative to politically sensitive risks—if that's the case, I find myself feeling somewhat resistant.

HSIUNG: In your works, I never get the sense that the concerns are “too trivial.” Even when the narrative voice comes across as rambling or drifts away from linear time—which might lead some readers to feel it departs from realism—the underlying themes are in fact deeply grounded in reality and the real world. Your past works have engaged with issues such as gender, religion, ethnicity, political corruption, historical trauma, and even, possibly, ecological concerns (such as haze and air pollution). Are there any new themes or issues you want to explore in your future writing? I'm also curious, how would you define your own work? Would you categorize your fiction as popular literature or high culture? And do you ever worry that readers might not fully understand your novels?

HO: My first short story collection was written entirely out of a desire to experiment with the form of modern fiction. I was filled with anger and suffocation in living under the constraints of national and institutional systems, feeling like there was no way out. The

second one too. But there was a change in style with *To Shed*. It was certainly done with readers in mind, but it was also an attempt to connect some inner vocal cadence to the perspective. I began to feel that I had drawn too strict a line between what counts as art and what doesn't—something a writer shouldn't be concerned with, because the boundary between art and non-art shifts with time and discovery. In the coming years, I may continue writing fiction on the May 13 Incident,<sup>2</sup> but using different approaches. I also want to step out of the framework of "serious" literature, or whatever kind of boundary, only to write more freely.

So far, among my works, "Black Panther" began from an early yearning for popular fiction. "Cha-Cha with a Hook" has the tone of light literature. The rest, I suppose, are far removed from popular literature. Currently, I'm working on both an essay collection and a novel. Both have more details of everyday things, inner feelings, and a contemplative sense of time passing. As always, I write so slowly, but this time, with more straightforward language. I don't want to be constrained by the aesthetics I used to imagine or hold onto because those standards can feel like haunting inner shadows. Sometimes, they stop a writer from really going all the way.

Besides, a writer must not be blackmailed by the marketplace. When displeased, just say, "F\*\*k U"! As creators, we must cultivate our own sense of what is good. Be persistent. Spend time honing what we love. Have faith that we can always write better.

HSIUNG: The loneliness and fragmentation you express in your work—while often perceived and experienced by women—don't seem to refer solely to women within a binary gender framework. Would you say that these feelings also speak to marginalized groups more broadly, those made vulnerable under various power structures, whether related to gender, religion, or ethnicity?

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<sup>2</sup> On May 13, 1969, a bloody conflict between the Chinese and Malay communities erupted in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia. The riots broke out two days after the announcement of the national general election results. According to official reports and accounts from foreign observers, most of the casualties were ethnic Chinese. This event remains a political taboo to this day.

In *Maze Carpet* and *To Shed*, can the motifs of ghosts, trains, and journeys be read as reflections of Chinese Malaysians' structure of feeling? A kind of quiet presence that exists everywhere and nowhere at once, a condition in which one speaks but is unheard, always departing or arriving, caught in a loop of repeated, futile journeys?

HO: Um, yes, both novels feature ghosts, trains, and journeys. . .

When I was writing *Maze Carpet*, it was a few years after returning from Taiwan. I was searching for direction, and the protagonist carried my own sense of uncertainty. I had already obtained my master's degree, yet I still felt that the place truly suited for me had yet to be found. I continued doing various petty tasks demanded by the system. This, I think, is a uniquely Chinese experience, but also a modern one—modern society turns many tasks into trivial routines and processes them like they're coming off a factory conveyor belt. In *To Shed*, however, the character is someone who is satisfied with the stability provided by the structural order of modern society, until he encounters someone—a dialogue partner—who provokes him to rethink an uncertainty that he had obviously known, an answer he was well aware of, but had deliberately avoided to confront.

To be honest, in my youth and even into my twenties and thirties, I rarely felt the full impact of what it meant to be part of a marginalized group. Because most of the time, we move within spaces made up of people from our own community—other Chinese folks speaking in Chinese. It was like being protected by a sponge-like circle of sameness—same skin tone—so one didn't directly feel the pressure of otherness.

For example, when I studied physics, over half of my classmates were Chinese. The university had a Chinese-language society, which offered space for quite a small group of creative writers to work on wall newspapers and bulletin boards for literary works. In most of the places I worked, including American-invested factories, no ethnic group was especially favored. So the sense of ethnic insecurity that you mentioned, I only began to feel it more clearly in the past ten years or so. That's when my "position" started to shift.

Because of limited resources, most of the wealth in the Chinese

community has become concentrated in business and commerce. So for those of us who are drawn to literature and creative writing—we're really just a small group—it often feels like we have no place to go. Whether within our own ethnic group or within the broader Malaysian society, we find ourselves as outsiders. It wasn't until this age, these recent years, that I began to truly feel this marginality.

HSIUNG: You just mentioned women's sensibilities, and in your previous interviews and book launches, you've spoken about how Chinese communities often feel a sense of shame around discussing sexuality. In fact, I've found that several of your short stories—including the title story in *Maze Carpet*, as well as “Wind Through the Pineapple Leaves, Through the Frangipani” and “October” from *Lake Like a Mirror*, and even *To Shed*—contain depictions of sexuality and desire. How do you navigate the fine line between desire, sensationalism, and voyeurism in your writing?

HO: Which parts of the stories do you think contain elements of exotic voyeurism? I don't like that question.

HSIUNG: To put the question more clearly: in the works I mentioned, I see a deliberate engagement with sexual desire. In contrast, I've seen other writers portray female desire in ways that evoke an exoticized, Orientalist gaze—often through female characters, in ways that render their sexuality not as an expression of self-awareness or autonomy, but as an object for voyeuristic consumption. Of course, this is also connected to the context in which the work is published and the position or identity of the reader.

So, when you write about female sexuality, are you consciously aware of the potential for such depictions to fall into Orientalist fantasies of the exotic, especially in representations of women? How do you avoid that trap in your writing?

HO: I'd like to respond in my own way—perhaps it will also help resolve the question at hand. Take, for instance, the strange sense of shame I mentioned earlier. There are, of course, other negative emotions too—jealousy, vengeance—feelings that often come with a sense

of guilt. Not to mention lust, erotic desire, sex, and the tingling sensations that come with them. The first time I ever wrote about “sexuality” was in 2011, when I revised and expanded “Black Panther,” a story that was originally published in 2004 in *Nanyang Siang Pau*. I lengthened it to over twenty thousand words. Before that, my fiction mostly dealt with injury and inner wandering. There was almost no presence of eroticism.

Before the age of forty-one, none of my stories had really touched upon sexuality or erotic desire. At most, they are presented in works like “The Wall,” which depicted a terrible husband and a wounded wife. “The Chest” hinted faintly at such things. But none had directly addressed a woman’s yearning for erotic or sexual pleasure. In my early reading years, I was deeply drawn to Xi Xi’s work—yet she never wrote about eroticism. The characters that entered my imagination came mostly from male writers: Haruki Murakami’s Midori and Naoko, for example, or Milan Kundera’s Sabina and Tereza. These women were composites of self-destruction and pain, striving either to possess someone completely or to be utterly free.

For women writing fiction, we can’t help but begin within the frameworks laid out by these writers, due to the canonical effect in the literary field. Inevitably, we had to borrow the existing figures already displayed on the literary “exhibition wall” and then insert our own consciousness into them. That injection of consciousness may well have come from instinct; for example, we might imagine what an embrace or passion could feel like. But when I began writing “Black Panther,” since the narrative was originally rooted in the history of the Malayan Communist Party, I found that the truths of that history were nearly impossible to trace. The year I wrote that story, 2002, was also when a major newspaper acquisition happened, leading to a full media monopoly. It signaled a further tightening of control over the freedom of speech. It was within that atmosphere that I wrote “Black Panther.” Because of such conflicts, the male and female protagonists held different positions when they met. And their encounter becomes a site where memory is disrupted, challenged, and exchanged.

At the time, I had never written about eroticism before. But during the process of rewriting the story, I realized that desire had always been something I wanted to write about, but kept holding myself back from it. Why shouldn't I? Aside from politics, the silences surrounding sex have caused many invisible and visible wounds. There's a book—its title escapes me now—that discusses how, within erotic experience, one often undergoes a dissolution of the self's boundaries, a kind of surrender of sovereignty, a relinquishing of self-control, and so on. But it brings an experience that's missing for a self who builds achievement through social competition. And perhaps, that kind of experience is a form of growth.

Lacan once said that stories of eroticism often contain a kind of *jouissance*, a bliss that compensates for the lack and fills the void in the subject who observed the patriarchal order. Yet this bliss can also trigger jealousy, destruction, and cruelty in our interpersonal relationships.

I grew up in the 1970s and 80s—probably the heyday of binary gender and sexual roles. In films, comics, and all kinds of fictional texts, we were shown sexual and erotic images that seemed to suggest that happiness could be found in them. But what exactly was *that*? Did this wonderful landscape of erotic desire truly exist? Or was it merely the product of our projections and fantasies—like a myth? I think that when a woman begins to write about desire and sexuality, she is also trying to explore those very questions.

HSIUNG: If I recall correctly, there's a story by Alice Munro in which a younger sister feels jealous of the affection and intimacy between her older sister and a man she herself has feelings for—she even tries to interfere or sabotage the relationship. This dynamic doesn't only stem from the younger sister's desire, but also from jealousy directed at her sister.

HO: I believe jealousy is the most painful emotion a person can experience. It can drain the subject's will, and the suffering it stirs is immense, like ripples that spread and infect interpersonal relationships. I've often thought that, compared to other forms of suffering—such as being bullied, poverty, isolation, loneliness, or unemployment—as long as a

person still has confidence in themselves, their defenses won't collapse. Compared to violence inflicted from the outside, internal jealousy is like a silent erosion from within. It makes a person feel utterly worthless, like a tree that could clearly bloom the China roses but is endlessly saddened by its inability to produce the European roses. The storm brought by jealousy is like being trapped in the Raksha hell. But as human beings, in a society that builds order through hierarchies, it's impossible not to experience jealousy. Society never teaches us how to love ourselves unconditionally, so we hope others will love us instead.

HSIUNG: In *To Shed*, however, there seems to be a shift—from desire being tied to pain or harm, toward something more pleasurable, less rooted in victimhood? The female sexuality becomes central—not the harm done to women through male violence, but women's own yearning for intimacy and pleasure.

HO: Why do you say that? Whether it's Luo or Gui Ying, both begin with desire and go through disappointment. What the novel aims to say isn't directly found on the surface of the words. But, maybe you're right. The narrative voice "proudly" expresses their affections; the desires are centered more on themselves than being the objects of men's erotic gaze. The exploration of women's desires is much more important than the desires of men.

HSIUNG: I remember that during the launch event for *To Shed* at National Taiwan Normal University, you mentioned that before writing the novel, you had interviewed families of victims of the May 13 Incident, and discovered that desire and sexuality are something Chinese communities often feel ashamed to talk about. That was one of the reasons you wanted to explore desire in your fiction. From my reading, the depiction of sexual desire in the novel includes the brief love affairs between the woman selling iced drinks and the taxi driver, as well as the ambiguous intimacy between You Mei and Ah Qing—though it's only hinted at in a few short lines.

HO: Yes, for anyone, this is the least likely thing to discuss. I once felt

uneasy, wondering if this would come across as offensive. During my interviews, I encountered a woman born after the war. She spoke of her mother, who, after her father's death, lived with "the other man" until her own death. Contrary to what we might expect, she did not express any traditional or moral condemnation of her mother. In fact, she didn't care whether her mother remembered her father, but was angry that her mother was still "short of money." And the daughter grew up poor, seen as an unwanted burden, left with no money. Although she wasn't a victim, I couldn't help but think: if this had happened to the victims of the May 13 Incident, there would be no reason why it couldn't happen. Do we always imagine that the narrative of a nation's suffering must be tied to a widow who, carrying the weight of national sentiment, becomes a respected mother? If we allow the story to delve into sexuality, suggesting that the woman cannot remain in widowhood (perhaps for the sake of survival, or because of financial reliance on a partner), what contradictions and challenges to patriarchal thinking would arise, stirring us to further reflection? Why not? Would that make us lose our voice to speak out against injustice?

HSIUNG: One of the most striking themes in *To Shed* is how the mother avoids recalling or speaking about the May 13 Incident. The narrator also mentions that victims and survivors were forced to forget their fear; for the sake of national harmony, dissonant voices had to be silenced.

I read *To Shed* before encountering Han Kang's *We Do Not Part*, and I noticed that the two of you seem to share a similar approach to addressing trauma and the taboos imposed by the state. In *We Do Not Part*, one of the female characters, Inseon, says that the wound must be pricked with a needle every few minutes so that it bleeds, so that it won't heal prematurely—only then will the nerves around the amputated limb not atrophy, and only then can a return to being "normal" be possible.

In your view, what role should literature play when it comes to confronting a nation's, or an ethnic group's, historical traumas? Is it possible to delineate the boundary between literature and history?

Might *our* story be something entirely different from *theirs*?<sup>3</sup>

HO: I've only read the first chapter of Han Kang's *We Do Not Part*; I need to finish it in the next few days. What you mentioned was really chilling and heartbreaking. What Malaysia did after the May 13 Incident was, precisely, to choose amputation to quickly stop the pain—forsaking memory to avoid further suffering.

But perhaps we can't forget. We can neither remember nor completely forget. What we think we've forgotten is more like something stuck, locked away somewhere in the reefs, only to resurface in fragments when we're struck again, bit by bit filling the gaps of the narrative. Perhaps in the long time of separation and vagueness, we endure what is like phantom limb pain. Sometimes, memory can be as terrifying as a ghost, especially when it endangers the boundaries of self-defense. Feelings of dislike, resistance, and the reflections or reinterpretations that follow once that resistance fades—they may all keep alternating with one another over time.

In the novel, Luo gradually realizes that she has been alienating herself from her mother, and her mother—Gui Ying—has been distancing herself from the unfortunate and gloomy feelings imposed on her family and herself by the devastation of the May 13 Incident. The dead are gone, but the living carry the inexplicable shame, regret, and guilt, because they cannot forget, but they cannot remember either. We find it difficult to return to the core of our own lives to understand our experiences, because from the beginning, the entire national construction, patriarchal culture, the language that encourages progress—all of these have distanced us from our body's sensations, making our language feel like ventriloquism. We are always speaking someone else's words, as if our tongue were detached from the body, unable to find words to express and connect with our own unique experiences. Our spaces are like this too—the places where riots once took place, now cleansed and swept away, leaving no trace.

Literature cannot replace or serve as the role of a witness; it

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<sup>3</sup> Due to time constraints on the day of our interview, the responses from this question to the final one were completed at a later time, after our conversation on Facebook had ended.

cannot be anything but belated. But perhaps its greater intention is healing, to inject hope for continuing life. For example, after reading *We Do Not Part*, I felt that a connection—that Han Kang’s own life is concerned with—was also embedded in the novel she wrote about the Gwangju Uprising. The mother-daughter relationship. I believe every writer has that space where their individual life story connects with the larger flow of history.

Compared to historical writing, literature may place greater emphasis on those seemingly unrelated aspects and details, preserving those gray zones where meaning is still ambiguous or unsettled. Sometimes, it might be a fresh wound, due to a current pain, that triggers the memory of long-past traumas. These old and new wounds may echo each other, repeating, or perhaps trying to fill in what the other one was missing. And in these stories, certain mechanisms of memory and self-defense often mirror those of the collective. It’s just that, in the past, we might have been more fragile, unable to understand or accept what had happened.

If time that had been frozen starts turning again, making a full circle to bridge the break, the wound has to bear the sting and the ache. As you mentioned, the needle constantly pricks, not allowing the wound to heal, yet it makes the nerve bundles come alive again, just like trauma revives language. If this insight brings peace and tranquility, that would indeed be a fortunate blessing. But we should not expect it to always bring tranquility. Because if we only expect the stillness of a full stop, perhaps we’re still only willing to accept the ease that comes with simplification.

Also, if you come here, you would see mosques, churches, and Buddhist temples standing side by side in the city. Some scholars believe that Malaysia’s social contract over the past half-century has been successful; at least no further massacres or bloody conflicts have occurred. But this harmony might be superficial. There’s always an untouchable line of taboo in our works and in the platforms where we share art. Imagine, our body, constantly avoiding pain. Over time, the body frame will slowly twist. In “Moth Eye,” I wrote about a slanted house where everyone lives together. The dead still dwell with us in that house, and they also live within our bodies.

If it weren't for literature, I wouldn't have come to realize this. Rather than saying it's for the deceased, I would say it's more for oneself. It's just like how Luo tries to confirm the name of something, only to eventually confront the fact that some things exist but remain unnamed. We must continue living, so we choose not to forget the deceased.

HSIUNG: And finally, I have two questions about the challenges writers face today. What are your thoughts on AI-generated writing? Is it a support or a threat? Just today, there was news from Japan that counterfeit books have appeared on Amazon Kindle, books falsely attributed to Banana Yoshimoto that she never wrote. And she's not the only author affected. The implications of AI-generated content may expand in ways we can't yet imagine.

At present, AI translation is becoming increasingly sophisticated, and may soon accelerate the publication of translated works. As a writer, how do you view the relationship between the original and the translation? Is translated text a kind of secondary creation?

HO: I have not used AI. However, given that AI translation tools nowadays seem to be able to translate texts quite well, probably even more accurately than humans (with just a few small tweaks from the user), perhaps one day, it won't be so difficult for readers from different language backgrounds to read novels originally published in foreign languages. Still, even so, I hope human translation does not disappear. Even though human translations are often full of mistakes and sometimes stray from the original meaning, they are still exchanges full of joy and discovery. I would prefer a human translator to translate my novels because that person will not merely transcribe from one language to another with perfect accuracy. Perhaps due to the differences in semantical structures between languages, translation must necessarily involve creation. Perhaps there are things I have hidden that the translator feels should be exposed and rewritten. When I read the translation, I know it is someone responding to the original text, word by word, sentence by sentence. I feel honored. Writing, which was originally lonely, is no longer so. Even though

sometimes I feel a bit of jealousy in this process, I am willing to accept the distance and space that come with the process of translation. I believe every version of a translation will not be the same. I enjoy this process. Since I don't have a big name as a writer, I cannot help but feel this is a great honor. The translator will interpret, will explain, using her own language and the cultural constellation that arises, creating her own version.

HSIUNG: In *The Shining*, the protagonist's deepest fear as a writer is portrayed through the haunting image of a manuscript filled with a single sentence repeated endlessly—a powerful depiction of the oppressive weight of writer's block. For you, what is the greatest fear of being a writer? Have you ever experienced writer's block yourself? If so, how did you deal with it?

HO: When I was writing *To Shed*, I encountered a bottleneck. At first, I was writing "Wei's Story," but the narrative kept straying further and further. I wanted to bring it back and focus directly on the story's core, but my body became extremely uncomfortable—starting with a cold, muscle aches, and illness. It wasn't until I told myself, "Enough, stop," that my body began to heal. I felt disappointed and a bit anxious about wasting time. I started going out for interviews, paused writing for one or two weeks, and decided to give myself more time. I interviewed people, talked about various things, looked through materials, took notes, and allowed myself to pause and write at my own pace.

While I was writing, I kept thinking that the issues I faced were different from Han Kang's. The violence in the Gwangju Uprising undoubtedly came from the national army. But here, with the May 13 Incident, the moral question and whether to blame this as a racial issue is murky, complex, and a gray area. I often struggled with different viewpoints. The Malays are not to blame; we shouldn't fall into a victim narrative centered around the Chinese community. At the same time, another voice says, "Don't hesitate! Don't doubt it! The injustices are obvious and unfair!" I often felt I was moving in the wrong direction, spending years going back and forth along

a thick gray boundary, trying to find the right tone to describe this contradictory situation. There was an editor inside me constantly checking my writing: some things were written and then erased. It wasn't the right time yet; I needed more time to think. Even now, thinking about it, I still feel something hard and knotted up in my abdomen and stomach. At first, I didn't know how to handle the issue of these ethnic relations. Moreover, this is a fictional novel, not nonfiction. Fiction means the writer is responsible for all the characters and plot developments created in the mind. Sometimes, I feel as if my inner self is quite dark. This is my writing bottleneck.

The bottleneck continued until I left Malaysia and went to Tamsui to start teaching at a creative writing department. I enjoyed the atmosphere of exchanging ideas with students. Although I didn't have many discussions with anyone about the writing of this novel—we simply talked about various creative issues, moral questions, and the concept of the “Other”—this already gave me some relief and space to think. I felt I should allow myself to write through the path I could enter.

I am very happy with how I completed this book. I did not blame the Malays, but neither did I avoid the issue. I did write about the “perpetrators” who will never be known again, but that does not mean I am blaming the Malays. If there is something this novel is against, it's the idea that we should forget the past and move forward. But blaming is not the goal of this novel. Rather, it's about the shadows in shared life. Most of us have been molded into forgetters by national discourse, and kept living like that. For some reason, the same kind of repression is repeated within ethnic groups, such as for gender roles and sexuality. The patterns of patriarchal repression also mirror the patterns of national repression, and they are very similar. These various situations of “for some reason” make it hard for us to examine our own lives. It's like what Virginia Woolf said in *Moments of Being*: we are always like sealed vessels, floating on the vast sea of reality, unaware of what we've been through, until reality hits like a flood and breaks down the defense wall.