

# **“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – IX: Xiu Ning (Born in 1927, Malaysia)**

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This is a condensed version of Chapter Seven: “Xiu Ning (Born in 1927, Malaysia)”, 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](#)

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[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 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 \(Born in 1927, Malaysia\)](#)

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“My brother was not convinced that we could endure the hardship when we left for the underground

and then the jungle. He was certain that we could not cope with the hard life as 'mountain rats' (how the British called the communist guerrillas). When I heard that, I resolved never to return. Now fifty years had passed and I never once returned. I never saw my mother again. She died in the 1960s. When I saw her photo, I cried and cried. Life is like this, we have to be cheerful and optimistic. One has to be content. If not, nothing will be good enough for you and you will always be unhappy. Life is short and temporary. I like the spirit of the pint tree, it is very strong and it does not die in winter "

**Youthful Days** - I was very active when I was young. I liked to play different games and sports - badminton, basketball, volleyball, table tennis etc. I rarely went straight home after school and often did not complete my homework. Even though by this time, it was very unsafe for girls to stay away from home but I was not scared at all. I was already 18 or 19 years old when I started school in Penang, Malaysia. Because of WWII, most people started school much later than usual. By then, I was already influenced by revolutionary ideas and had begun to build links with the underground movement. A cadre friend and a fellow classmate, who was herself from a very rich family, used to come to teach us about Marxism every night. That was how my younger sister and I were influenced by Marxist ideas. Her brother was martyred and her younger sister was also arrested by the government. She was interrogated about her older sister but she did not give anything away. After she was released from prison, her father sent her to China. Her brother later died under cruel hand. Her father was asked to identify his body, which was riddled with gunshots. So I was prepared that one day, I may have to disappear, it was very easy to become blacklisted in those times. Before I joined the guerrillas, I went to see my good friends to sort of say 'goodbye'. I did not even return to my school for my certificate because it was too risky. There were police and intelligence officers hanging around my school all the time. My school was known for its activism, it was branded 'red' (communist-controlled) by the government. One of the alumnae of the school later became a Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) leader.

The Party told me to become a teacher. I was the only teacher and the principal of a very small school. I was also the one to ring the school bell! There were about twenty - thirty students and some of them were as young as five years old. The oldest were about twenty years old. It was a primary school, which taught only one subject: Chinese language. I was also the one to collect the school fees and this would be my salary. As a teacher, I also visited my students' homes regularly.

**Working for the underground** - my mother was supportive of our activities. However, my elder brother-in-law who was a civil servant working for the English was very against us. One night, my sister and he suddenly turned up at our home while we were printing underground materials. My mother helped us hide the things away, she knew that what we were doing was against the law but she trusted us anyway. She sympathised with the Left even though she might not know how dangerous this meant. We were very determined. Then our only link to the CPM was arrested one day. He was known to sing "The International" in the prison. After he was executed, we had to quickly leave home for our safety.

I was a Christian, so I stayed with a Christian friend for a while, since the government did not suspect Christians as communists. It was a remote place, we were four women in a cell group, and we would visit the Christian family regularly to sing hymns together. Even though by that time, I have already stopped believing in Christianity. Fortunately, our party link did not betray us even at the last breath of his life. So we felt safe enough to return home and very soon, we had resumed the printing of underground materials. This time, the party sent another printer to work with us, who was from another underground unit. He would come to our home everyday and we would eat lunch together. Unfortunately, he was soon arrested and was also executed by hanging. So we had to run again. Each time we left home, the party kept an eye on us and watched out for us. Until finally, we were told not to return home anymore and soon after that, I joined the guerrillas in the mountain.

Let me now return to the time of the Japanese occupation - I remember this period as a child. My father died when I was very young due to high blood pressure. He was thirty years older than my mother, she was still in her teens when my father married her as his fourth wife. My mother did not remarry after his death. She had six children with him. I was in my fourth or fifth year of primary school when the Japanese invaded Malaya. I could have gone to study in China had it not been the war. I was sent to study in an English language school run by nuns in my hometown instead. In the convent school, both teachers and students were conscious of their appearances, much attention was paid to the way we dressed and the teachers all wore make-up, this was very different from the Chinese-medium schools where dressing up was discouraged. I did not like the fact that we had to pray in school either, so even though my mother had already paid for our school fees, I soon refused to go to school. When the Japanese came, they closed all schools that taught in Chinese. My mother decided that we had to leave Penang and brought the whole family to join my father's third wife in the countryside. The Japanese were bombing Penang all the time. As children, we would secretly go to the hilltop to watch the bombs fall. When the bombing stopped, I would creep out to look at the sea, it was all so quiet everywhere, not a single boat or ship in sight. When the Japanese occupied Malaysia, they were mistreating women everywhere. They raped women in broad daylight, even young girls of seven or eight years old. My mother was so worried because she was still young herself and we were barely ten years old. So we used to hide in the mountain caves.

Then we heard the Japanese were carrying out "Purification Campaign" by arresting and executing people everywhere. They took our younger brother who was only nine or ten years old too. He was in prison for two days and two nights. We had to bail him out. Later, the Japanese announced that they would arrest everybody within a fifty square mile radius in the city if they found any resistance member in the area.

Not long after, my older sister began to teach Japanese language in what used to be a Chinese medium school. And her husband worked in a Japanese company. One day, there was another "Purification campaign" and we were all woken up at 6 in the morning. We all had to assemble outside our homes and names of suspected anti-Japanese resistance elements were called out. Most of these were men. They were identified by people who were dressed in black and hooded so that no one could recognise them. These traitors would point out those they thought were against the Japanese and trucks would come to take all of them away. They were never seen again. We were saved because my elder sister told the Japanese officers that she worked as a Japanese language teacher. I also got a job working for the Japanese later. It was like a cooperative, I was given a badge and a uniform to wear. My job was to supervise people who weighed and sold meat.

Nursing the Japanese soldiers in the army hospital - from then on, every time when there was a roundup, I managed to escape because of my job. I also went to study in a Japanese school and my Japanese teacher was a very nice lieutenant in the navy. He taught us many beautiful Japanese songs. He used to visit me at my home. Later, my friends and I decided to work in a Japanese hospital. We worked as telephone operators because we were still too young to be nurses. The Chinese staff in the hospital were allocated the lower level and menial jobs. The doctors were all Japanese but the nurses were mostly Chinese. We were soon fed up with being just telephone operators and decided to apply to become nurses in a Japanese Navy hospital nearby. This time, our wish was granted. We were even allowed to take charge of the medicine room when all the Japanese staff were off for lunch everyday. We were the youngest staff and we spoke Japanese, so the Japanese trusted us. They did not trust the older Chinese staff. In this hospital, all the soldier-patients were Japanese. The Japanese were cruel and fierce even to their own people. Many navy soldiers who caught venereal diseases were badly beaten by their superiors; they were slapped really hard on the face! The military police were very terrifying with their long and sharp swords. The lower-rank Japanese soldiers were nicer, not as arrogant, so we got along better.

My friends and I were somehow the favourites of the Japanese staff, so we were given privileges like hostel accommodation and better food. The Japanese staff always had a lot of good food but not the Chinese staff. The Chinese workers in the hospital never had enough to eat while the Japanese staff would feed the dogs with their leftovers. So we tried to help the Chinese staff whenever we could. We secretly dispensed medicine and glucose from the medicine room for Chinese staff whose relatives had fallen ill when the Japanese were not looking. One of our tasks at the hospital was to take blood samples from the soldiers, sometimes more than 20 of them in one day. If our equipment did not work, we were told to suck out their blood manually with a tube. We were to measure the water content of their blood. We were given vitamins to eat after such tasks. They said it was to strengthen our bodies.

**Chinese-speaking Japanese soldiers** - There were some nice Japanese soldiers and patients who speak Chinese too. They would speak to us in Chinese when their superiors were not around. But they would not say where they came from originally. One of them confessed to me one day that his mother was a Taiwanese and his father came from Mainland China. He was drafted into the Japanese army.

Live Experiments on Human Beings - Each day after 5pm, all the staff would go home and the hospital became very quiet. One day, I accidentally saw a truck parked in front of the hospital and blood was trickling down from it. This continued every night. The strange thing was the truck would be parked there for hours and nothing happened for hours. Finally, one night, I plucked up my courage and decided to find out what was going on. To my horror, I saw in the operation room that they were operating on human beings who were half-dead! The operating room was brightly lit and I could hear the sounds of the operating tools inside the room. The Chinese newspapers had written about this before. I finally understood that these people were Chinese left to die in the truck. They looked like workers and the Japanese were using them as life experiments! I felt so disgusted and angry. How immoral! From then on, my attitude towards them changed. I lost the enthusiasm for my job. Soon after, the Japanese surrendered.

**The British returned** - The Japanese first sent their nurses back to Japan by the truckloads. The Japanese military police were wielding swords, running here and there like mad men; they looked crazed with anger and would kill a person with just a swipe of their sword. Once the Japanese left the hospital, we were left to take as much as we could home. After the Japanese left, the British came back. The Chinese schools reopened and I resumed my study. I joined the Teacher Training College and was increasingly influenced by revolutionary thoughts. My class even went on strike for 3 days and succeeded in forcing one of the teachers to resign. He was one of those teachers who were also KMT (China Nationalist Party, former ruling party in Taiwan) members in my school. They monitored student activities in order to stop us from joining political and progressive activities. But it was very natural to be interested and to be involved in politics at that time.

**Becoming a Guerrillas fighter** - I was already over 20 years old when I joined the guerrillas. I was asked to sign a piece of paper that stated that I had become a Party member. It was written that I would pledge my loyalty in service of the people, that *I would follow the party with one heart and one mind*. There was a picture of Marx and Engel on the paper. Army life was very strict, we were not allowed to have boy-girl relationships and men and women slept in separate dormitories. At night, a whistle would go off to signal bedtime and everyone had to sleep at the same time. We went about our assigned tasks and duties in the day and gathered for lessons in a big lecture hall afterwards. We studied Chinese language, literacy classes, and group dance classes including Malay, Thai and Filipino dances. We could play poker during festivals but not with money. I belonged to the twelfth Battalion, which consisted of several hundred people. Discipline and centralised command was very crucial. Anyone who made a mistake was punished. We had roll calls every morning. Then the leaders would give us the lecture for the day. After he finished, we would have drills and

exercises. This usually lasted for ten to fifteen minutes. Following that, we could return to our dormitories to rest. Then the whistle blew again at about eight in the morning to summon us for breakfast. The whistles signalled everything we did. We used our own individual mess tins for meals. We were served our own portion of rice but shared the dishes with the others. We were very careful with hygiene in the camps; we did not share utensils, to avoid spreading of diseases.

**Working as a telegram officer** - We used secret codes to receive and send messages. As a telegram officer, my working hours were different from the rest. We worked at night because it was quiet then and the frequencies were stronger. Normally, the telegrams came at eleven or twelve at night and we would work until two or three the next morning. Then we could go to bed until ten or eleven before our leaders woke us up again to decode telegrams. When there was no telegram, we devised new codes for future use. It was difficult to devise these codes because each code needed a different set of four numbers. It was a lot of brainwork. We had to standardise the codes for all the different army units. We also changed them regularly to prevent our enemies from breaking the codes. We received many telegrams because we were in the Command Headquarters, so we received news from all the guerrillas units everyday.

**Training in China** - I was once sent to China for training but we were not allowed to travel freely in China for security reasons. Most of my time was spent in classes. While in China, we could play basketball or watch movies during our free time. But we were not allowed to go to the ordinary cinemas, we were confined to the Party's Academy. Then the Cultural Revolution began and our course was disrupted and I had to return.

**The Vietnamese** - The Vietnamese comrades were very good to us. We had to pass through Vietnam to go to China in the 1960s. They were very warm and hospitable. We had to stay in Vietnam for half a year before we could resume our journey to China. So we witnessed and experienced the Vietnam War. We were brought to see the people's collectives. Even though North Vietnam was suffering from famine, because we were guests, they made sure that we had enough to eat. I saw with my own eyes the homes of the Collective members, they had so little to eat, no meat, no fish.

**As a section leader** - I was expected to assess the section's work and performance at the end of each day. I also had to give speeches at various occasions. Eventually I got tired of the job and resorted to recycling my speeches. Nobody actually noticed that I had used the same speech repeatedly. They forgot. I was too lazy to write a new speech each time, so I used the same old story and the same old slogans such as "Believe in our leaders, follow the party and so on. " We tried to imitate China by having marching parades and cultural presentations and so on. The battalions were huge and we held our parades deep inside the jungle. We even built a big stage for the Master of Ceremony (MC) and our leaders to watch. They would stand there to review the different contingents and we would march past to salute them. They would applaud us and we would smile back. After the parades, there would be food and games. We used to make our own video programmes and pass them around to the different units too.

**Changing Names** - We were always changing names. Whenever we transferred from one unit to another, we changed our names to conceal our identity. We also changed names regularly even at the same place so that no one could track us down.

**Examinations** - In class when we studied Marx, we discussed his ideas and debated among ourselves. But it was mainly memorising work and I was very good at it. We would have class tests after each chapter. We studied thoughts of Marx, Engel and Lenin and tried to adapt their ideas to the Malayan context.

**Peace At Last** - We were only told about the peace negotiations after it had reached its conclusion. We were unprepared for the prospect of leaving the jungle at last. We felt confused and lost. We expected that it might be difficult to adjust to normal life. We had become used to living inside the jungle.

**My dreams** - I dream very often these days, they were all about my comrades like the younger sister of Lin Dong, Lin Hong, who was also a medical doctor in the guerrillas' army. Her partner died during one of our marches, he fell into the Perak River and drowned. He was already ill that day and he fell with his heavy telegram machine on his back. In the army, we had strict discipline about these things. If it was your job to carry the telegram machine, then you were fully responsible for it. You had to guard it with all your life. When he fell into the river, some of our Malay comrades dived into the river immediately to rescue him but they failed. Lin Hong was so heartbroken when he died. What did I dream about her? How she used to treat us when we were ill, how we used to have heart-to-heart talks. I remember how she would visit us in the afternoon just to chat. In my dreams, things were exactly the same as they used to be. I still dream about us laughing and singing together. I remember how we held each other's hands as we went off somewhere for a heart-to-heart talk. Whenever I wake up from these dreams, I realise that it is all over now.

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**Authors' note:** *when I last saw Xiu Ning, she was still very agile and active despite her old age. She continued to work as a nanny to the children of a couple, who are also ex-comrades but they belonged to a different fraction of the party. So she divided her time between the village in Betong and the city.*