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STATE OF EMERGENCY

A NOVEL

JEREMY TIANG

Author of It Never Rains on National Day

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EMERGENCY**

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JEREMY TIANG



EPIGRAM BOOKS
SINGAPORE · LONDON

for my parents, Helen and Victor Samuel

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Published in Singapore by Epigram Books
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NATIONAL LIBRARY BOARD, SINGAPORE CATALOGUING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
NAME: Jeremy Tiang, 1977–
TITLE: State of Emergency / Jeremy Tiang.
DESCRIPTION: Singapore : Epigram Books, 2017.
IDENTIFIER: OCN 973573544
ISBN: 978-981-1700-92-7 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-981-1700-98-9 (ebook)
SUBJECTS: LCSH: LCSH: Families—Fiction. | Communism—Fiction.
| Singapore—Fiction.
CLASSIFICATION: DDC S823—dc23

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FIRST EDITION: May 2017

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

“The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule.”

—WALTER BENJAMIN,
THESES ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY
(TRANS. HARRY ZOHN)



JASON

Mollie Remedios died in the explosion that tore apart MacDonald House on 10 March 1965. She was at her desk in the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank adding columns of figures when the wall behind her shattered, followed by the ceiling. She suffered several broken ribs, a punctured lung, and a basal skull fracture that killed her instantly. She was 24 years old.

There were three fatalities apart from Mollie—two girls who worked in the same office (the newspapers called them all girls, even though one of them was nearly 40 and divorced), and a driver for the neighbouring Borneo Malaya Building Society, killed by a drainpipe detaching and crashing decisively through the roof of his car. Thirty-three other people were taken to the General Hospital, where seven were warded with serious injuries.

The three dead women, wholesomely pretty, would be on the covers of all the newspapers the next day. Mollie in particular was featured for her youth and promise; the tragedy of her being so recently married, leaving a baby behind. The driver lay unconscious in hospital for five days before dying, and so missed out on most of the publicity.

Mollie's brother Jason was in his office on Connaught Drive when the first reports came on the radio, a few minutes after the explosion itself. There was a moment of absolute stillness in the

room before Jason was down the stairs and on his bicycle, peddling past the Padang and then down Penang Road. Traffic thickened on his approach to the red brick building, as drivers stopped to stare and abandoned cars littered the street.

Rain made the scene dreamlike. Bank workers stood calmly on the pavement, many of them bleeding from small cuts. The tall white men from the Australian High Commission, which occupied rooms above the bank, looked unhurt but far angrier. A thin old woman lay on a stretcher as ambulance workers tried to staunch the blood seeping from her forehead. The building looked undamaged from the outside, apart from the windows, which had sprayed their glass outward for a hundred feet around and now gaped black and empty.

A policeman in khaki shorts stood in front of Jason as he tried to approach the building. *Stop*, he said, grabbing Jason's shoulder so he almost fell off his bike—*no entry permitted*. He stumbled over the English words. *My sister*, said Jason, trying to keep his voice calm. *My sister inside*. But the policeman merely repeated, as if from a script, *Awas, danger, the building is unsafe*.

Men with notebooks and cameras circled the wreckage warily. Rumours rippled through the crowd: a burst gas main, structural defects, and then, with more and more resonance, the word *bomb*.

When the police grudgingly confirmed this, reporters formed a queue behind the two working telephone booths, and photographers sped off in taxis to get their pictures developed before the print deadline. Everyone seemed aware the story now being created would eventually work its way into the new national mythology. This was the worst incident yet of Konfrontasi, the confrontation with Indonesia. This was Sukarno tightening the screws, and there would have to be some kind of response.

Police fanned out on both sides of the road to prevent looting. Jason clung to his bicycle, saying over and over, *my sister, my sister*, until they left him alone. He found himself marooned on the black sea of rain-slick road, shards of glass glistening at his feet like stars. The British bomb disposal squad arrived, men with brave voices. They looked more confident than the local police, but there was little for them to do except mark off the perimeter with little flags and speak urgently into their walkie-talkies. They sounded like people in films.

“Where is everyone? Where are the survivors?” Jason clutched at uniformed arms as they passed, asking first in English and then Malay. The police shrugged, pointed at the crowds on the pavement. There was no order to this, no one was tallying lists of the living. There were too many to take in—human mountains, human oceans, they say in Chinese. “Are there still people inside?” Nobody could answer this. Rescue workers carted rubble out in wheelbarrows, manhandling great slabs of concrete out of the way.

When they began bringing the bodies out, he knew. He tried to get closer, to rip the concealing blankets off, but they stopped him again. *Go to the hospital*, they said. *Not here, not in the open*.

No one offered him a lift, and he had to cycle again through the slick streets, up New Bridge Road and into Outram. The morgue was in a basement, painted sickly green. The assistant made him stop shouting before he would show him the bodies of first two strangers and then his sister.

Mollie's face was crusted with blood, her familiar eyes open but filmed over. Flecks of rubble were lodged under her tongue, behind her perfect teeth. The attendant stopped him from touching the evidence. Jason was only required to nod for identification. Then the corpse was taken away to be labelled.

He declined tea and slumped in the corridor. Who would

pick the children up from his parents' flat? Mollie usually got her daughter before he came for his twins. He tried to do something, call their parents, but the air seemed to press on him, keeping him immobile. There were things he wanted to say to Mollie, but of course she was not there. He was later unable to work out how long he'd spent in that basement. When he emerged, the rain had stopped and a weak sun was shining.

The bombers were arrested three days later, two Indonesian guerrillas caught trying to escape by sea. They had been given a Malaysian Airways bag containing between twenty and twenty-five pounds of nitroglycerine, and told to detonate it in any public building. They had landed at eleven in the morning and, after lunch, left the explosives up a flight of stairs in the imposing bank.

In Jason's memory, the killers died very soon after that, even though he has looked up the dates and knows it took three years for them to exhaust their appeals. They were hanged within the high walls of Changi Prison on 17 October 1968. Like many people, Jason stood at the prison gates that day, waiting for the flag to go up to indicate the executions had taken place.

Now, at a distance of fifty years, Jason's instinct for revenge feels blunted. It makes no difference what these men did, why their leaders told them to, if it could have been avoided. It doesn't matter that they were punished. Entirely irrational, he thinks if only his sister had not died, if Mollie had been in another room that day, if she had taken an early tea break, then he too might have been saved. Lying now on his iron bed, aware that he is dying, there are moments when he can think only of Mollie, can wonder only whether it was fear or peace that filled her mind as she looked up and saw the world, unimaginably, begin to fall apart.



In the minutes immediately after waking, Jason Low cannot remember where he is. There is no guarantee it will be morning, and in fact it often isn't—he needs so little sleep these days. He lies in the indeterminate pre-dawn gloom, squinting to make out shapes in the dark. He can hear laboured breathing, smell disinfectant. Reaching for his wife, for Siew Li, his fingers hit only the metal railing around his bed, and he thinks *prison* for a moment, before remembering he's in hospital.

The bed is in a Class C ward, which means there are seven other bodies in the room. He would rather be alone, but his Medisave account is running out after several years of lavish disease. Whenever he tentatively mentions going private, like a nice room in Mount Elizabeth, his daughter Janet's mouth snaps shut like a purse. She appears to regard her inheritance as a *fait accompli*, and any unnecessary spending as straightforward theft from his grandchildren. He could go against her wishes, but if he angers Janet and she stops visiting, then no one will. Light begins to seep into the room, and the grey walls take on their daytime shade of bilious green. Next to him is Madam Ngoh, the mouth breather, who cries out in her sleep to absent children. Although they have nothing in common—she barely speaks English—he has come to depend on her. They are both here for the long haul, surviving as the other beds fill and empty with transients, dilettantes who breeze in with cataracts and leave without. They don't even have to cut you open for kidney stones these days; a laser goes right through without breaking the skin.

None of the beds have curtains drawn around them, which is a good sign—it means no one has died during the night. In the fortnight he's been here, he's seen three bodies removed from the ward (discreetly, under sheets). Each time, he glanced across at Madam Ngoh, and she looked as apprehensive as he

felt. *Time is picking us off one by one*, he thought, *like characters in a horror film.*

There is something unseemly about the place itself. The nurses, talking amongst themselves, call it “gerry”—“I’m on gerry tonight,” they say, sometimes right in front of him. He doesn’t blame them, even though it’s disrespectful—he knows his face is falling in on itself, his eyes dim, his mouth slack. How are they to know that there is sentience in all this drooping flesh? He has tried telling them about the dream of Gerontius, but they don’t have time to listen to his old man’s mumble, his old-fashioned insistence on complete sentences, just briskly assume he’s mispronouncing “geriatric” and assure him, *Yes, that’s where you are, Mr Low. The gerry ward.*

Before coming here, he used to enjoy this part of the day—the faint chill of the air, the light mist over the field downstairs. He would make himself a cup of tea in the dim false dawn and sit at his kitchen table, listening to the neighbours beginning to wake up. The hospital is different. There is already a tinny feeling of readiness as the night shift hands over, as tureens of Quaker oats are filled and loaded onto trolleys. He tries to sit up, but that makes his sheets rustle unnaturally loudly. Only the higher-class wards are carpeted. This room has noisy tiled floors and a ceiling fan.

Not that he’s particularly eager for the day to start. After breakfast, the nurses come round with medication, and at some point in the morning he will have a sponge bath. Afternoons grind by, once the lunch trays have been cleared away and he has nothing to do. There’s a television in one corner of the room but he worries about looking in its direction, alarmed at the great chunks of time that slip away in chat shows and cookery programmes. He wonders if his face in repose takes on the same deadened look

he sees in the others as they gape at the machine. He wishes he could read instead, but it’s too much effort to hold a book upright, to concentrate.

His daughter invariably arrives with the first wave of visitors at five on the dot. She has to leave work early to ensure this, and is always sure to let him know if this has meant walking out of an important meeting or letting a deadline lapse. He wants to say, *You didn’t have to*—but what if she takes him at his word and stops coming?

Janet is a schoolteacher—at least she was, until her talent for bureaucracy was spotted by someone high up in the Ministry. She still looks like one, with her stiff cardigans and martinet’s glasses, her hair tightly permed. Jason is faintly stunned every time he remembers his daughter is less than a decade from retirement. It seems wrong that she should be old.

His grandsons occasionally come with her, clearly press-ganged and eager to run away as soon as they can, citing films to see, girlfriends to meet. They are in their twenties now, tall and well-nourished, speaking the uninflected dull English the young all seem to use. Janet’s husband put in a perfunctory appearance right at the start, but he’s busy with his grassroots work, and as the hospital is far from his constituency there isn’t much point being seen here. He has a lot of ground to cover.

Visiting hours go on till eight, and every evening Janet dutifully sits by her father’s bedside until the nurses begin asking people to leave. Sometimes she tells him about her work or the boys’ accomplishments, but for the most part she is happy to sit in silence, making quick notes on a policy document, as if her presence is all that’s required. Each visit ends with her reading from *The Daily Bread*, a handbag-sized booklet of devotional tracts she gets free from her church. Jason has told her he’s not religious, but she

brushes that aside. There's nothing wrong in being reminded how to behave well, she tells him. Although neither of them will say this, both know she is thinking about the small amount of time he still has on earth, her tiny opportunity to save his imperilled soul.



As a civil servant, Jason ran his life along orderly tramlines—each day as like the one before as possible. His department gained a reputation for efficiency. Meetings started on time with no deviations from the agenda. Projects finished exactly when they were supposed to and never over budget. At the retirement dinner on his 65th birthday, even the Minister joked about how they'd had no need to look at their clocks with Jason around to keep them on schedule. They gave him a gold watch and engraved plaque. He'd always done everything exactly as he should. Was this his reward?

His current incarceration feels like a hellish version of this earlier life: wide empty days punctuated with regular, worthless events. Even Janet's visits, which should be the highlight of each day, feel cloying and airless as soon as they commence. He knows his daughter is prompted more by duty than affection. At least his sense of obligation has passed on to one of his children. He has tried asking for sleeping pills to get through the afternoon, but the nurse will only give them out at night, with a doctor's approval.

The main problem is in his own mind, which seems weak and spongy. He has always prided himself on his grasp of facts, but now he cannot hold anything in his head for long. More than once he has had to ask a nurse to buy him a newspaper on her lunch break as a favour, because he was too embarrassed to ask the date. It hardly matters, he has no appointments for the foreseeable future, but it feels necessary to hold on to his sense of who he is.

He will not become a person so irrelevant to the world he does know which month it is.

When desperate to make conversation with Janet, he sometimes accidentally asks her about people who are gone. *How is your mother*, he says. *How is Auntie Mollie?* The first time it happened, she glared at him as if he were a troublesome student, as if he might have been joking. Now, she simply murmurs, "Dead, Pa," then adroitly changes the subject as if to save them both from embarrassment.

He doesn't know how to explain to her that he knows they are dead. Truly, he is aware of how much he has lost. And yet, they are inside him. He cannot tell her about the long conversations he has with the departed, whiling away long afternoons, as he tries over and over to understand where they went. He cannot tell her that sometimes his sister, and sometimes his wife, come to visit him in the small hours of the morning.

"Lost in his own past," he heard her whisper once on the phone. People are becoming less cautious around him. Perhaps they think his hearing is going, since everything else is. Unlike her brother, Janet has never had time for bygones, preferring instead to focus on what she calls her goals. "You need to know where you're headed," she is fond of saying. "Otherwise how will you ever get there?"

Sometimes he thinks this is supposed to happen, his life flashing before his eyes at the end, the final moments expanding to fit everything that's gone before. But the events are not unfolding in an orderly way, which would at least make them easy to follow. He finds his attention constantly wandering, sinking into the fog of memory, meeting old enemies, replaying arguments he should have won. Afterwards, he is angry for some time without being able to remember why.

Jason has lost a great deal—more, he considers, than the usual attrition of a long life. He spends the hot sleepless nights making lists. His parents, of course, long ago. His sister and his wife, taken from him in different ways. His son in London, a city on the other side of the world. Janet, who belongs to no one but herself. And Barnaby, his brother-in-law—he decides to add Barnaby to the list of the missing, even though they were never particularly close. Gone is gone.

He talks to the nurses about the many people who have left him, and they nod with sympathy and impatience. Gerry ward is full of the abandoned, and for all his grief and anger, Jason is visited by his daughter every day. *Such a respectable lady*, whisper the staff, *and her husband an actual MP*. They don't understand what more he wants, with such a good daughter to take care of him.

Each evening, when Janet leaves, he takes stock of his body. Often it is tense from the effort of being in a room with her, both of them straining towards cordiality. He lies stiffly, listening to the other inhabitants creaking around getting ready for bed. Although he still has most of his teeth, he can't be bothered to brush them very often. He doubts he'll be around long enough to see them rot.

It is hard to accept this decrepitude, which the nurses seem to think is all you can expect at his age (he's 76, not even that old these days). Jason would really like to be one of those smiling centenarians, usually Japanese, who appear in newspapers attributing their continued good health to genes and a daily glass of brandy, lively eyes looking out from a mass of origami-fold wrinkles. A hundred seems like a good age, although the doctors have told him that he'll probably not see out the year, or even the month (in fact, he suspects they wish he wouldn't, so they can have their bed back—there are shortages). In any case, long lives are probably the domain of the guiltless, those at peace.



He knows he hasn't always been a good father. In his defence, it was unusual for a man to be left in charge of children back in those days. He had help, naturally, after Siew Li went away: from his mother (and hers, though he didn't like to ask after a while—she just cried all the time). Mollie helped for a while, but she had her own baby, then she was gone too. Sometimes Jason wonders if they could have stayed a family, had Mollie continued to be there. His mind slips into a familiar groove: what if Mollie had lived? What if his children had grown up alongside her Stella? He imagines them all sitting together after school, feasting on jam sandwiches.

He wonders if he should have joined forces with his brother-in-law, but he never had much time for Barnaby—even when they'd both lost their wives, and were falling apart from within, they still barely spoke. Barnaby was weak, had always been. So the two fathers brought up their children separately, sunk in isolation, even as the kids grew closer.

Janet takes pleasure in reminding him of the many ways in which he has failed them. She drops these into conversation like amusing anecdotes: the time Henry, aged seven, refused to eat his dinner, and Jason smashed his bowl of soup on the floor. The time Jason forgot to come to Janet's graduation ceremony, as a result of which she has no photographs of herself. The time he beat them both for going into his room without permission. She still has the scars.

His daughter is an unknown quantity to him. She is a good mother—at least her sons have turned out well—but she seems as closed to him as she is to the world. Implacable, armour-plated, so sleek and single-minded that she appears to have no weak points. Quite often, when he hears her crisp footsteps approach the ward,

his initial reaction is claustrophobic fear. When did this happen? Surely it used to be the other way round.

Henry, his son, has been in London for decades, and seldom comes back to Singapore. It would have been easy enough for Jason to get on a plane—especially with all these cheap flights now—but something about his sense of the fitness of things made him feel it was Henry's duty to come back here, to his home, and not for others to go to him. What if Jason had gone, and been unwanted?

He allows himself to regret this. It would have been nice, at least, to know how Henry lives. His son has transformed himself, now has the patched tweed jacket and clipped accent of an English academic—he's a professor of history at one of the less exciting London colleges. How is it possible to escape your origins so utterly? Henry has a flat in Bayswater, something he vaguely imagines from the few British novels he has read to be poky, damp, and smelling of cabbage. Janet has been to London a couple of times but never says much, apart from hinting darkly that she's surprised the English did not succumb to cholera generations ago.

Large areas of his son's life are not open to him. Why has he never married or had children? Jason never asked. He hopes his son isn't damaged, afraid any woman he married would abandon him like the mother he has no memory of. Of course, Jason himself has never remarried, and couldn't tell you why either. He and Henry have simply never talked about any of this, never talked about anything that mattered.

They do speak—Janet bought him a mobile phone and calling card, and he can now talk to his son in London for surprisingly little money. He's distrustful of this, mindful of the days when an international phone call meant weeks of low-level anxiety until the phone bill arrived. His youngest grandson frequently tries to

persuade him that it would be free to call the UK over the Internet, but he doesn't see how that could possibly work, and in any case doesn't own a computer.

Calls start the same way—hellos and how-are-yous, then awkward silence. "How's your health?" Henry asks.

"Terrible," he replies—he truly doesn't want to discuss his ailments, neither interesting nor fixable. Instead, he asks about Henry's work. *How are the students?*

"It's not just teaching that I do," says Henry wearily, as if he has rehearsed this argument before. Perhaps he has; Jason's porous memory forces repeats of entire conversations.

"I know. You have to do the admin as well. So does Janet, you know. In fact, the other day she told me she had a meeting that went on the whole afternoon." As he speaks, he remembers that Janet hasn't taught for at least a decade.

"I do research, I publish papers—I'm an associate professor. Dad, it's not just about face time with the students. We have postgrad monkeys to run the tutorial circus. I'm an academic." Henry, he can tell, is getting frustrated and annoyed, which in turn makes him sound like a teenager. His voice grows strangled, as if he is only a hair's breadth away from snapping at his father. He wonders how his son deals with his students, who are probably much less well-behaved these days.

"Are you going to write a book?"

"I've written a book. Three. I sent you copies."

"They're somewhere in the flat. But I don't mean some textbook. A real book. Something normal people will read."

"Dad—" Again, that clenched-throat noise. It can't be healthy.

"I saw on the news that your students are rioting," he says, trying to change the subject.

"They seem to do it every year. There's always something, some

war or government policy to be unhappy about. Too much free time.” Henry has always been distinctly antipathetic to any kind of political agenda. Perhaps his long view of history has given him a sense of nothing ever changing, not really, and therefore the best thing being to keep your head down and get on with the things in front of you. Jason can sympathise with this.

They are then able to discuss some of the stories on the news with reasonable civility. Henry complains about the folly of Brexit, a country cutting itself off from the world, and his father points out that Singapore did the same, albeit not voluntarily, but no one could argue with the results. Henry tries to explain that the circumstances were completely different, the populace in Singapore didn’t get a real vote, but Jason is already drifting off. It was all so long ago, he’s bored of it all. So much history, especially with the 50th anniversary of independence just recently. Everyone wallowing in it—all over the TV and papers, even in the streets. Why? Bad enough living through it the first time round.

Jason feels almost tender towards his son during these conversations. For all that it seems impossible to say anything without one or the other of them being offended, this at least feels more bearable than the brittle politeness he suffers with Janet. The difference in time zones doesn’t help the patchiness of their conversations. When Henry answers the phone with “good morning,” he takes weak pleasure in answering “afternoon.”

“When are you coming to see me?” Jason now says, his voice querulous.

“It’s not very long till the end of term, maybe then?” *Maybe*. “I’ve had a look at tickets, they’re quite pricey.”

“Of course they are, everyone knows it’s expensive to fly in the summer. You should have booked your flight sooner.”

“I didn’t know you were going to fall ill,” says Henry quite

reasonably. “And it’s term time.”

“Let me know when you’ve fixed a date.”

“Of course. I’ve got to go now. I’ll see you soon.”

“You should come now. I might die.”

“I have responsibilities. You’ll just have to hang on.”



Siew Li and Mollie appear to him at different ages. Mollie sometimes comes as a little girl, demanding a leg-up onto the rambutan tree in their back garden. Siew Li was in her teens when they met, and not a great deal older when she left—still, each new glimpse startles him with how different she has become. Siew Li in her Nanyang Girls’ uniform, Siew Li as a bride, then with her babies, and much later in that other uniform, when—

He knows they are not in the room with him, not really: his faculties aren’t quite that gone yet. But when the alternatives are the clammy dark, the coughs and moans of his fellow inmates, he can’t resist giving in to them. Mollie’s cool hands on his temples, Siew Li arranging his pillows the way he likes them, folded over to support his neck. Let them be here. Let the dead return.

There was a while, early on in their relationship, when he thought he’d lost Siew Li for good. They’d only recently met, which was the worst feeling, the fear that he’d found this precious thing and it was being snatched away. She was detained indefinitely—no indication at all if she’d ever be released. It wasn’t fair, a girl of fifteen with everything still to come. *But that’s you too*, said his friends, *you’re young, move on*. He couldn’t. So he kept visiting.

He’d thought this would be the hardest time of his life, not having her with him, not even being able to see her regularly once he started national service. He didn’t tell his parents, just

Mollie, who was sympathetic and kept his secret, for which he was grateful, even if her main emotion was amusement that her staid older brother was finally in love. It was even a bit exciting for her that his crush was an outlaw girl, one of the dangerous elements the government said were destabilising the country.

He'd never believed that, although he could see the establishment doing great things for the nation, and trusted them to know best. Still, he knew Siew Li—or was at least getting to know her—and she didn't want to blow anything up. The strikes she'd help organise were necessary, she said, because how else were the workers to get their voices heard? The stories she told him were horrific. He had no idea, in his clean, light-filled existence, just how most people lived. It was true, he supposed, and yet he could also see this was no way forward, paralysing the country with violence in the streets. They were both children of the 1940s, and their first memories were of the occupation. Why have yet another warzone, just a decade later?

And yet, she fascinated him. He wanted to know more, not just about her, but about everything. Even at that age, he was aware the world only made sense if he looked away from most of it. At school, history was a straightforward pageant of progress with a few unfortunate aberrations. But then there was Siew Li, who called his parents capitalists as if that were a bad thing, who looked down on their successful business precisely because of its success. Why should so many people be working, but only they get rich? He had no answer for her. But he wanted to find out.

His curiosity was how they had met in the first place. The newspapers had been full of this riot at the bus company, and on the radio it sounded like an apocalypse. This had been going on for a while, Chinese middle school students joining forces with labour unions to hold the country hostage. He thought it was important to

see this historical moment for himself—though, if he was honest, he just found it exciting—but anyway there he was, on Alexandra Road, the heat and energy of the protest searing through the order of his life. And there she was, a man's handkerchief folded double and slung rakishly across her face, like she was a bandit. A banner in her hands—Marianne, brandishing a flag. On impulse he said hello.

She lifted the fabric from her face and he saw her firm jaw, her small teeth. He tried to talk to her in halting Chinese, until she took pity on him and they switched to English, which she clearly wasn't fluent in, but somehow managed to make expressively her own. He felt a flicker of shame, and wondered why. Amongst his peers, it was a source of pride not to speak Chinese, a foreign language. English was the future. His friends mocked the Chinese school students, still clinging to the language of the old country, talking about "going back" to China when they'd been born here, listening to Yao Lee instead of Perry Como. And here he was, listening patiently as she explained the banner she was holding. "*Gaicao huandai*. Haven't you heard this before? It means change the time and, what do you call it, the Emperor."

"We don't have an Emperor."

"You know what I mean. The *zhimin*."

"The what?"

"The ang moh. Those people."

"The British? You mean the government?"

"Yes, government." She pronounced it *gabmen*. "We need change."

"Isn't this protest about bus workers unions?"

"How can you just change one thing? Everything is not working."

They kept going for a while, him tossing statistics and facts

PHOTO BY: OLIVER ROCKWELL



ABOUT THE
AUTHOR

Jeremy Tiang is a writer and translator. His short story collection, *It Never Rains on National Day* (Epigram Books, 2015) was shortlisted for the 2016 Singapore Literature Prize. He has translated more than ten books from the Chinese, including novels by Chan Ho-Kei, Zhang Yueran, Yeng Pway Ngon and Su Wei-chen. He won the Golden Point Award for Fiction in 2009, and has received an NEA Literary Translation Fellowship, a PEN/Heim Translation Grant, and a People's Literature Award Mao-Tai Cup. He also writes and translates plays, and currently lives in Brooklyn.



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FINALIST FOR THE 2016
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Siew Li leaves her husband and children in Tiong Bahru to fight for freedom in the jungles of Malaya. Years later, a Malaysian journalist returns to her homeland to uncover the truth of a massacre committed during the Emergency. And in Singapore, Siew Li's niece Stella finds herself accused of being a Marxist conspirator.

Jeremy Tiang's debut novel dives into the tumultuous days of leftist movements and political detentions in Singapore and Malaysia. It follows an extended family from the 1940s to the present day as they navigate the choppy political currents of the region. What happens when the things that divide us also bind us together?

“A superbly structured piece of work. The sweep of the dramatic narrative is impressive, with just the right dose of intrigue and mystery.”

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ISBN-13: 978-9811700927



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