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The East/West Relationship in *The Crippled Tree*

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Abstract

This essay examines the East/West relationship in *The Crippled Tree* by Han Suyin whose life has been lived on the boundaries of many worlds, personally, professionally, politically, and culturally; not surprisingly her writing is equally concerned with exploring the margins, the intersections, the boundaries of human experience. In *The Crippled Tree*, Han Suyin's treatment of the East/West relations can be divided into three major parts. First she "decolonizes" China, at least metaphorically, by exposing the role of the West and of Japan in the oppression of the Chinese people, often through the agency of the old feudal Chinese order itself, with the inevitable loss of cultural and national identity that follows such a process. In this process she explores the Chinese struggle to restore lost cultural and national dignity through the recreation of both her family history and her self. Secondly, Han Suyin reflects the Chinese history through her parents' family sagas, which stand for two very different cultures: her father's Chinese culture and her mother's Western one. She forms a very interesting comparison between the two as well as a sharp contrast at the same time, and the exchanges and the conflicts between the two cultures is an important focus throughout her work. The sagas of both her father's and her mother's families are also used by Han Suyin, the writer, to define herself even as she writes them. Writing her own version of China and her family, that is, she simultaneously writes herself.

Key words: East/West relationship, cultural identity, cultural exchange, cultural conflict.

Introduction

Han Suyin is perhaps one of the most prominent, most controversial, but in an academic context least examined writers to explore the relationship between the East and the West.¹ Born to a Chinese father and a Belgian mother in China in 1917, she spent all her childhood there until she was nineteen. She was educated in China, Belgium and England, involved in several love affairs and married three times, first to a Chinese army officer, then to an English Assistant Superintendent of the Malayan Special Branch, and finally to an Indian colonel. Han Suyin is a Chinese patriot, a British citizen and a Swiss resident whose mother and two sisters became American citizens and whose brother became a French citizen after the Chinese Communists took power in 1949.

She was a medical doctor, first in Hong Kong, then in Malaysia, from 1949 to 1961, and at the same time gradually established herself as a professional writer. Her life has been lived on the boundaries of many worlds, personally, professionally, and culturally; not surprisingly her writing is equally concerned with exploring the margins, the intersections, the boundaries of human experience. Before the 1970's, she became the most significant, in her own words, "bridge builder" between the East and the West; as Howard Gotlieb, the director of the Special Collections, Boston University's Mugar Memorial Library, where her manuscripts, journals, notebooks, and correspondence are being collected, says, "But what is remarkable about her is that for so many years she really was the open window to China. The fact that [...] she could take in Occidental ideas for discussion was extraordinary. And she's an extraordinarily intelligent woman."² The late Nobel Peace Laureate Bertrand Russell once said, "During the many hours I spent reading Han Suyin's books, I learnt more about China in an hour than I did in a whole year spent in that country" (27).

As a successful writer, Han Suyin is not only a popular novelist and polemicist but also a historian, economist, political commentator and educator. Many of her novels, autobiographical volumes, and non-fictional books have been highly acclaimed and some have been translated into as many as 17 languages. Yet the significance of Han Suyin's contribution to exchanges and conflicts between the East and the West has not been systematically and properly addressed. Thus, this paper attempts to examine Han Suyin's treatment of the cultural relationship between the East and the West in the context of her own life stories as well as her ancestors' life stories in *The Crippled Tree*, which is the first of the six volumes her autobiography. Han Suyin's treatment of the East-West cultural relations in *The Crippled Tree* can be divided into three major parts. First she "decolonizes" China, at least metaphorically, by exposing the role of the West and of Japan in the oppression of the Chinese people, often through the agency of the old feudal Chinese order itself, with the inevitable loss of cultural and national identity that follows such a process. In this process she explores the Chinese struggle to restore lost cultural and national dignity through the recreation of both her family history and her self.

Secondly, Han Suyin reflects the Chinese history through her parents' family sagas, which stand for two very different cultures: her father's Chinese culture and her

1 Han Suyin, personal correspondence, 2 March 1996. Han Suyin has herself remarked: "As to research on my writing, it has not been done in an academic manner for several reasons." According to her the main reason is political.

2 Diane Casselberry Manuel, "A Fiery Chinese Patriot," *The Christian Science Monitor* 30 June 1982: 19.

mother's Western one. She forms a very interesting comparison between the two as well as a sharp contrast at the same time, and the exchanges and the conflicts between the two cultures are an important focus throughout *The Crippled Tree*. The sagas of both her father's and her mother's families are also used by Han Suyin, the writer, to define herself even as she writes them.

Since *The Crippled Tree* is on a basic level concerned with the question of East/West relations, the task of this paper is both to examine the significance of Han Suyin's treatment of the relationship between China and the West in historical, cultural and economic terms and to analyze the impact of such relationship on her parents' families and on herself. In other words this paper will closely study Han Suyin's recreations of the histories of her parents' families, and explore Han Suyin's complex self-definition framed by them. Since it is crucial to understand Han Suyin's writing in the light of the histories both of modern China and her parents' families, the focus of this paper will be on the inter-relations among the history of modern China as macrocosm, the history of her parents' families as microcosm and her multi-selves as a result of them.

The East/West Relationship Mirrored in Han's Family Sagas

Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.³

...human societies, at least the more advanced cultures, have rarely offered the individual anything but imperialism, racism, and ethnocentrism for dealing with "other" cultures.⁴

The dis/mantling, de/mystification and unmasking of European authority that has been an essential political and cultural strategy towards decolonization and the retrieval or creation of an independent identity from the beginning persists as a prime impuse [*sic*] in all post-colonial literatures.⁵

In *The Crippled Tree*, Han Suyin explores the East/West relationship through the sagas of both her father's Chinese family and her mother's Belgian family. She claims, "A man's life begins with his ancestors and is continued in his descendants. My father's life, and after my father my own life, begins with the Family" (CT 19).⁶ The historical events explored in *The Crippled Tree* reflect more than the changing pattern of East-West relations; they also reflect the changing pattern of the relations between two very different cultures. It is with these cultures, defined in the largest possible terms, that Han Suyin is primarily concerned in her autobiographical book. In the book, set against the macrocosmic sweep of history is the microcosmic saga of her family, which becomes

3. Rudyard Kipling, "The Ballad of East and West" in *Complete Verse*, definitive ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1989) 233.

4. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978) 204.

5. Helen Tiffin, "Post-Colonialism, Post-Modernism and the Rehabilitation of Post-Colonial History," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 23 no. 1 (1988): 171.

6 *The Crippled Tree* is abbreviated as CT in this paper.

both a primary subject and a model of the intersection of East and West at which Han Suyin literally and metaphorically has always positioned herself.

In *The Crippled Tree*, Han Suyin explores both sides of her family and their multiple cultures, and more specifically, she recreates a family history that opens up new perspectives on the larger history of Western-Chinese relationships. Here attention first will be paid to the decline of the traditional Chinese culture to which Han's father belonged, beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century when the West began to penetrate into China, then to the inability of her father's family to face the challenge of Western culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and finally to the conflicts or problems of cultural exchange between her family members. The last is especially important, since it embodies both the larger historical context of cultural confrontation between China and the West, and the possibilities of equality, mutual recognition and reconciliation in East-West cultural exchanges. In other words both East-West cultural exchange and conflicts to a larger extent are theoretically inherent in, but more practically frustrated by her father's marriage to her mother. Again my approach to Han Suyin's cultural themes will be historical, and the theoretical frames of the discussion will be those suggested by Said's *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* and by other recent post-colonial criticism.

Han Suyin's treatment of traditional Chinese culture is mainly based on the long development of her family history on her father's side, which is compared and contrasted to the Western culture of her mother's family. Her account of the long history of her father's family thus becomes a microcosm of the cultural, political and economic history of modern China, with her father's gentry family, together with its strong background of traditional Chinese culture, serving as a model of Chinese political and economic systems. When Western culture began to penetrate into China, her father's family was forced to confront it, and suffered accordingly. It is the period (1886-1895) from the Qing Empire's accelerated disintegration through its conflicts with both the domestic rebellions and the West to the present that is carefully examined by Han Suyin through her family history and her own personal experience in *The Crippled Tree* and her other autobiographical works.

Han Suyin begins the long account of her life by identifying her ancestral roots among the Hakka people (Guest People in Chinese) in *The Crippled Tree*. As a distinctive group of northern Chinese, they exemplified to an extreme degree the characteristic Chinese ability to survive in difficult conditions. Like all Chinese the Hakka people were deeply influenced by traditional cultural values defined by Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, yet were perhaps more courageous, progressive and open-minded than most in trying new possibilities in life. They were restless, migrating from place to place, especially when affected by wars, famines, natural calamities and social instability. Their migrations on the one hand reflected their attempt to both survive and prosper, but on the other mirrored the reality of the historical changes that marked Chinese society over the centuries.

The growing prosperity of Han's ancestors reflected Chinese culture both in the context of Confucian conventions and as a reflection of the changes, developments and internal conflicts of Chinese society more generally. Han Suyin suggests that her ancestors firmly believed that their success was due to the uprightness and virtues bequeathed by their progenitors in Confucian terms, as her Third Uncle argues in his

preface to the Family Book of Generations (CT 31). He identifies the continuity and unity of his family over many centuries, including the several long migrations, as defining characteristics of Chinese culture, which the Chinese themselves identified with the philosophy of harmony. With harmony the family effectively prevented, avoided and ignored behaviour of its individual members that might be considered discordant. Whatever quarrels, misconduct or scandals they might have were certainly never recorded in the family history; as Han Suyin comments:

What affected the Family as a whole is recorded, the final, authoritative decision is inscribed on paper, or even carved on stone if weighty enough; but the transient concern of an individual member, a wayward and aberrant effusion soon terminated, finds no place here ... there was no place for the individual choice. The tenor of continuity, an invisible but relentless heart, beats its steady pulsation, propelling the Family forward into its own destiny through these two centuries, the seventeenth to the nineteenth. Only a harmony unceasingly displayed could sustain this relentless holding together, nonconformism and disunity were erased from memory lest they maintain or suscite discord (CT 30).

Her father's ancestors, like all successful Chinese of the gentry class, began to put down roots in the land where they had settled and prospered. Land became the foundation of the family fortune and on it the family based its spiritual, political and economic fortunes as they extended their activities into business and scholarly learning as well as government administrative positions. As the family gradually obtained more land, and grew richer, Han's ancestors could either rent the land to tenant peasants or hire managers to take care of it. By following the traditional social system of self-sufficiency, the family hired relatives, friends and "adopted children" to manage the land and its rent. The family reinvested the profit from the land into the tobacco business and established its own company, Kuang Hsing, which was also managed by the family's relatives and adopted children.

As landowners and businessmen Han's ancestors then began to ask their younger generations to pursue high classical learning, for such learning was the only passport to get into government administration. Thus Han's great great grandfather, her great grandfather Chou Taohung and her grandfather Chou Chiehyu all became scholar-official-administrators who duly achieved the honours that all traditional families sought. The family strictly followed the Confucian moral principles that for many centuries had been the central pillars on which Chinese society rested, and which Han's ancestors' firmly believed were the guiding principles for success in cultural, social, political and economic activities. As Han points out, "Third Uncle's preface [to the Family Book of Generations] gives compendiously the Confucian moral structure which propped the feudal gentry family in its social and economic framework" (CT 31). Thus the development of the family reflects the principal structures of Chinese traditional society in agriculture, economics, arts, literature, philosophy and politics.

The fortunes of Han Suyin's ancestral' Chou clan to some extent reflect Harold Isaacs's divisions of the general situation of China in history in his classic *Images of Asia: American Views of China and India*. He divides American views of China into the following six ages:

1. The Age of Respect (Eighteenth Century)

2. The Age of Contempt (1840-1905)
3. The Age of Benevolence (1905-1937)
4. The Age of Admiration (1937-1944)
5. The Age of Disenchantment (1944-1949)
6. The Age of Hostility (1949-) (71)

Although these divisions are too general to accurately reflect the total reality of Chinese history and too broad to cover all individual cases, they perhaps represent the dominant view of not only the Americans but also the Europeans towards China; therefore, they will be used in the broadest sense in the following discussion. Before the nineteenth century China had been seen by the West as a great and powerful empire with a long history. Marco Polo's *Travels*; the writings by the Moroccan, Ibn Batuta, about life, tradition, arts, economics, agriculture in China; and the well-known works of many famous missionaries like Matteo Ricci (Italian, 1552-1610), Julio Aleni (Italian 1582-1649), Nicolas Trigault (French, 1577-1628), Johann Ada Schall von Bell (German, 1591-1666), and Ferdinand Verbiest (Belgian, 1623-1688) all vividly described a prosperous Chinese society, and highly civilized Chinese culture, which enchanted the West. Of course the sketches of China by these pioneer Orientalists described only one side of China. Han Suyin's father's family with its history of migration, development and prosperity from the seventeenth century to nineteenth century was just the type of family brought to the attention of the West by these missionaries, other writers and travellers. Such families earned for China the reputation referred to in Isaacs' first category: "The Age of Respect."

The passing of "The Age of Respect" defined by Isaacs was to have important consequences for her father's family no less than for China and it is these consequences that Han Suyin documents so fully in the account of her father's family. During the nineteenth century the positive image of Chinese culture and civilization gradually turned into an "Orientalist" fantasy of sensual, exotic feminine beauty which either invited Western penetration or was to be dominated by the Western powers because of the decline of the Qing Empire. In discussing Orientalism, Edward Said sums up the complex process thus: "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences. Now it was disappearing; in a sense it had happened, its time was over" (1). Indeed China before the nineteenth century had been "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes" and Han Suyin's description of her father's ancestors and the stories of their migrations and prosperity testify to the power of such exoticism. But after the Opium War (1840-42) the Western powers through their military superiority penetrated into China and began to lord it over a country that was becoming weaker and weaker. The self-sufficiency of the system was shattered by Western interference, aggression and exploitation and the Age of Contempt had begun.

The East/West Conflict in Economic Relationship

Han Suyin's books such as *The Crippled Tree*, *A Mortal Flower*, and *Birdless Summer* offer an over-view of the process through cultural comparison and contrast between China and the West. She shows above all that the tremendous continuity of Chinese culture and society was interrupted and derailed by the intrusion of the Western powers in the historical period after "the Age of Respect." Since 1840 China had been

declining, while the Western countries, including Japan, had become stronger and stronger because of their political and economic reforms and revolutions, especially the Industrial Revolution. Thus the long history of Chinese civilization, formerly an object of admiration, was dismissed by all except those who still wrapped themselves in romantic Chinese fairy tales in the illusionary world of the Oriental exotic, as Han Suyin's mother did when she fell in love with Han's father. Such fragile illusions did not survive contact, however, with the unending wars, wide-spread famines, disease, starvation and poverty on one side, and the magic power of gunboats and rifles of the Western powers in China on the other. This Han's mother discovered to her cost during her long stay in China.

Han's family provides a more specific focus on the historical fact that as the country began to decline, in part through the corruption and ignorance of the Qing Court but more certainly through the aggression and exploitation of the Western powers, her family was also rapidly declining. Its decline was directly bound to the larger fate of the country and reflected the worsening situation of the Chinese cultural, political and economic systems. The family's tobacco business, which had lasted more than a century, went bankrupt because of the fierce and unfair competition from the gigantic British-American Tobacco Company, with its exemption from the crippling taxes that Chinese manufactures and businesses were obliged to pay. The fortunes of the family further declined as a result of the wars against the never-ending rebellions such as the Nians, the Moslems and the Boxers, and the wars against the Western powers such as Britain, France, Russia, Japan and the United States. All these wars resulted in countless and heavy taxes which were used to pay war indemnities and which would ruin numberless families like Han's father's. By 1913 Han's grandmother had to sell her jewellery to give a face-saving reception for Han's mother.

One context for the decline of Han's father's family is provided by the disintegration of the Qing Empire, whose collapse could trace its origins back as far as the late eighteenth century. By then the Qing Empire was already exhibiting signs of its corruption and decline; yet it refused to acknowledge the potential danger of adopting a closed-door policy, or the threat posed by the outside world. Beyond the corruption and incompetence of the Qing Court, the traditional insularity of the Chinese played its part.⁷ For centuries the Chinese had considered their country to be the centre of the world, the

7. When the British government sent Lord Macartney to China to seek trade and diplomatic relations in 1793, Emperor Qianlong (Ch'ien-lung) sent King George III the following message:

We possess all things. I set no value on objects strange or ingenious, and have no use for your country's manufactures ... It behooves you, O King, to respect my sentiments and to display even greater devotion and loyalty in future, so that, by perpetual submission to our Throne, you may secure peace and prosperity for your country thereafter. H. F. MacNir, *Modern Chinese History: Selected Readings* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1913) I, 2-4. (qtd. in Hsü: 161).

This often quoted remark clearly shows the arrogance and ignorance of the Chinese court about the outside world at that time.

Middle Kingdom, and their culture to be superior to all other cultures, which were merely barbarian to them. Such arrogance was based on ignorance, for they blindly refused to accept anything foreign beyond their own boundaries, and therefore did not know much about the rapidly rising powers of the West after the Industrial Revolution until it was too late.

Thus the roots of the threat that affected the Chous ran deep. The virtues that had traditionally sustained them proved inadequate. Neither the political and social systems, nor traditional culture based on Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism could stand the challenge from the West. This had become evident to the West as early as 1763 as the French historian Nicolas Boulanger made clear even then:

All the remains of her ancient institutions, which China now possesses, will necessarily be lost; they will disappear in the future revolutions; as what she hath already lost of them vanished in former ones; and finally, as she acquires nothing new, she will always be on the losing side.⁸

The East/West Conflict by Religious Impact

In the meeting of East and West, one of the more significant sites of confrontation was religion. For many Westerners, traditional Chinese beliefs, ceremonies, and traditions were simply pagan and therefore to be obliterated as swiftly as possible. Missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, were the shock troops who would transform not merely religious belief, but the culture that generated it, thereby bringing China even more firmly under Western control. When the Chinese not unnaturally resisted such a transformation, secular military might could easily be brought in to back up the spiritual arm of the church in the imposition of Western values. Harold R. Isaacs comments thus:

Missionaries served their governments as interpreters and emissaries and utilized to the full the support of their governments and armed forces for their effort to propagate their Gospel. (133)

Even Kenneth Latourette, "a product of the missionary movement and one of its principal American historians," admits that "the Church had become a partner in Western imperialism and could not well disavow some responsibility for the consequences" (280).⁹

One of the most powerful tools the Catholic church possessed was its ability to give the Chinese converts special powers and privileges, and in particular exemption from Chinese law. One incident illustrating the point is particularly significant, having profound consequences for both Han Suyin's family in particular and the entire Sichuan region in general. In 1886, Han's grandmother's niece-by-affection¹⁰ was engaged to a

8. Nicolas Antoine Boulanger, qtd in Spence's *The Search for Modern China* (New York: Norton, 1990) 134.

9. For similar views see also Paul A. Cohen, *China and Christianity: The Missionary Movement and the Growth of Chinese Antiforeignism 1860-1870* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963) 84, 86; Hsü, 388. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 205. Fairbank, *The United States and China*, 202.

10. In traditional Chinese society, especially in rural areas, it was fairly common that people adopt (not in the legal sense but often in oral agreement between the parties involved) children as their sons-by-affection,

young man, the son of a family relative and clansman Hung. A local Catholic convert, Middleman Tu, however, wanted Lee's daughter to marry his son and forced Lee to break his daughter's engagement. Lee was very afraid of Tu, who had the strong support of the Catholic church, and finally broke his daughter's engagement and married her to Tu's son. But the young bride strangled herself in her sedan-chair on the way to Tu's family and later having heard the tragic news her mother also committed suicide.

There were at least two immediate consequences of the deaths. Han Suyin's grandmother in her shock and grief became very sick, and consequentially gave birth prematurely to Yentung, Han Suyin's father. The incident also brought about a widespread revulsion against the church, and led to violent and passionate protests. More than a thousand anti-missionary uprisings exploded in Sichuan province in the next few years, as Han's father records:

Big and small, involving whole districts, for the next few years over one thousand anti-missionary risings took place in Szechuan. They were savagely put down, in one instance a thousand peasants being decapitated. Our gentry were not spared; they openly incited the peasantry against the Christians; some were caught leading local revolts, and put to death (CT 66).

This incident points to the ideological role of the Christian missionaries as agents of Western domination. Here it is God himself who sanctions their right to enlighten and rule the Chinese people, for the Chinese were so backward that they were unaware that they were living in a dark world. If they protested, or resisted, or rebelled against being enlightened and ruled, it was the missionaries' duty to control and suppress them with either the Bible or the rifle, as necessary. Their attitude towards the Chinese marks typical Orientalist discourses, as described by Said:

What are striking in these [Orientalist] discourses are ... the notions about bringing civilization to primitive or barbaric peoples, the disturbingly familiar ideas about flogging or death or extended punishment being required when "they" misbehaved or became rebellious; because "they" mainly understood force or violence best; "they" were not like "us", and for that reason to be ruled. (xi)

History, however, clearly points to the counter-productive nature of the process; inequality and injustice generate resentment, resistance and rebellion, which naturally bring about suppression in return, which of course causes further resistance. Said identifies the loss both sides suffer:

... history also teaches us that domination breeds resistance, and that the violence inherent in the imperial contest—is an impoverishment for both sides. These truths hold in an era saturated with the memory of past imperialisms. (287)

The truth of Said's conclusion is amply demonstrated by the incident that involved the Hung, Lee and Tu families. The suppression of its own people by the Qing

daughters-by-affection or nieces-by-affection. In this case because Han's grandmother was the best friend of Lee's wife, she adopted Lee's daughter as her niece-by-affection.

government, forced to do so by the missionaries backed by their own governments, led to bloodshed and cost many lives; the price both the Qing government and the missionaries had to pay were hostility, hatred, and rejection. It is necessary to point out that the incident was not an isolated one but rather a typical example of Chinese hostility to the domineering high-handedness of the missionaries and the powerful military forces that stood behind them.

Obviously for Han Suyin, the incident, while of importance in the family's history, has a larger significance as a representative example of the many wrongs¹¹ that led up to the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1900) which was to symbolize the inevitable and violent clash between Chinese and Western cultures generated by the West's political hegemony. In other words the incident was merely a drop of water contributing to the torrent that would storm first over North China and eventually the entire country.

The incident has one more level of interest, namely as an illustration of the breakdown of Chinese culture. The weak and corrupted Qing government was no longer able to protect its own culture, while under the protection of unequal treaties the missionaries could freely build churches and schools to propagate their culture and to preach their doctrines. The Qing government's harsh treatment of its own people and acquiescent attitude towards the Western powers points to the betrayal of its Confucian virtues of benevolence, humanity and good conduct in a Faustian bargain with the West to maintain its power.

Without protection from his own government, Lee for his part was forced to abandon his moral integrity to break his daughter's engagement; Lee's action, however immoral in its violation of the Confucian principles of righteousness, propriety and integrity, was his only chance to survive in the face of Tu's overbearing demand. Even the young bride, who defended her honour and integrity by committing suicide, herself violated the Confucian principle of filial piety, for the girl did not obey her father's order; she was faced with a choice of evils. Like the young bride, the mother's suicide was also a silent protest against both her husband's immoral decision and the high-handedness of the Tu family. By so doing, however, she was also disloyal to her husband in Confucian terms. The violent protests and uprisings against the missionaries caused by the incident show that the moral and social forces that governed Chinese society were upset, and that,

11 Another celebrated example is the Tianjin Incident of 1870. In 1860 the French missionaries razed an old imperial garden and a Buddhist temple to build an orphanage on the site, but no Chinese sent orphans there at first. Hence the nuns paid a certain amount of money for each child sent there; this not only encouraged bad people to steal children to sell them there but also caused suspicion, especially since, as the nuns particularly wanted to have dying children so that they could baptize them, the death rate was very high. Suspicion brought widely-spread rumors that the nuns killed children and made medicine with their eyes and hearts; therefore, the local government sent officials to inspect the orphanage. This enraged the arrogant French consul Henri Fontanier who went to the local magistrate to demand justice for the sisters. In his outrage he shot the magistrate's servant dead, missing the magistrate himself and this provoked a mass riot that killed Fontanier and his chancellor, M. Simon as well as ten sisters, two priests, three Russian businessmen, and destroyed four British and American churches. Of course the result was that the Chinese officials and citizens involved were severely punished by the Qing government that was threatened by gunboats at Tianjin Port; the psychological trauma and hostility, however, continued to develop. For further details about this incident see Hsü, 299-302.

faced with the challenge of the Western culture, traditional Confucian culture seemed no longer functioning. Of course the severe punishment of the young man of the Hung clan who was first engaged to the girl and thousands of others led by him against the missionaries and the converts was a clear sign of the government's weakness and the missionaries' domineering show of power.¹² In the wide-spread Chinese xenophobia generated by the incident, Han Suyin's family was fully engaged. Her great-grandfather, Taohung wrote: "If your son becomes a Christian, kill him, for he will desecrate the graves [of your ancestors]" (CT 66). The incident in its largest sense demonstrates the degree to which the decaying feudal system was falling apart, and to which the Chinese government was unable to deal with the serious situation at home, let alone taking effective measures to deal with the aggression of the West. The decline of the Qing Empire directly affected the gentry class to which Han's ancestors belonged, and it suggests the larger inadequacies of traditional Chinese culture in such a context. The gentry class, which consisted of land-owners, businessmen, and scholars-officials, could not stand the challenge of Western learning in science, technology and philosophy, let alone of Western military might. Han Suyin's father commented:

Already the system was crumbling, the predatory West within our gates, feeding on our decay. Already all had changed, below the lacquer of our floors the wood had rotted, but we tried hard not to pronounce the word: *change* (CT 77).

Paradoxically it was the corruption and weakness of the Qing Empire that ensured its survival, for the West supported the government because of these qualities, and indeed nurtured them, for it was such qualities that made it easy for the West to exploit and dominate China.

Han's grandfather and great-grandfather were both participants in this process. As soldiers and administrators, both helped to put down the Moslem revolts in the northwest generated by the weakness, incompetence and corruption of the Court. As always worrying to lose its own power, the government brutally suppressed such rebellions. Han's grandfather for his part seemed not happy about his actions, perhaps realizing that by carrying out government orders he did not help to solve the serious problems but rather intensified them. In the end he fell into a profound melancholy, deepened perhaps also by anxiety caused by foreign aggression and cultural encroachment. This melancholy helped to hasten his death in his early forties and intensified the family's crisis, for with his death the official position from the government that the family had held for many years came to an end.

With the decline of the family's tobacco business, with the many heavy taxes, and with the loss of the official position from the government, the family fortunes were

12 Such a situation in China in the late nineteenth century is in its principles of course similar to that to be found in any post-colonial society Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin provide a useful gloss in their *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* (London: Routledge, 1989) 172:

But in post-colonial societies, the participants are frozen into a hierarchical relationship in which the oppressed is locked into position by the assumed moral superiority of the dominant group, a superiority which is reinforced when necessary by the use of physical force.

collapsing. The failure of the family was a microcosm of the ruin of the country, as social harmony was disrupted by both internal conflicts and external aggression. The West understood that it was high time to take advantage of the Qing Empire's weakness, ignorance and corruption and demand treaty rights, including cultural clauses with military forces. The Qing government was easily subdued by the aggressive and vigorous West whose culture began to penetrate into even the hinterland of China. Thus it was that traditional Chinese culture began to clash with the modern culture of the West in the middle of the nineteenth century and crumbled and disintegrated from then on.

The East/West Relationship in Cultural Terms

To understand the fate of China from the 1840s, it is necessary to understand not merely the social, political, and economic crises of China under assault, but the basic aspects of Chinese traditional culture in its broadest sense. To simplify, traditional Chinese culture had rested on three pillars. The first of them was Confucianism, whose major principles include good conduct, practical wisdom and proper social relationships and whose primary virtues include righteousness, propriety, integrity, and filial piety. All these principles and virtues of Confucianism were family heirlooms, the inheritance of all Han's ancestors and a heritage to be passed on to younger generations. The second is Taoism whose fundamental essence is the natural balance of *yin* (the feminine and negative principle in nature) and *yang* (the masculine and positive principle in nature) of both the human world and the natural universe through conforming the spontaneous self with the latent or potential law of the universe. Even to this day Han Suyin herself believes the basic principles of *yin* and *yang* of Taoism. The third was Buddhism, which offers escape from the sufferings of life by meditating on the nature of existence of all things, whose spiritual harmony can be achieved only by understanding and perceiving the true nature of existence.

While Confucianism played the most important role in the traditional Chinese culture all three shared a common emphasis on harmony. The first is harmony in society, harmony among people, between the junior and the senior; the second, harmony between men and women, between human beings and nature; and the third, harmony in the spiritual world. Thus for more than two thousand years Chinese civilization, which consisted of millions of self-sufficient families like Han's father's, had survived on the basis of harmonious principles of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Such qualities do not foster aggression, and up to the last half of this century, the Chinese have been in general a mild, though sometimes passively self-righteous people, ill equipped to deal with foreign aggression. From the middle of the nineteenth century, these qualities cost China dearly in its confrontation with the West, as it suffered one defeat and humiliation after another.

One of the more important aspects of traditional Chinese culture is veneration of the deceased ancestors; it is part of the more general Confucian respect for the elders. From this respect flows the continuity of Chinese life. To worship one's ancestors is to respect their virtues, and thus to pass them on, thereby guaranteeing the prosperity and integrity of future generations. The practice of the Hakka people of carrying their ancestors' bones wherever they migrated and burying them in new graves; the ritual ceremonies of festivals and funerals, such as that for Han's great-grandfather; and Han's Third Uncle's serious research and recording of the family history, all demonstrate the

family's emphasis on establishing a cultural continuity over two millennia. Such ancestor worship was typical of Third Uncle's preface to the Family Book of Generations, which makes the point thus:

All things under heaven have their rise and fall; and these occur beyond our intercession; only resolution and uprightness, virtues bequeathed by our ancestors, can transform ruin into resurgence. That is why a family erects its ancestral sanctuaries, to maintain the veneration due to progenitors and the remembrance of its own humble beginnings. Hence the necessity for filial virtue, to accomplish the rites due to the spirits of predecessors (CT 31).

Until the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Catholic church took a tolerant policy towards traditional Chinese ritual and worship; this tolerance was carefully and effectively cultivated by some intelligent, scholarly Jesuits like Alessandro Valignano, Michele Ruggieri, Matteo Ricci and Adam Scha von Bell. In 1705 Pope Clement XI, however, took a firm stand against Chinese rites and subsequently the Catholic Church abandoned its tolerance, redefining them as pagan superstition. The tragic story of the Hung and Lee families shows one example of the destructive impact of the church on Han Suyin's family. A more immediate example with consequences for Han Suyin herself was the final break between her mother, Marguerite, and Yentung's family. This was occasioned by her refusal to let Han's Elder Brother light joss-sticks for the dead ancestors, for Marguerite's confessor, the Catholic priest, had forbidden it. Facing the confrontation, traditional Chinese culture could not match the aggressive Western culture and so the Chinese were forced to deal with the consequences of the serious situation.

The paralysis of the Qing Court, the increasing domination of the West, the endless cycle of outrage, revolt, and suppression illustrated by the Hung-Lee-Tu incident in *The Crippled Tree*, all pointed in one direction: the collapse of China itself. Patriotic intellectuals, scholars, and some politicians all searched desperately for ways to save their country and their culture. They concluded that, in Third Uncle's words, "Only when we were strong would people respect us, as the Whites began to respect Japan after 1895" (CT 88), or as the writer Li Chiehjen maintains, "No one is kind to the weak. Only when we could be strong, like Japan, would no one dare to parade gunboats on our waters, to push our people off the sidewalks of our cities, to garrison troops on our land" (CT 225).

The problem was how to become strong and one of the solutions was to learn from the West. Thus came the Tongzhi Restoration during the 1860s and 1870s, "the Self-Strengthening Movement" from 1861 to 1895 and "the Reform Movement" in 1898. All failed because all were preoccupied with, in Hsü's words, "restoring the traditional order through reaffirmation of old morality" (261) rather than with reforming all the inadequate principles in political, economic, and cultural terms. Thus Third Uncle remarks: "All the talk of Reform was hypocrisy, meant to delude us. All these corrupt men who talked of Constitutional Monarchy were defrauding us of the truth. To become strong, we must fight" (CT 220). Thus in fighting came the Republic Revolution that overthrew the Qing Dynasty; in fighting, the country got rid of the warlords. Although *The Crippled Tree* ends at this historical turning point, the conflict between China and the West still continues.

Conclusion

Han Suyin begins with an account of her distant ancestors, the Hakka, and their own migrations. She moves on to the rise and fall of her father's family as a particular example of the implications of Western involvement with China. Then comes the more immediate encounter of East and West in the decision of her father's family to send their children abroad to study, followed by the even more direct confrontation involved in her father's involvement with, impregnation of, and marriage to Marguerite Denis despite the fierce opposition of both families. Their return to China marks another phase in larger saga of China and the West in the early twentieth century, as Marguerite found herself isolated as the European wife of a Chinese husband, while Yentung was discriminated against as a Chinese engineer working for a European enterprise, the Belgian Railway Co. in China. Their children, the most literal embodiment of all these examples of East-West relations, were in due course to be caught in a Eurasian limbo all their own.

In her account of both the histories of modern China and her family, Han Suyin defines or rather recreates herself in her writing, for history not only has defined her family but also nurtured and defined her in its own making. As the marriage of Han Suyin's parents was defined by the history of modern China, Han Suyin thus became a historical product marked by both Western and Chinese cultures. The particular historical conditions in China where she was born and spent her childhood, adolescence and some years of adult life not only deeply influenced her but also created her in cultural, social and moral terms. Naturally her writing of both modern China and her family is inescapably branded with such an influence and creation. Thus if her writing is a recreation of the modern history of China, it is also a recreation of her family history and a recreation of herself as well, for in her writing we see not only her version of Chinese history, the history of her parents' families, but also her life, career and most important of all her emotional and moral involvement in her interpretation of that particular history, part of which she witnessed and lived. To some extent the process of her writing or recreation of modern Chinese history as well as her family history reflects an intended self-expression, self-integration, self-definition and self-recreation. This is the basic foundation of all her works, especially *The Crippled Tree*.

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