



A Life in Words:  
My Writing Journey

# YOU JIN

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# A LIFE IN WORDS

MY WRITING JOURNEY

TRANSLATED BY SHELLY BRYANT



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Part One

## CHAPTER 1

## My Parents Meet

## Hero of the Resistance

IN 1940, MY father, Tham Sien Yen, flew to Chongqing and underwent strict military training to take up arms against the cruel, fierce Japanese, in response to the Nanjing Massacre during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Five years later, my brave, resourceful father had fought in numerous battle zones.

In February 1942, Malaya was steadily subjected to the Japanese offensive and ultimately brutally occupied. The people were plunged into the most abysmal suffering for a period of three years and eight months. My father and ten other members of the military academy, under the command of resistance fighter Lim Bo Seng, flew from Chongqing to India to work with the British government to organise resistance forces that would enter Malaya and gather intelligence from behind the enemy lines. This unit was the famed Force 136.

After my father and his troops reached Calcutta, they were sent to a dangerous mountainous region for training. More than a thousand feet above sea level, temperatures were scorching during the day and freezing at night. There was not an inch of vegetation, or a trace of human life. In this harsh environment, they carried out the most arduous training. They knew neither

morning nor night as they scaled mountains and crossed chasms, learning all sorts of special battle tactics. Sometimes they sailed to distant places and were left with just a map and a compass and told to survey the military situation in the region. Other times, they infiltrated Bombay or other cities to spy. In this way, whether in mountains, jungle, sea or city, they were thoroughly trained.

From India, the troops took a submarine to Colombo in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and from there crossed the Indian Ocean to the Malayan jungle. After disembarking, my father established a liaison with Chen Ping and set up a base at Meiluo Mountain.

At first, my father's main responsibility was to help Force 136 communicate with the local people in Malaya, forging a cooperative effort in the resistance against Japan. Later, his role was to establish a stricter chain of command so that the troops could be more disciplined and soldierly, and also to train them in firing live ammunition in order to increase their military capabilities.

My father succeeded as a go-between for ground troops and Indian headquarters, ensuring that headquarters always issued weapons, food and daily supplies. Gradually, they gained more recruits, and the abilities of the troops increased as well. In 1945, just when the combined resistance forces were about to attack Malaya, the Japanese announced their surrender.

After the war, my father took his wealth of experience and his innate writing talent and wrote a ten-thousand-word report entitled *Reflecting on the Resistance in Malaya*. When I was a young adult, I took delight in reading this work over and over. It was my first contact with a true historical record. His account is rational, offering accurate details full of feeling; many of the heroes of the resistance come to life again in my father's writing. In his public conduct, he

was unassuming and dependable, both in word and thought; his writings mirror his person. Because his writing is so honest and open, it is especially moving.

For instance, the details in passages such as this absorbed my younger self:

*Living deep in the jungle, food is not easy to come by, so we must scavenge to supplement our meals. We take it in shifts for several hours each day to go to the neighbouring fields and dig up tapioca roots to stave off the hunger. In the mountains, there is a sort of lettuce that has a foul smell and a bitter flavour. The first time we tried it, we had to hold our noses just to get it down. Later we ate it often, but it was still hard to get it down without gagging.*

*There is one other food that is readily available, and that's bamboo. It grows wild in the jungle, and not only are the shoots edible, even the bamboo tips of two or three feet can be used for food, as long as it has not yet grown branches, though it is difficult to harvest. When the tree is shaken vigorously, the tip will break off and shoot like an arrow plunging into the earth. If you don't dodge it quickly, it's likely to kill you. After peeling off layers of hard shell, pieces of white flesh are left. Soaking these in boiling water for ten minutes will take away the bitterness. When fried with shrimp paste, the taste is not bad.*

*There are also lemon trees, about twelve or fifteen metres tall, which have a tender twig that can be eaten. The tree is full of thorns, and its bark is quite hard. When you try to chop it down, it echoes sonorously, its vibrations making the hands ache. After that, we still have to expend a lot of effort to remove the branches and leaves, in order to get to the tender core. They taste very good when cooked with curry powder.*

*There are also bamboo rats in the jungle, weighing about a pound*

*and with tails half a metre long. They are the favourite food of the local tribes. The local people will set grains of corn in the corner of the house, then wait quietly on one side. As soon as they see a shadow, they throw a spear. They never miss. They roast the whole animal, fur and all, over the fire, then carefully scrape the fur off, and cut open the rat's stomach. Using their fingers, they pluck out the innards and pop them into the mouth. Seeing this, we were openly repulsed. They dried the tails, then twined them around their upper arms, saying it would keep the evil spirits away.*

To me, who had not yet seen the world, this sort of life was as exciting as *The Arabian Nights*. When I got older and read my father's writing again, what moved me was the moral force running through the work.

The memoir reports that Lim Bo Seng took great risks to go into the city and collect emergency funds. Setting out in the evening, he left my father in charge. Every time I read the section about their late-night conversation, I gain a deeper understanding. He writes:

*It was late, and our comrades were all asleep. Lim Bo Seng and I were still sitting up, talking. He said, "If we can complete our duties honourably, I still have one more dream to achieve in peacetime. I want to organise our comrades and start a work project together, a professional network. We can all work together like a big family, and do justice to the hardships we've been through together."*

*Saying this, he picked up a piece of wood and tossed it into the fire, making the flames glow red. As the fire flared, sparks danced upward. He rubbed his hands together and continued with passion and optimism, "Gaining profits, besides improving one's own life and bringing*

*in a bit more money, is for the purpose of improving society. We should set up various charities so that we can build up our country and serve society. That will be a peaceful, meaningful life."*

*As I listened, I became intoxicated with this vision of the future, my mind taken up with the idea of this beautiful scene. People would feel no more dread or hatred, each doing what she or he could, and each receiving what he or she needed. It would be a beautiful world.*

After joining the resistance, what made my father suffer most was that his family was under constant surveillance by the enemy. Hoping to locate some trace of my father, Japanese soldiers arrested his second brother and imprisoned him, torturing him cruelly to force a confession. Because his brother's knowledge was limited, the soldiers could force nothing out of him, so they took him out to a bridge over Ipoh's Anshun River to behead him. There were about twenty people lined up for execution. When each of the other victims was executed, my uncle was so startled that he turned to watch. Furious, a Japanese soldier kicked him, knocking him off the bridge and into the river. When he went under water, the soldier fired his gun but, fortunately, missed his target. My uncle was wearing a jacket and when the water flooded over him, it became inflated and the ropes around his wrists came loose. He swam to the bank, retreated to a small, secluded place and, under an assumed identity, stayed there and farmed until peacetime.

Having gone through the baptism of war, my father knew exactly what sort of scourge war is. Because of this, when he was teaching his children in later years, there was one point he was very explicit about—he wanted us to grow up placing a great importance

on moral character. He wanted us to be strong and disciplined, upright and frank. He wanted us to be considerate of others, to give proper attention to our personal matters, and to take an interest in the affairs of the nation.

### A Lifetime of Love and Hate

My maternal grandfather, Tan Tock Hong, left China's Fujian province when he was thirteen, heading south to work as a rubber tapper. He was clever and eager to learn. When he was not hard at work, he read books and newspapers diligently, and was very studious in learning languages. His mind was razor-sharp, honed through continual use. His knowledge snowballed, growing steadily as he matured. Relying on tireless self-study, he went from being an illiterate youth to an educated young man who excelled in life. His work ethic won the approval of his superiors. From life as an unassuming rubber tapper, he improved his prospects until, at the age of twenty-two, he became the Chen Jiageng Company's chief foreman. After that, he started his own rubber business, and eventually he was voted president of the Perak Rubber Association.

Despite his great wealth, my grandfather did not neglect the importance of education. What was rare was that he was not only proficient in the Chinese classics, but had also mastered the English language. His written English was quite fluent, and he thoroughly mastered written Chinese. His exquisite calligraphy was powerful and unforgettable. He read widely, including works of literature, science, medicine, ancient and modern fables, and current events in China and abroad. In the eyes of his family, he was a walking

encyclopaedia. There were always many books at home, arranged tidily throughout the entire house.

When Malaya was occupied by Japan, horrifying rumours flew all about. One persistent rumour was: "If they don't destroy a man, they'll destroy his books; if they don't destroy the books, they'll destroy the man." Every family that had hidden books would be exterminated on the spot. Once my grandfather weighed the options, he painfully took each book and laid them one by one in the fire he had lit in the garden. While each page burned in the flames, my grandfather's eyes filled with tears of indignation and remorse. This story still makes me gnash my teeth.

My maternal grandfather was a handsome man, with a refined, scholarly air. He was tall, with broad shoulders, a straight back and long legs. He listened attentively while others spoke, his bright eyes exuding a tenderness that melted the heart. Because his nose was high and sharp, many people said he looked like he was of mixed race. With his cultivated manner and tendency to always find just the right thing to say, he presented himself as an elegant gentleman.

My grandmother, Pan Jun'e, was his first wife. The two were what is often termed "a perfect match".

Objectively speaking, my grandmother was not beautiful. Her eyes were not big nor her nose high, and her features generally not well-defined. But when she smiled, her eyes were like the charming crescent moon, and her cherry-red lips turned up in a beautiful, fluid curve.

My grandmother was, just like my grandfather, a real bibliophile. Raised in an era when convention said that education was wasted on a girl, my grandmother did not have a chance to go to school. When she reached marriageable age, the matchmaker

married her to an extraordinary man, and she plunged herself wholeheartedly into supporting him and raising their children. But she was not complacent. She worked hard to improve herself, expending sweat, tears, and energy to study. While other wealthy wives spent their time calling on friends and playing mahjong, she buried herself in books, learning all the good things in life from what she read. She read *Dream of the Red Mansion* over and over with great delight, so that the names of the book's many characters were always on the tip of her tongue. I was often sick when I was small, and often full of anxiety. At such times, she would playfully call me "Little Lin Daiyu". One of my relatives was quite a smooth talker, always quick to make friends with people. My grandmother called her "Xue Baochai". Another was snobbish and glib, so Grandmother would purse her lips and refer to that relative as "Wang Xifeng". Under the gradual tutelage of great works of literature, her thinking became quick and agile. Even her most mundane conversations were seasoned with idioms. She did not write much, but those few articles she published are all of good quality.

To my grandmother, my grandfather was her whole world. Every night she prepared his herbal tonics of ginseng and cordyceps, serving him herself, even though there were plenty of servants in the house. She cooked for him with her own hands, lovingly ladling his meal into a bowl and serving it to him.

My grandmother was a woman with an independent mind and a strong personality, but if my grandfather said just one time that he wanted her to stand, she would not sit down. She felt a reverential love for him. It was because she loved him so deeply and completely that when she found out about his affair, it was like

a thousand daggers stabbing so far into her heart that they could never be extracted again.

It was only after I was married and had a family of my own that I really understood. That deep love my grandmother had felt for my grandfather was engraved on her bones, and it gnawed at her insides. If her love had not been so deep, her hatred would not have been so passionately felt, nor held for so long.

My grandfather's lover was a clerk from his office, a woman with fine, delicate features. She had large eyes and large dimples. Her lot in life incited sympathy; when she was only three, her mother died and, after her father remarried, the younger siblings came one after the other until there were seven of them. Later, the family business failed and, being the oldest daughter, she had to quit school and work to support the household.

When she met my grandfather, she was not yet twenty years old. When my grandmother heard about her difficult home life, she felt great tenderness and so took her under her wing, treating her like her own younger sister. She would often invite her over for a sumptuous afternoon tea. In this way, there were many opportunities for my grandfather and her to be in contact.

My grandfather was in the prime of his life, and was exceptionally good-looking. It started with flirtatious looks, a sort of silent communication that spoke volumes. But in all that was communicated, there was really only one message. By this time, my grandmother's mother had got an inkling of what was happening and warned my grandmother, "Those two are always looking at each other. You need to wise up. Don't be left in the dark about this. Someone's going to get hurt. You've got to look out for yourself. You really shouldn't invite her to the house anymore."

My stubborn, confident grandmother shook off these comments, retorting, “Mother, I treat her like a little sister, so how could she stab me in the back like that? And anyway, Tong Hock wouldn’t be interested in her. Don’t say such things so carelessly. Don’t look for faults, or you’ll be sure to find them.”

“If you don’t listen to your elders, it’s your own loss.” My great-grandmother’s face darkened. “If you carry on like this, you will surely regret it.”

Eventually, it was carelessness that was their undoing. When the tiny thread of love in the couples’ eyes had grown thicker, deeper and longer, grandmother came to see the truth, despite her great trust.

One day, that woman was again invited to the house for afternoon tea. My grandmother excused herself and went upstairs. Then she peeped through a crack in the wooden floorboards.

At first, the two kept a proper distance, chatting idly. But while they talked, the pair was drawn together as if by some all-powerful force. Then, my grandfather, seemingly deeply agitated, took a square of folded paper from his trousers pocket and gave it to her.

My grandmother flew down like an arrow, made swift by her wrath. When she reached the pair, my grandfather had no room to ponder his next words or actions. He gasped, then closed his mouth tightly and said nothing. Caught red-handed, he took the paper and all the romantic poetry it contained, popped it into his mouth and swallowed it. As the old Chinese saying goes, “When the belly is full of poetry, the breath will naturally be sweet.” My grandfather’s speech had always been seasoned with the classics, and now he’d literally eaten his words—a whole page full of them.

Despite the lack of physical evidence, my grandmother kept score in her heart. After this, the woman was not allowed to so

much as set foot in my grandmother’s house again. Before long, she resigned from my grandfather’s company, and it was as if she completely vanished into thin air.

My grandmother thought that her nemesis had been expelled. She did not suspect that my grandfather and that woman had resorted to a more clandestine affair, not letting a soul know what was going on. My grandfather left for work every day, and returned home punctually every evening. He was a model husband.

By the time my grandfather’s continuing extramarital affair came to light, he had already had several children with that woman. Even if my grandmother had had the Monkey King’s legendary cudgel in hand, she would not have been able to break them apart.

During this time, my grandmother suffered pain, like a knife stabbing her heart over and over. The pain of betrayal enraged her. She found the house in which my grandfather kept his mistress and descended upon it with a group of her female friends. Going into the house, they took every movable object and destroyed them. As for the person in the house, she was grabbed and beaten. They beat her until she was bruised all over. But no matter how my grandmother beat her, that woman never let out a sound and never retaliated, because she knew how much she had wronged my grandmother. It was said that she moved house several times, and my grandmother wrecked her house as many times, allowing her family no peace and making them live in constant fear.

After many years, my elderly grandfather developed a heart condition. One day, he was hospitalised due to a heart attack, and that woman bravely went with her eldest daughter to visit my grandmother. Tearfully, she begged my grandmother to forgive her. By this time, neither was young. It was uncertain whether

my grandfather would pull through so, in the face of his dark misfortune, these two women, who had been the most important people in his life, shook hands and made up. If she did not forgive the other woman, my grandfather, hanging on by a thread, would not have the peace of mind to recover. On the surface, it looked like my grandmother bore enough hatred toward my grandfather to last for thousands of years, but it was equally clear that there was a good place inside her, and her love for my grandfather was still enshrined there. Now, in this difficult time, she weighed one fact against the other and, finally, nodded her assent.

From that day on, we had to start respectfully calling this woman Er Zumu, meaning “Second Grandmother”. My grandmother and Er Zumu had five children each, ten altogether. There were six boys and four girls. My mother was born of the legal wife, and was second oldest in her family.

### Cracking a Gem with Sincerity

Everyone said that my mother, Tan Toh Yen, was pretty. Aside from her delicate features, what was most attractive about her was her effortless grace and confident disposition, a temperament shaped by her time spent reading.

When she was born, my grandfather named her Toh Yen, meaning happy and carefree. His greatest hope for her was that she would be a happy woman, always pleased with life when she grew up, and she did not disappoint him. When life was easy, it was like she was laughing on a bed of roses. When things were more difficult, she walked a narrow path through the brambles, a smile on her face.

Before she married, having been raised wealthy, Mother seemed

to have even the wind and rain at her beck and call. In that age when conventional wisdom said that “a woman’s virtue is to have no talent”, my mother picked up her books and went to school. There was one incident that emphasised her personality and that she took special delight in discussing.

One day when she was in maths class during Secondary 1, her good friend, who was sitting beside her, had not completed her homework. This offended the teacher, who proceeded to scold the girl fiercely. My mother listened to the tirade until she could stand it no more. She stood up and faced the teacher, saying deliberately, “What are you going on for? *My mother is a hundred times more capable than you*, and even she doesn’t go on like this.”

The teacher was shocked into momentary silence. When what my mother had said sank in, she did not get angry, but laughed instead. The whole situation was quickly defused. My mother’s comment spread quickly around the school and soon became a “famous saying” that made everyone laugh.

My mother was as unfettered as a bird. In her free time after school, she would wear the clothes she liked and ride bicycles with her friends. From a distance, they looked like a ball of green light, pursued with great interest by a group of boys, although my mother never encouraged them. Sometimes, she was the embodiment of a fish in water. As soon as she came into contact with water, it became obedient to her. When she was bobbing along in the current, one would believe she had been born in the water. My mother was quick as a hare, but quiet as a kitten. When she did not go out, she would be lost in the pages of a novel. When she was not reading a book, she took interest in music, her long, thin fingers on the keys producing a flowing melody.

These happy, idyllic days came to an end in February 1942, when Malaya was invaded. Then, after three years and eight months, when the horror ended, she stumbled across someone hailed as a hero of the War of Resistance: my father.

After the war ended in 1945, Tham Sien Yen, an officer who had devoted his life to the Resistance, came down from Meluo Mountain. When he reached Ipoh, he paid a visit to the renowned community leader and head of the Perak Rubber Tree Association, Tan Tock Hong. When Tan Tock Hong learnt that the uniformed man with such a commanding presence was the leader of the much talked about Force 136, he welcomed him with the greatest hospitality. Outside the house, a crowd of neighbours had gathered, whispering and gesturing. As the two of them sat in the living room chatting, a pretty figure at the back of the room caught Lieutenant Tan's eye and distracted him. It was the oldest daughter of the Tan family, Tan Toh Yen. The young couple's eyes met. The girl was beautiful, dignified, and stylish, while the boy was strong, heroic, and full of vigour. In that instant, Cupid aimed his arrow at the couple.

In later years, every time my mother recalled those tender days, she said with a smile, "He visited every night, supposedly to chat with my father so he could gain some understanding of the situation in Ipoh. Each time he came, he would sit for several hours, and eventually everyone figured out that his visits had nothing to do with his interest in Ipoh's situation."

Finally, after much effort, his sincerity paid off. On 13 July 1947, the couple who had fallen in love at first sight were married before a gathering of four or five hundred relatives, friends and associates. The newspaper announcement went on at great length about the event.

After they were married, my mother, who had been pampered all her life, was faced with severe trials. Once they had settled down to family life, my father's first job was in mining for mineral resources. Ipoh was an important city in Malaya, rich in tin ore. My father and a friend invested in a plot of land and started mining for tin. They were inexperienced and unlucky. There was only a pitiable amount of tin on that property and, after the whole plot had been thoroughly worked over, they found that all their work had been for nothing. It was a huge loss of capital.



## About the Author

YOU JIN has published more than 150 books in Chinese in Singapore, Taiwan, China, Hong Kong and Malaysia. These include novels, short story collections, travelogues and essays. She is the first recipient of both the Singapore Chinese Literary Award and the Montblanc-NUS Centre for the Arts Literary Award. She received the Zhong Shan Literary Award in 2010 and Singapore's Cultural Medallion in 2009.

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SHELLY BRYANT divides her time between Shanghai and Singapore, working as a poet, writer, and translator. She is the author of seven volumes of poetry, a pair of travel guides for the cities of Suzhou and Shanghai, and a book on classical Chinese gardens. Shelly's poetry has appeared in journals, magazines and websites around the world, as well as in several art exhibitions. Her translation of Sheng Keyi's *Northern Girls* was longlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2012.

写这部书时，我已进入了“宠辱不惊”的哀留漫云”中时过梦想斑蝶，渐远渐。万事淡地眼可却楚道有，一至，渝的，字。它与宛若

“

*Writing has magical powers. It is delicate and beautiful, each character wriggling with life, powerfully controlling others' emotions, sensory pleasures and feelings.*

*I treat text like a mysterious treasure, cherishing it like a miser. It is in my heart, my mind, my blood and my soul. I always hear it forever calling to me, and I must answer it with gentle affection.*

*I touch it, feel it, read it, write it, and am entangled in it for 365 days a year.*

*Text is not part of my life. It is my life.*

*This book is not a character study. It is a love story.*

”

— You Jin

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