

“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – XII: Qiang Lin (Born in 1955, Ipoh, Malaysia)

Wednesday 9 January 2008, by [KHOO Agnes](#) (Date first published: 30 September 2007).

This is a condensed version of Chapter Ten: “Qiang Lin (Born in 1955, Ipoh, 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](#)

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

[Part IV \(Chapter 2\): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – IV: Chu Ling](#)

[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 \(Born in 1934, Perlis, Malaysia\)](#)

She is small but strong, very strong. Male comrades talked about her with admiration for her strength and great physical tolerance. She has an unusual name: Qiang Lin, which literally means *a jungle filled with flying arrows and bombs raining down on the enemies*. It is part of a Chinese proverb referring to situations of intense fighting and great danger; *Qiang Lin Dan Yu*. She has spent her entire youth, her healthiest and strongest years in the jungles of Malaysia and Thailand as a guerrilla fighter.

“The army was a microcosm of society with all kinds of people, human failings and weaknesses existed too. So did human strengths and goodness of heart. Living together meant we had to confront one another about many things in daily life. We tried to overcome our differences because we had to fight shoulder to shoulder for our lives. We learnt to be tolerant. If it were not for the deep comradeship, we felt for one another, we could not have endured for so long. My years as one of the food carriers in the army were hard. However, I am proud of myself as a woman; I did not work less than my male comrades did. I gain my self-respect and pride because I saw that I was equally capable as my male comrades and I could do all the things that my male comrades did. “Qiang Lin said with a broad smile.

My hometown was a revolutionary base for the Communist Party of Malaya. My mother was a student of a very senior Party member so my family were often with the communists; I was not yet born when they began to use my home for their work. I am the youngest daughter in the family, my parents had six children, and I have three older brothers and two older sisters. My father died when I was only twelve years old. I hardly knew him except that he suffered a lot at the hands of the Japanese during the occupation of Malaya. One of my brothers whom I am closest to, joined the revolutionary struggle as an underground member at a young age. I was very much influenced by his ideas of serving the people. He introduced me to progressive books and movies. He used to invite his comrades to our home so that they could do their ‘extension work’ in our neighbourhood. They reached out to the people, mobilized sympathizers for the movement and recruited members for the party. That was how I began my life as an organized member. I was not yet a party member then. I was considered only as a ‘candidate-in-waiting’. I had to adapt to party life first. So gradually, the Party gave me more and more tasks. I was a courier passing letters for them. I was finally accepted into the party after my ideas were considered firm and determined. I finally joined the underground Liberation Front around 1972. By 1976, I entered the jungle to join the guerrillas. I just turned nineteen years old.

I only had an elementary school education; I had to stop school at 14 years old.

My job as an underground member was to courier letters and messages for the party. As my cover, I worked as a rubber-tapper together with an older sister who was also a comrade. She was responsible for me and we lived together like a family. By sixteen or seventeen years old, I was transferred to another place and worked as a construction worker, still travelling frequently to deliver letters and messages for the party. Construction work was not tough for me because I was young and strong then. I was often given the heavy work at the construction site. During that time, all work had to be done manually because there was hardly any machinery. We had to carry boxes of sand and pour them into a barrel to make cement. This was mainly the women’s job. As soon as the cement was ready, we poured it out and these were used to lay bricks. I was living with four other women in one cell group by this time. We were very happy together because we worked well as a team. My colleagues were my comrades, our own people.

Life as a cell-group member - We were divided into cells of three or four members each. We lived and worked together while carrying out our assigned tasks and duties. A senior comrade was assigned to take charge of us and guide our work. We functioned like a small unit of a larger organization. Even though my brother and I belonged to the same organization, we had a different

line of command and communication. These lines could not cross each other and there was no horizontal communication between them. This was to ensure that if one line was broken or destroyed by the government, the other lines would not be affected or implicated. So my brother and I rarely met each other except during family get-togethers. We kept the details of our work to ourselves too, so even though four of five of us may live together, we do not know of each other's mission or work. We also had a routine to follow everyday. In the morning before we began work, we would read the "Little Red Book of Chairman Mao" by reciting a quote each. This was meant to guide us in our actions and thoughts for the day ahead. It was not easy to transform ourselves to become progressive. After all, we are only ordinary people with all our shortcomings. It was not easy to rid ourselves of old habits and thinking to become model members of the organization. However, we tried our best.

Working with the masses - the masses felt that we were different, even somewhat strange to them. Nevertheless, they loved us very much because they knew we were always ready to help them. As underground members, our job was to establish good relationships with them, to integrate with them completely. We were like family to one another. We helped each other when anyone got into trouble. As part of the revolutionary movement, we behaved rather differently. We seemed different from the average person in the street. It was very easy to identify and differentiate us from the others. Perhaps, that was one reason why our identity was so easily exposed. The masses thought we were different because we were so kind, so helpful and so open to being one of them. We shared our resources with them whenever we could. We were keen to show them that we were progressive in both words and deeds, even though we may still have our own personal shortcomings such as being bad-tempered and stubborn and so on.

Difficulties in Leaving the Family - My family was poor. My eldest brother who was the breadwinner of the entire family, died suddenly in a work-related accident. His job was to drive big logs from the jungle into the city, it was hard job, and many people were killed in this job. After his death, my sister-in-law begged me to stay home to help take care of the family. It was a big dilemma for me, I had to choose between family responsibilities and commitment to the party, this was in 1974. Finally, I told my sister-in-law that I could not simply decide on my own because I was already part of the organization, I could not simply give up the struggle for personal reasons. I could not even attend my brother's funeral. My family did not even know where I was. Unfortunately, my sister-in-law also died four years later because she could not bear the burden of the family any longer. The cause of her death was skin cancer; she might have got it through her job, working in the rubber plantations for rich bosses, spraying pesticides. I did not even know when she died because I was by then in the guerrilla army already.

Joining the Guerrillas at twenty-one years old - At that time, the party needed many new recruits. I belonged to the last batch of trainees the party recruited. We were altogether more than a hundred people; my class alone was about fifty to sixty recruits. That was in 1976, the party decided to develop and expand the armed struggle further. We went through formal military training and studied political theories too. Apart from training and learning, we also had to work inside the tropical rainforest. It is hard to describe my feelings the day I went into the jungle. I had to leave my family behind and could not even say goodbye to my mother. My mother thought that I went to work in Singapore. When she knew the truth, she was angry with my brother for facilitating my decision. Even though she has always been supportive of the revolution, it was still difficult for her to see her own daughter go. I lost my closeness with my mother because of my choice. I feel very guilty for what I did to her. I was afraid that had I told her the truth at that time, she would cry and that would put me in a serious dilemma.

The army was a complete change of worlds for me; I had to fight in battles as a soldier. Even so, death never crossed my mind. I saw myself merely as a brick or a piece of tile on which the

foundation of the revolution was to be built upon. My love for my family is very different from the love I feel for my comrades in the army. I feel much closer to my comrades now because we have lived and worked together for so long. We saw each other everyday; we faced difficulties, life and death together.

Fun in the army - we were free from many worries living in the jungle. There were few battles by this time, so we need not fight everyday. We just did our respective tasks and duties everyday. The solidarity and fraternity we felt in the army for one another was indescribably deep. We went through thick and thin, life and death together, it was collective living. Even though life conditions were tough in the jungle, we were happy in spirit and mind.

Towards the end of our stay in the jungle, we were even composing our own music whenever there was an anniversary celebration or commemoration day, such as the February 1st, Founding of the Army Day, April 30th - Founding of the Party Day, Commemoration of the Martyrs Day, New Year's Day, and Friendship Day etc. We used to record our songs on tapes and send them to our radio station based in Hunan, China. It was known as the "Voice of the Revolution". And much later on, we set up our own radio station inside the jungle too. We used to wait eagerly for these programmes and got excited whenever we heard our own songs. Other than singing, we watched videotapes from China every night, which became possible after 1980. Besides the daily morning exercises we did together, we could also play basketball and table tennis when situations were calm and peaceful.

There were naturally unhappy times too, for instance during those criticism sessions, some people went overboard in their criticisms of others. I was criticised for being vain because I had wanted to alter the size of my army uniform to fit better, it was difficult to wear over-sized clothes when travelling over long distances. I was also criticised for being vain because I had preferred a different haircut from the rest of the group. It was the time of the Cultural Revolution in China. And every woman in the army was encouraged to keep the simple haircut like what we saw of the Red Guard in China in the 1970s. There were differences in lifestyles and worldviews in the army too, especially between those from the cities and those who came from the countryside. It was a challenge to accept each other as we were. After all, there was nowhere to escape to in the jungle, so we had to stick together. I think we should not be too calculative and petty about small things in life. It is better to be easy-going because life was already tough enough for everybody. The leaders also told us that we could criticise the leaders and party cadres too. However, from my experience, it was better not to criticise at all.

Personal Pride in Work - As women, we had the same motivation, ability, and fighting spirit as the men. Even though I am petite, I could run as fast as my male comrades could. I even ran faster than some of them! Having said that though, usually the men are physically stronger than women are and are better able to cross mountains and ridges. They can walk faster too. However, to survive in the guerrillas' army requires other attributes too, such as being alert and flexible. One cannot afford to be too slow or dumb. Those who fought in the frontline especially had to be strong and agile at the same time, they must be able to run, roll and jump quickly. These are characteristics both men and women can have if they try hard enough. I got my strength through this revolutionary struggle and I feel good about myself.

I feel proud of myself that I could do as well as my male comrades in many things, including carrying heavy loads on my back as a food carrier. I had carried loads as heavy as theirs. Not only that; I could run as fast as the men even with a full load on my back. Some of the men even lost out to me! As women, we have the same motivation, ability and fighting spirit as the men. This spirit helped me withstand all the physical demands in the army.

Believing in Communism - Even though I was still young and innocent, I believed that the

Communists were good people and they had already liberated China. I hoped that Malaysia could be like China and become liberated from colonial rule one day. I was sincere about giving myself up to serve the people so that the Communist Party could rule my country. We watched many progressive movies and read many progressive books at that time. I aspired to be a good and useful person, to lead a meaningful life. It seemed to me at that time that joining the Communist Party of Malaya was the only way. I did consider falling in love, getting married, having babies and leading a life as an ordinary woman before but in the end, I prefer to make something special out of my life. My thinking and ideas were gradually tested in the army; they were strengthened in the process.

Actually had I wanted, I would have fallen in love much earlier when I was still working as an underground member. I was about eighteen or nineteen years old then and I became attracted to the son of the family whom I was living with. He did not know my identity. We liked each other very much. I had to choose between him and the Party. I could not tell the Party about him either, so we were secretly dating for a while. A woman comrade whom I was staying with at the same place eventually got married and left the movement. I could have gone the same way but I did not. I do not blame her for her decision though; I think people should be entitled to different ways of thinking and have the right to make different choices. But for myself, I decided to give him up, so when the party told me to go into the jungle, I just left without even leaving him a note.

Learning new things in the army - before I joined the army, I had never climbed a mountain or crossed a river. Therefore, at the beginning, I was often tripping over tree roots and falling into thorny bushes. It was tough for city people like me. We had to walk long distances with thick undergrowth and jump over roots and creeks. We had to learn to walk differently, by lifting our legs high as we walked. Actually being small is not always a disadvantage in the tropical jungle. Flexibility is the key. If there were rattan trees ahead, you had to bend down as you walked, otherwise the things you carried on your back, which were usually stacked very high would be hooked onto the rattan trees. The rattan hung low all over the place, so one had to be alert, quick and flexible in knowing when and how to dodge them. It was more exhausting if you kept being hooked onto these strong but dangling tree trunks. As women, we also had to do reconnaissance work in the mountains and hunt for animals, such as wild boars, like the men. We also laid animal traps and monitored them ourselves. I had myself killed wild boars, birds and monkeys before. We depended a lot on animals to survive in the jungle. We have eaten all kinds; elephants, big snakes, tortoises, we ate whatever there was available and edible in the mountains.

I was trained to be tough; the revolutionary struggle tested me and challenged me to be a good comrade. The ideal of "Serving the People" would be just empty words if we do not put into practice. In fact, to be kind and compassionate to others is the essence of serving the people. I maintain this spirit in my present work even after we have left the mountains. I would help whoever needs my help and do not expect anything in return. The revolutionary struggle we went through has transformed me and educated me.

Infiltration in the army - It was in 1976, the government infiltrated the organization. The entire line of command was destroyed as a result. The government arrested everyone including my brother and his wife. They were both arrested for their involvement with the underground movement and sentenced to five years in prison. In fact, my sister-in-law gave birth to a baby girl in prison. Between 1979 and 1980, the government were arresting people everywhere; nearly all the underground lines were destroyed. They were then gradually released over time, some stayed in prison for five years, some for nine years and others only two to three years.

Difficulties during the building of the East-West Highway in Malaysia - When the enemy was constructing it, we had to cross many danger zones. The comrades who went south into Malaysia during this period really suffered. Our job was to support the Southbound Ambush Troops with

weapons and food once to three times a year, depending on the situation. The furthest I had reached in Malaysia was the State of Perak. We had even crossed the Perak River. However, all along the river, the enemy had built many campsites. These camps were built very close to each other so it became very risky to pass through them. Sometimes our movements were discovered and we had to quickly detour. As a result, we often got lost inside the jungle. On my second trip southwards, the enemy's checkpoints and barriers had already sprung up everywhere. Bulldozers had also quarried stones out of the mountains, leaving very steep cliffs. Therefore, we had to improvise ladders to slowly climb down these dangerous cliffs; this was especially tough when we had to carry heavy loads on our backs too!

Combat troops - My first experience in combat was when I was part of a small group of five comrades, we were three men and two women. I do not remember clearly now but our task then was to protect our very old and very young comrades from enemy fire. Altogether, we were about fifty people then. By this time, our enemy were mainly Thai soldiers and not Malaysians. These Thai soldiers would only stay one week to ten days inside the jungle, if they could not locate us, they would just leave. It was rare to exchange fire with them. Usually they were more scared about the jungle than we were because we had been living there for so long. We were familiar with the terrain but not them. They were also fearful of the landmines we had laid all over the forests. Hence, they tried to take unexplored routes through the jungle, which means they had to cut through the thick undergrowth as they moved along. In doing so, they made so much noise that we could easily hear and locate their position. They sometimes deliberately left their traces behind too, so that we could avoid meeting them. On our part, we moved very stealthily and hardly made a noise as we moved around. We also covered our tracks very well, so it was difficult for the enemy soldiers to find us.

I used to lead marches too. I would be the one running ahead of my troop so that I could warn my comrades about enemy presence. I had to be prepared to fight the enemy first if they appeared suddenly. I had even carried a carbine missile launcher as a frontline soldier! These were heavy artilleries weighing at least five or six kilogrammes. My squad once shot down a plane with one of these carbine rifles. We shot from a distance, aiming at a point in front of the plane so that as soon as the plane hit our bullets, it exploded. Planes flew faster than our bullets, so we had to shoot at a spot in front of it. Later, the enemy retaliated by carpet-bombing us. However, we were always supported by the masses. They gave us information about the enemy and supported us with food and equipment.

Sentry Duty - My job in the army, besides transporting food, was either to cook or to do sentry duty. We were divided into small battle units and a sentry roster was kept for each group. Doing sentry duty is as good as staying at the campsite or resting. It was more restful than going on marches and carrying food. Each sentry shift was for one hour and we would share the day's roster among four to five comrades in a group. After that, the night shift would take over. If there was to be a battle, the small battle group had to take up position immediately. They had to go ahead of everyone else to fight the enemy, to give the rest of the group time to retreat.

Organization of the army inside the jungle - the zone where we were staying at the border, was known as the revolutionary base. This comprised of many different units. A leader would lead one unit. All the units then made up a big company. In smaller companies, there would be less units but would have at least the essential facilities and functions. In each company, there was a command unit comprising of four to five leaders who directed our work and assigned duties.

In my company of more than fifty people, we had a factory for making drums and containers. These were used to store food. In smaller companies, we had to do all the work ourselves, so we need to know a little about everything, we learnt to be multi-skilled. We knew how to store food, lay mines, set animal traps, and hunt. In the bigger regiments, the tasks are more specialised and fixed, so that

if you were assigned to printing work that would be your only work and nothing else.

Marrying a younger man - It was easy to fall in love in the army because men and women lived so closely together. I wanted to find a man whom I really liked and with whom I know I would be happy. That was why I did not get married until I was past thirty years old. My husband was only in his teens then, he is fourteen years younger than me. He was born in Thailand but ethnically, he is Chinese. I was with him for three years before we got married and we have two daughters now. I am surprised that we ended up as husband and wife. We became close because we were working together and going on marches together. We also enjoyed singing together. I wrote a whole book full of songs for him. Moreover, he bought me many painting materials because he knew I love to draw.

However, because of our age gap, our relationship tended to be more like an older sister with a younger brother. Many comrades were against our marriage at first but we wrote to our leaders and it was approved. Our wedding was very simple. We bought two packets of sweets and everyone got two as a treat. We bought a carton of cigarettes and those male comrades who smoked each got two sticks. We also bought a can of cocoa drinks and milk and offered a cup to each comrade. The party made tea for us. Maybe the party also bought eggs for us, so that each comrade got two eggs. The comrade in-charge of our wedding was the Master of Ceremony. He announced that we were married that night and he told everyone present how we fell in love, and how we were together in the struggle and then everyone drank tea. After that, we were sent to a small hut. These huts were reserved for married couples only whereas single male and female comrades had to stay in separate dormitories. There were limited number of huts for couples, so we had to take turns to stay there.

Since we left the mountain and settled down in Yala city, my husband and I have been living apart. He stayed in our village to take care of our home and our small plot of land, which we grow rubber trees for income. Moreover, I moved to the city with my two daughters so that they could go to school. In other words, we have not been together as a family for ten years now. Sometimes, I pity my husband that he had to take care of himself and live alone in the village. No one to cook a good meal for him. It is not easy for me to return to the village these days because of my work and my daughters. I try to go home at least during public holidays and big festivals such as the Chinese and Thai New Year Days.

Hope for the Future - My hope is to bring up my two daughters well. We are not rich but I am satisfied with three square meals a day and have a roof over our heads. We have enough income now from tapping rubber to provide for the education of our daughters. We can even begin to save some money these days. I hope that my daughters do well in school. Even though there is no more revolutionary party for them to work for nowadays, I hope they can become useful citizens one day. As their mother, I could only be their mentor. I am not educated enough to help them with their school work but I will make sure that they get the best help there is available.

It has been more than twenty years now since the day I left home. I have not returned to Malaysia since then. After the Peace Agreement was signed in 1989, I wrote for the first time to my family in my hometown. Luckily, I still remember my home address. They got my letter and my mother immediately came to see me. It was in April 1990. That was the first and last time I saw my mother after more than twenty years. We talked about the good old days. My mother told me what she had been through, having to bring up her grandchildren single-handedly, after my eldest brother and his wife died and my other brother and his wife were in prison. Indeed, my mother had a tough life because of us. As her daughter, I feel bad that I did not and could not do anything to support her then. All I could do was to listen to her as she recounted her difficulties. She finally passed away in 1996 at the age of eighty-four.

THE END