

“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – IV: Chu Ling

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This is a condensed version of Chapter 2: Chu Ling, of Agnes Khoo's book *“Life As the River Flows” - Women's Oral History on the Malayan struggle for Independence* (Published by Merlin Press, United Kingdom, 2007).

See also:

[Part I : “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – I: About the book](#)

[Part II: “Life As the River Flows - Women's Oral History on the Malayan struggle for Independence” – II: An Introduction](#)

[Part III \(Chapter 1\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – III: Cui Hong](#)

[Part V \(Chapter 3\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – V: Lin Mei \(Born in 1937, Singapore\)](#)

[Part VI \(Chapter 4\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – VI: Lin Dong \(Born in 1944 in the tropical rainforest of the State of Selangor, Malaya\)](#)

[Part VII \(Chapter 5\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – VII: Suria \(Born in 1951, Thailand\)](#)

[Part VIII \(Chapter 6\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – VIII : Guan Shui Lian \(Born in 1946, Perak, Malaysia\)](#)

[Part IX \(Chapter 7\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – IX: Xiu Ning \(Born in 1927, Malaysia\)](#)

[Part X \(Chapter 8\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – X: Siti Meriyam Binti Idris \(Siti Meriyam daughter of Idris\) alias ATOM \(Born in 1927, Malaysia\)](#)

[Part XI \(Chapter 9\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – XI: Huang Xue Ying \(Born in 1934, Perlis, Malaysia\)](#)

[Part XII \(Chapter 10\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – XII: Qiang Lin \(Born in 1955, Ipoh, Malaysia\)](#)

Chu Ling kept a very beautiful picture of herself; taken when she was only 16. She looked like a film star in that photograph. Sometime after this interview was done, Chu Ling had a terrible accident. While she was working in her vegetable garden at home, she lost her balance and fell into a pot of boiling water. She was burnt all over her lower body and stayed in the hospital for more than 1 month. But she did not shed a single tear despite her pain and suffering.

“Some people in Malaysia and Singapore asked me why I brought my whole family into the guerrillas’ army. I told them my husband was taken away by your government. What can I do with 4 children other than follow the Communist Party and join the guerrillas? Otherwise, my children would have nothing to eat. This silenced them. “

A young bride at 15 - The society was still very feudalistic when I was growing up. The old matchmaker in our village offered to match-make me with my future husband when I turned 15. This was how she made a living. My future mother-in-law liked me instantly when she saw me but I was reluctant to marry because I felt that I still had a future ahead of me. I was so sad I really cried. I wanted to run away but I had nowhere to go. I was so young and did not know many people. My mother told me: “This is your destiny, just go along with it”. I was married less than a year after leaving school, it is very sad that it was not up to me to make decisions about my own life. Two years later, the Japanese invaded.

As the daughter-in-law, my job is to take care of the pigs and cook for a family of ten, including my parents-in-law and my father-in-law’s second wife. She even tried to run away because life was hard for her too. My mother-in-law turned out to be very strict. She would stare hard at me if I ate too much rice, even though I was always hungry because I did so much of physical work. My husband was a weak and soft-spoken person who never stood up for me against his mother. That really hurt me. To make things worse, he often asked to take a second wife even though I was still young and energetic then. I was angry with him because even after I had borne him two children, he continued to flirt with other women. I gave him an ultimatum one day: if he dared to take a second wife, I would leave him. After that, he never brought up the subject again.

My husband was a schoolteacher and he taps rubber for a living too. My mother-in-law controlled the money in the family and never gave me a cent. I used to be so depressed because I could not see a future for myself and even contemplated suicide. Later, I read in the newspapers something that moved me a lot. It said if one has the courage to commit suicide; one should also have the courage to live. That changed my mind; I still remember the exact words.

Life As a single parent - my husband was arrested after my third child was born. Two police officers came to the house to take him away. I was shocked and confused. During those times, the government was very suspicious of people like us who lived on the Thai-Malaysian border because they thought many of us were communists or their collaborators. I think my husband was betrayed by our neighbour. My husband did help the Communists to buy things; you cannot reject such requests, given the circumstances, right? I was naïve then, I thought he would be free after some questioning. Before he left, I still asked him to come home as soon as possible to tap rubber. By then, I was already pregnant with my fourth child. My husband was later charged, his hands were chained and his legs were shackled as they led him to the court, I was there and saw everything, my heart completely sank. Even though my husband was later sentenced to jail and subsequently deported to China, I remained faithful to him, never thought of running away. I still believed in the Confucian teaching: *a woman who marries a chicken must follow the chicken, if she marries a dog, she must follow the dog, if you marry a monkey, then you follow him all over the mountains, if you marry a piece of wood then you have to endure and stay put.*

So I brought up my four children single-handedly and tried to keep them as clean and as presentable

as possible. We had to struggle a lot to make ends meet. I cannot count anymore how many years I have been tapping rubber now. It is a very tough job because you have to stay up the whole night. I used to bring all my children with me when I went to tap rubber. I would sometimes hear strange noises and conversations...out of exhaustion. I suffer from insomnia for more than 30 years now. I would sleep only for 2 hours a night when I tap rubber. My oldest son started to help me tap rubber when he turned 9 years old. In the 1950s, there were still many tigers around our place and sometimes they attacked rubber-tappers. I heard that they even ate human beings in broad daylight. Everyday, I started to tap rubber at about 10 at night and returned home to have my breakfast next morning at about 4 or 5. Then by 9 in the morning, I am back to collect the latex. I used to carry as much as 40 - 50 kg of latex up and down the steep mountain slopes even when I was heavily pregnant.

Joining the Guerrillas at last - I joined the army around 1967. I took all the four children with me. Before I joined, I already knew the liberation army was always fighting with the enemy. So I was prepared to live a life full of danger. After we left to join the army, our neighbours took away all our things we had left behind. I did not want to join my husband in China because he said he was very poor there. So what is the point of joining him? We would only suffer as a family. He later remarried and I was angry with him for that. At that time, some wives whose husbands went back to China had asked me to help them write their divorce letters and I refused. I would help them write any letter but not this one. I had proposals from other men to remarry too but out of my concern for my daughters that they would not be treated well by their stepfather, I always refused. I could not bear to risk the happiness of my children.

We were first assigned to the Civilian Troop when we first came to live in the jungle, transporting food for the army. Carrying such heavy loads up and down the mountain is dangerous; you could easily slip and die if you are careless. Crossing the rivers and running was hard too. Even though I was still young and agile, I was always the last one in the team. The journey from our base camp to where we had to pick up our food supplies usually took 17 hours. I did this for 2 years before being transferred to the Command Headquarters. My main task there was cooking, my comrades loved my cooking, they said that my food was delicious.

Cooking for the Guerrillas Army - We had to cook 2 to 3 meals a day for about 50 - 60 people. It was tough but manageable. I still had both my arms then... (long silence). [1] We cooked 2 to 3 dishes for each meal: a soup, some vegetables and salted fish. Food was usually the same. Sometimes we might have eggs. Cooking was usually shared among a few people. One would cook the rice and the others prepared the dishes. We used to make a lot of tofu. Especially when we had a festival or celebration, we would fry a lot of tofu. We usually made our tofu at about four or five pm and worked until midnight. As the cook, I had to wake up very early, about two or three in the morning, to wash and cut the vegetables. When we could not buy meat from outside, we hunted animals. We were still dependent on the masses outside the jungle to help buy most of our supplies. We either asked for donations or gave them the money to make the purchases. We used very big stoves and carried all our kitchen utensils with us wherever we went. *Da Guo Fan (Big Pot Rice)* was not hard to prepare once you got used to it. Just have to get used to this way of cooking, which is different from household cooking. As cooks, we could choose to eat with all the others in the camp or eat by ourselves. Things were kept very hygienic in the army; we used our own spoons and food was served in separate bowls for each table of 10 persons. People only dished out what they needed from each bowl. That is why people like us are very careful about food left over by others even after we left the jungle. We had to be careful with infection and diseases.

We usually had study sessions at night after completing our assigned duties. You could rest in the afternoon if you like. When the situation was calm and stable, we could even enjoy afternoon tea and we would have some porridge. We could play sports too, like jogging, basketball, or table tennis. [2]

Other duties as a rank-and-file soldier - Besides being a cook, I had been assigned to a unit stationed between the jungle and the nearest village on the Malaysian border before. I was a courier and messenger for the guerrillas. Our job was to contact and organize the masses and buy food from them. There were about 2 to 4 of us in a unit. We also had to take turns to do sentry duty to guard our campsite. When it was my turn to do night sentry, I always worry that I might mistake a friendly villager for an enemy and shoot innocent people by mistake.

Other times, I was assigned as a 'sweeper' (Sao Lu), which meant sweeping and hiding the traces of our comrades after they had walked past. I would be the last person in the troop to sweep away their footprints. I lost my comrades once while doing this duty, I turned around and they were gone and I had no idea where I was. Worse still, there was no track before me, so I could not tell which way they had gone. Finally, the noise from a nearby village led me to it. When my team leader finally found me, he scolded me for being left behind and walking right into a village full of people!

Losing An Arm - That day, we were on our usual trip transporting food from one camp to the other. It was 3pm and I thought the path did not look right, even though it was our usual route. I alerted our team leader that I thought some people had been there before us. But he dismissed my warning. When it was my turn to do sentry duty again, suddenly I heard a loud 'Thud!' near me. I turned around and saw 3 to 4 government soldiers walking towards me. I panicked and fumbled about for my rifle because I was still very inexperienced. I hesitated to shoot because there were other comrades nearby too. When I finally got the courage to shoot, my first shot missed and that immediately alerted the enemy and a fierce crossfire started. When the firing paused for a second, I remembered that I have left my backpack with all my personal belongings behind. Those things if lost would be difficult to get again; it was funny that in those moments of danger, the possibility of death or injury hardly entered my mind. It was at this point that I was shot in my arm. Even though I did not feel the pain immediately, I saw blood gushing out of my broken arm, my arm "opened up like a flower" or like "a piece of pork". Fortunately, we were able to retreat safely into our base camp after 3 days of arduous walk, despite the constant enemy fire behind us. They searched for us everywhere, helicopters and airplanes encircling above us all through the night and bombs were raining down on us.

Even though I was given medicine for gunshot wounds, it did not stop the excruciating pain. After taking a cup of coffee and a teaspoon of milk, I was in such pain I could not eat anymore. Some comrades had offered to carry me on their back but I refused because I felt bad to burden them some more. By the time we were safely back at our base camp, my broken arm was only attached to my shoulder by a piece of skin. In the end, my arm could not be safe and had to be amputated because it was already turning black with infection and was even infested with worms! The knife they used was not sharp at all; it was so painful that I fainted a few times. They washed my wounds with hot water after the operation, which was a mistake; you never wash gunshot wounds with hot water. Even though my other arm was saved, it still sustained an injury, which continues to give me a nagging pain even until this day. It was only much later that we found out the place where I was shot was actually the enemy's airfield! All our food hidden there was confiscated by the enemy.

After my wound was healed, my comrade doctor decided to pull the bone out. However, she did not prepare me beforehand what she was going to do. She distracted my attention by saying to me: "Look who's coming? ". I turned unsuspectingly and right there and then, she pulled the remaining bone out. Blood gushed out furiously. I nearly fainted. There have been so many misfortunes and mishaps in my life but I am hardy and strong.

After my injury, I was assigned to a different post. I became in-charge of the petty cash in my unit, issuing receipts for purchases. The accounting could be complicated sometimes but I did this task for 17 years. Even though I could no longer cook with one arm left, I continued to do sentry duty,

helped with transporting food and taking care of animals in the camp. I also carried firewood or do weeding on our vegetable plots, located deep inside the jungle where government soldiers seldom dared to go. I remained hardworking and responsible despite my disability. I told myself, I maybe physically handicapped but I am not useless. I do not like to depend on others; I tried to do everything I could on my own. For example, I would ask to help carry firewood so long as my comrade helped tie it up for me. I could carry it on my back.

Equality between men and women - men and women had separate dormitories. Only those who were married were allowed to stay in small separate huts. And couples had to take turns to stay there because usually there were more husbands and wives than small huts available. Once in the army, all my children and I did not sleep in the same place. We were often assigned to different units and duties. Whenever anyone of them was away, I would worry about their safety. Women and men were treated equally in the army in terms of work. During pregnancies or child deliveries, women comrades would take care of each other. Even though I had 4 children myself, they were all delivered by our village mid-wife. That was why when our camp leader asked me once if I could be a mid-wife for our comrade, I refused for fear that I would make a mistake that I would regret for life. I was always told not to look when I gave birth myself, so I never learnt how to do it for others.

Living in the jungle - Whenever we went on an expedition, we would have only one set of clothes for 10 days. It was cold in the jungle, and everything was quiet and still. Sometimes the mountains were so high that not even birds could be found. Only the noise of very small insects could be heard. Hunger was the hardest and most unforgettable experience inside the jungle. It was not enough to simply find food; we had to be careful that it was not poisonous. Or we had to make sure that after we had eaten the animal, the leftovers were concealed properly, otherwise the enemy could trace us from it.

Malaysian recruits - Among my troop members, quite a number of them were from Malaysia, cultured people and highly educated. Some of them were university students. Some of these Malaysians were previously underground members of the party. They were surprised by some of the things they saw in the army. They asked me why people in the army seemed so hot tempered. In contrast, their experiences working with underground comrades outside the jungle seemed to be better. What can I say? I simply explained that like all communities, we have all kinds of people in the army, the good ones and the bad ones. Fortunately, the bad ones are the minority.

Looking Back - I had been in the army for more than 20 years. The happier moments were the celebrations and festivals when we performed deep inside the jungle with and for our comrades. I really enjoyed the dancing and the singing. We sang songs like: "We wish Chairman Mao longevity in life", do you know that song? Also songs like: "The Glorious Party", "The Lighthouse", "The heart of a loving mother", "The sons and daughters of Pahang". That is how I learnt to sing in public without feeling shy. We also did dances like the one about "Rice Planting". Therefore, there were good things in the army too. There are things that are not so nice in the outside world too. Of course, army life was dangerous but since we had decided on this path, we are prepared to die anytime. Who cares? Our lives could simply vanish with one bullet. (laugh) It is hard to say whether it was because the children could not bear to leave me that they all joined the army with me or was it the other way round. It is a long story, hard to say. I am now a great-grandmother. I learnt to use my legs to do my own washing and laundry. I scrub my clothes on the clean bathroom floor with my feet. Then I use my good left arm to rinse them. Some people are curious how I could put on my clothes with one arm. I told them because of my disability, I have to be creative to be independent.

I still work on my own plot of vegetable garden nowadays by myself. Work makes a day pass quickly. I cut the grass and pull out the weeds. They grow very fast all over the hill. I work everyday, 30 days a month, 7 days a week. My comrades call me an iron woman. I think my toughness was borne out of

necessity.

Footnotes

[1] Chu-ling had lost her arm in a crossfire with the enemy.

[2] I was told that at one point in time, the circumstances were so relaxed that the guerrillas even constructed a swimming pool deep in the jungle so that comrades could learn how to swim.