

## **Differentiating the Imperial and the Colonial in Southeast Asian Literature in English: *The Redundancy of Courage* and *The Gift of Rain***

*Reed Way Dasenbrock*

### **Introduction**

There would of course be no post-colonial literature in European languages if there had been no European colonialism in the first place. Post-colonial literature stands in a close relationship – often sympathetic, though sometimes agonistic – to the literature of the European colonial power, but the point of origin for much of the literature is a relationship of antagonism – indeed, explicit opposition – to the fact of European colonial power. It is not always remembered that ‘post-colonial literature’ begins in the colonial period, and many of the classics of post-colonial literature date from the colonial period or were written in the immediate aftermath of the anti-colonial struggle. Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938), R.K. Narayan’s *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964), Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Weep not, Child* (1964) and *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) – these are only a few instances of this classic pattern.

One of the enduring themes of post-colonial literature therefore is to present the projection of power – particularly the domination of one people by another – as essentially European, as a function of European colonialism. And colonialism – the domination of these non-European countries by Europe – is seen as essentially coterminous with Imperialism, the formal domination of one nation by another state. The dichotomy is thus structured in this way: colonizer/colonized; European/non-European. This fundamental dichotomy can survive the disillusionment with much of what happens inside newly decolonized countries after independence, i.e. there may be internal oppressors as well as external, but the notion that the Imperial is nonetheless the European can and does survive this moment or indeed process of disillusionment. If one reads the classics of postcolonial literature, the inference one is likely to draw is that the act of colonization itself comes from and can be attributed to the West, to European powers, and resistance to imperialism is to be aligned with the celebration of the local, the indigenous, the culture and people and sometimes polity that was therefore before colonialism.

There may be parts of the world where this works fairly well as an explanatory category, but there aren’t very many of them, and nowhere in Southeast Asia does it work very well. The focus of this paper is two Southeast Asian novels written

in English, which question and seek to move us beyond this fundamental cast of mind, Timothy Mo's *The Redundancy of Courage* (1991) and Tan Twan Eng's *The Gift of Rain* (2007). Neither novel is particularly well-known in post-colonial circles (post-colonial studies tend to promote works that support its fundamental orientation rather than question it), but they deserve to be much better known than they are. I would not assert any influence of the one on the other—this is not a study of literary influence; my point is rather to draw out fundamental underlying similarities that indicate some larger themes worth consideration.

*The Redundancy of Courage* (we will concern ourselves with the title a little later) is set in a lightly fictionalized version of East Timor, Danu, and tells the story of the invasion of Danu by an even more lightly fictionalized version of Indonesia (the invaders are called the *malais*). What suggests that the novel will not comfortably accept the dichotomy I have already introduced is that it is not narrated from the perspective of one of the Danuese, at least not a fully representative Danuese. The narrator is Adolph Ng, a Chinese Canadian-educated hotelier. But who is to say that he is not Danuese?<sup>1</sup> For he too was born in Danu, and this is indeed his home. Due to his education, he becomes close to the small group of educated idealists who win the first election after independence from 'the Mother Country,' and who lead the resistance and finally the guerilla movement after the *malais* invade. But he is distinct from them in at least three respects. First, in a strongly homophobic environment, he is openly homosexual. Second, as a member of the large diaspora of Chinese in Southeast Asia, he is part of a community which has played a decisive role in the commerce of the region and is therefore part of a group which is economically – even if not politically – dominant<sup>2</sup> whereas the others are part of the Portuguese-Danuese mestizo continuum far more characteristic of Spanish and Portuguese colonialism than of French or British. Finally, the resistance leaders were educated primarily in Portugal or else served in the Portuguese army, so Portuguese is their intellectual language even if not their mother tongue, while he was educated in English. All three establish his outsider status in the novel, although two of them link him to the author, who is of Hong Kong Chinese origin and was educated in Britain, and whose English-speaking status positions him – both inside the world of the novel and in his role as narrator vis-à-vis the reader – as an interlocutor between the world depicted in the novel and the audience of Mo's fiction.

However, the course of the novel rejects any characterization of Ng as inauthentic or not Danuese. He helps the revolutionaries in their early heroic phase and then joins them and fights with the guerilla army, learning how to make what we now know as IEDs (Improvised Explosive Devices) which prove remarkably effective against the invaders. The narrative of the guerilla war, the middle section of the novel, is gripping, and the reader is inevitably pulled into identifying with Ng's evolution into a fighter and hoping that the Danuese will, against all odds, win

militarily over the *malais*. Ng's evolution in this period is one of assimilation into the Danuese community, as the barriers of sexuality, class, ethnicity, and language, which had seemed so important in the city at the beginning of the novel crumble in the face of the solidarity of the guerrilla fighters in their struggle against the invaders.<sup>3</sup>

It must be this part of the novel that led Tariq Ali, himself a gifted novelist, to call *The Redundancy of Courage* "a deeper and more satisfying work than *For Whom the Bell Tolls*," (as quoted on the back cover). But Mo is gifted at sending yet modulating generic signals, and he isn't really writing the post-colonial version of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* that the far more politically engaged Tariq Ali would probably like him to have written. The title alone suggests that we are in a more complex landscape than the last paragraph suggests. Courage is what the Robert Jordans of the world live on: what on earth is or could be redundant about courage in a heroic context? It cannot be the fact that the guerilla movement faltered and the *malais* began to eliminate the active resistance to their occupation. There is nothing unheroic about defeat: from the fate of the Trojans and *The Song of Roland* to *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and beyond, defeat is more heroic than victory because the defeated can be purer and do not have to make the necessary compromises of the victor. But Ng does not die in battle like so many of his friends and colleagues; instead, his career as a revolutionary hero is cut short when he is captured, and after his capture he ignominiously becomes a servant to a *malai* family who are part of the invading force. As Danu becomes more pacified, army officers are being encouraged to bring their families to live, so Adolph looks after Mrs. Goreng and later their son Kaptan while Colonel Goreng is busy stamping out the remnants of the insurgency. (There are various linguistic jokes going on here, as *goreng* means fried in Malay and Kaptan is close to *kapitan* or captain.) Ng's trajectory reflects that of Danu itself, moving from an initial sullen response to the invasion to armed struggle against it to a more complex mixture of pacification and acceptance. In the complex final action of the novel, the few remaining guerillas enter the capital city, taking Adolph and Kaptan hostage. Adolph tries not to take sides, wishing neither to betray his former comrades nor allow them to harm his charge. The raid is a disaster, and Ng saves Kaptan's life by killing the leader of the raid, although it is unclear if this is a conscious change of allegiance or simply the only way he saw to survive this situation since the guerillas were trapped and were not going to escape.

One of the points being made here is that this was not a war that was winnable, in the conventional sense: the force that the *malais* could bring to the theatre of war, with their total command of the sea and the air, with extensive American support, with the power that a large nation can bring to the domination of a small one, meant that a play of force had only one possible end. The revolutionaries always knew that at one level, so their strategy was precisely that of heroically losing but in a way that turned defeat into victory. Everyone knows the story of Alexander

weeping after one of his victories and wishing he were Hector, because he had no Homer to transmit his fame. Defeat can become victory if defeat becomes amplified through cultural transmission. Alexander's concern was transmission across time; the revolutionaries are more concerned with transmission across space, with the urgent task of communicating to the rest of the world what is happening on Danu.

This is one reason why they cultivated the English-speaking Adolph from the start: his skills as a bomber came as a complete surprise. One of the themes throughout the novel is the importance of media coverage both for the success of the revolution and for the success of the invasion and pacification. The revolutionaries knew that they could not win a war of force, for tiny Danu with no trained army and no modern weapons, could not stand up to the superior force of the *malais*. Nor is an island—even a tropical island with jungles—a very good place for a guerilla war since there is no place to go to. So their only hope from the start was to win the war for international public opinion—along the lines of the rebels today involved in the ‘Arab Spring’. So they do what they can to keep and influence foreign journalists until one is killed in the invasion—an episode based on actual events during the invasion—and they also do what they can to send envoys overseas to stimulate foreign concern. Later, as pacification gains sway, the *malais* do what they can to win this war of international opinion by bringing in foreign journalists who they hope will present their side of the story. As Ng says at the end of the novel, “you shout loudest into the Anglophone” (400). Although the journalists the *malais* bring in prove a little less tractable than they had hoped, nonetheless, the Danuese do not by the end of the novel prove to have won the war for international public opinion, a fact brought out by a letter Adolph receives from his Canadian former girlfriend who says that he “must be glad that the terrorists have gone away” (400).

The end of the novel moves away from the conflict at the centre of the novel to the theme of how the conflict is read and interpreted in the outside world. Adolph's reward for saving the Colonel's son in essence is to be freed, and after some bribes he is sent overseas, away from Danu. A possible new ending to the novel is set in motion by this theme: if Adolph isn't going to die a heroic revolutionary death, perhaps he can join the remnants of the Fakoum movement overseas and continue the fight with the pen instead of the sword. He has lunch with the Fakoum representative who is trying to get the UN to condemn the invasion. But this too is a denouement rejected by Ng and by Mo. Instead, Ng, given a choice about where to live as a displaced refugee, presumably with possibilities in any English-speaking country, chooses the lusophone over the anglophone world and moves to Brazil to work in the hotel industry, taking a Japanese name in an effort to obliterate his old identity. But as the moving closing passage of the novel reflects, this doesn't work:

I could not terminate Adolph Ng so conveniently. I was trying to accomplish within my own small person what the *malais* hadn't been able to do to a nation.

An identity and a history cannot be obliterated with the switch of a name or the stroke of a pen. ... And if I couldn't make away with myself, how could the *malais* make away with a whole nation? Before the invasion there were seven hundred thousand Danuese. Now there are less than half a million. If that isn't genocide I don't know what is. But I know something else—you can't kill everyone. ... The *malais* might have put the torch to the field, they might think they've exterminated all the creatures in it, but there'll always be one woodchuck left. There always is. (406-8)

So what does this tell us about the relationship between colonialism and forms of domination? There are at least three circuits or forms of colonialism at work in the novel: Chinese, Portuguese, and English. The Chinese is the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, portrayed in the novel as an international network of trading and commerce, a family network, but certainly legible in other analyses as a structure of exploitation, pulling profits out of the Danuese people. The suspicion of Adolph by the Danuese early in the novel is one sign of this structure of exploitation, as is the fact that Adolph has the means at the end of the novel to extricate himself from Danu as well as the capital – human and actual – to launch himself into a second life in the outside world. The second is the formal (and former) imperial power of Portugal, largely nominal by the time of the novel's action, but still part of a lusophone world relevant to the world of the characters. Finally, there is the largely English-language world of international media. But the key point is that however one analyzes these forces, as working for good or not, they are not the key forces of domination in the novel. The force that matters is the *malai* army, and these others are all in fact potential and in some degree actual anti-hegemonic forces.

This is not to portray Mo as naïve about international politics. At the very end of the novel, in the conversation with the Fakoum representative at the UN, Adolph learns about one of the decisive motives for the invasion, the American military's concern that Danu not turn communist as the Portuguese colonies in Africa had. Why would the American military be concerned? They did not want a second Cuba, which they feared because Danu is positioned near a key deep-water passage for American submarines through the Indonesian archipelago. This, in one go, transforms a conflict which had been presented so irreducibly as about individuals into a proxy war, an abstract chess game in which people somehow don't matter.

Lobato makes this point to Adolph when Adolph says that the war and Danu seems so far away in New York. "“This isn't remote,” his voice shook. ‘This is where it's determined; this is where it began; this is where it will end’” (404). The circuit of power in which the *malais* can dominate the Danuese is not a closed circuit, but is part of larger circuits. There are forces outside that circuit which can potentially intervene and check the power of the *malais*; indeed after the writing of this novel, that is in a sense what happened, since Indonesia finally withdrew from East Timor after a quarter century of occupation, more as a result of international pressure than

the failure of the normalisation' efforts leading, between 1999 and 2002, to the creation of the new sovereign state of Timor-Leste. So while the denouement of the novel doesn't have Adolph join Lobato in his replacement of armed struggle by unarmed struggle, Lobato was right in predicting where it would end, and the novel has been curiously completed by the success of that unarmed struggle outside the confines of fiction in the years subsequent to its publication. The resulting interplay between fiction and history is fascinating. One imagines both the character Adolph Ng and the writer Timothy Mo celebrating or at least endorsing what actually happened in history outside of the confines of the novel, and the events do argue for the position advanced inside the novel that culture and the world of ideas do have a role to play in the response to the naked force of power.

Turning from *The Redundancy of Courage* to *The Gift of Rain*, one can itemize similarities and differences. It is a much more beautifully crafted piece of writing, not flirting with the genre of the thriller in the way Mo does, although the plot material could have been handled in that way. It is set in Penang, starting in 1939 in British Malaya but extending up until close to the present, to the 1990s. It is also narrated in the first person, and the narrator and protagonist is also Chinese, or half-Chinese, born into a family of English merchants but caught between the two worlds of the British Empire and the Chinese culture of urban Malaya as well as the Fujian culture of his mother's family.

The plot of the novel is also a kind of dance between culture and power but a very different dance. Phillip Hutton meets a young Japanese diplomat, Hayato Endo, and becomes fascinated by the Japanese martial arts discipline aikido. His family and friends are concerned that Endo-san is up to no good, but Philip is attracted to the art and grows ever closer to his *sensei*, assimilating, in a sense, to Japanese culture. They are of course right, as his friendship with Endo helps the Japanese assess the military preparedness (or rather unpreparedness) of the British forces in Malaya. This intelligence was crucial to the success of the Japanese invasion of Malaya and rapid conquest of the peninsula and of "Fortress Singapore," the capture of which was a huge blow to the British and represents one of the few times in the war when Churchill lost hope.

Unwittingly a collaborationist before the war, Philip then becomes a conscious one during the Japanese occupation, his argument being that he can help save lives albeit at the cost of being publicly reviled. He isn't the one-sided quisling he is thought to be, however, as he is in contact with resistance forces and feeds them information at crucial points in the war. But the narrative centre of the novel is less about these plot elements, since the wartime narrative is in fact framed by events in the present. The novel opens and closes in 1995, with an old friend and lover of Endo-san, Michiko Murakami, who is also an exponent of aikido, visiting Penang hoping to learn of his life and death there.

Philip's voyage into aikido is complex. Zen is central to aikido, so he learns

about Daruma, a figure in Japanese Buddhism said to be central to aikido. But across the course of the novel, he gets to know his Chinese grandfather—who disowned his daughter when she married Philip’s English father – who tests him in martial arts (as well as expresses concern about Endo-san. Philip comes to understand through this that the aikido which he loves grew out of Chinese traditions, his own culture, and the Daruma whom Endo-san reveres is, in fact, the Bodhidharma whom his grandfather reveres as the founder of *qigong*. So he didn’t need to turn to Japan for any of this, he could have had all of it from his own family’s heritage.

Here, the analysis of colonialism becomes more searching than anything in Mo, for I think Philip needs to go outside of China to find what he could have in China or from his Chinese family because of the psychological structure of colonial Malaya, in which things English are put on a pedestal, while things Chinese are seen as part of a lesser, colonized order. Philip is born into two worlds, but those worlds aren’t seen as equal, making it very difficult to embrace what belongs to both with equality and balance. It is the great advantage of Japan in this cultural complex that it is not part of the colonial situation in Malaya, that in fact Japan is challenging Britain’s colonial power. What horrifies his family about his relationship to Endo-san may be part of the attraction: as Proust says, when we say ‘despite’ we often actually mean ‘because’. Philip’s intimate involvement with the culture and people of Japan is part of the reason why *The Gift of Rain* is more complex psychologically than *The Redundancy of Courage*. Both novels focus on figures who are at different times resisters of the external Imperial power and collaborators with it; but Japan has a very different semiotic force in *The Gift of Rain* than Indonesia does in *The Redundancy of Courage*. Although Adolph in the end collaborates with the invaders, nothing Mo does in the novel presents the culture of the invaders as attractive or compelling in the least. Our loyalty as readers remains fervently with the Danuese, and the struggle between Danuese and the *malais* is straightforward for us, and although at crucial turning points in the novel it isn’t entirely straightforward for Adolph, this is not a matter of conflicting loyalties. There is no sugar-coating of Japanese atrocities in *The Gift of Rain*, but we also know that Philip’s collaboration with the Japanese isn’t purely situational or a matter of survival in the way Adolph’s is because he has in fact at some level, fallen under the spell of Endo-san in a way which complicates both his feelings and his actions. After the war, as we gather from the frame, he went on to teach aikido and be an aikido *sensei* of some renown in his own right. Thus, even after the events of the war, even after all of the horrible things done by the Japanese during the occupation, he continued his deep and lifelong involvement with Japanese culture. There is no rejection of that by Philip at any point: at the end of his life, he is still practicing the art with Endo’s friend. In contrast, one doesn’t imagine that Adolph is going to start playing gamelan in his exile in Brazil; in fact, there is absolutely no sense in *The Redundancy of Courage* that the *malais* have any culture at all. They have the monopoly of force, but are presented as completely without culture worth emulation or respect.

Moreover, despite the tension between Japan and China in the historical events described in the novel, the deeper cultural connection sketched by the figure of Daruma-Bodhidharma means that Phillip's cultural commitment to things Japanese helps him move to a better integration of his English and his Chinese halves. It is not until close to the end of the novel (and probably his life) that he signs his name Phillip Khoo-Hutton for the first time, accepting that he is equally English and Chinese – ironically at an event celebrating his donation of his father's *keris* collection to the Penang Historical Society. Perhaps it is easier for the two sides of his upbringing – English and Chinese – to join on the terrain of a third culture, in this case Malay. But the first time Philip had seen his name written this way was by his grandfather, showing him their family and ancestral temple years earlier. And at that time, it was the Japanese language which helped to bring his two halves together:

He had added a hyphenated Khoo to Hutton, so that my family name now was Khoo-Hutton. I felt a shifting feeling of being brought apart and then placed back together again, all by the single stroke of the hyphen. The hyphen was also similar to the ideogram for 'one' in Japanese and, as I discovered, Chinese as well. Once again the feeling of connection and conjunction I had encountered in my room the previous night came over me, fragile and yet evocative as morning mist. (274)

It is hard to imagine Philip becoming Philip Khoo-Hutton, not just Philip Hutton, integrating the two sides of his identity, without the role Japan has played in his life.<sup>4</sup> Can one go further and argue that Philip would not have been able to integrate his Chinese and English selves, seeing them as of equal value, in the colonial landscape of Malaya if it had not been for the demonstration by Japan during World War II that the colonial order with Europeans in a position of unquestioned superiority was about to vanish?

The interplay between Philip's Chinese heritage and Japanese culture is complex here, but so too is the interplay among aspects of the world of the Japanese. It can be argued that those aspects of Japanese culture that intrigue Philip have no connection with the war, and this interpretation is strengthened by the fact that aikido – while a martial art – is a defensive approach to combat that has no offensive moves. Aikido means the 'way of spiritual harmony,' and we are told that Endo-san's *sensei* himself was a pacifist opposed to the war. Yet this attempt to separate a good Japan from a bad Japan itself runs into the problem that Endo-san, while inculcating Philip into the non-aggressive if not quite non-violent *dao* of aikido, was himself acting as an agent of the Japanese imperialism that would kill the rest of Philip's family and commit horrific war crimes delineated in the novel.

So the relationship between power and culture is a theme in both books, but the relation is quite different in the two books. In *The Redundancy of Courage*,



culture is a potential antidote to power, that can be used to de-legitimize the naked exercise of power. In *The Gift of Rain*, culture is used in more of a Gramscian sense to provide some legitimacy for power, aikido helping the Japanese *sensei* to turn at least one person towards a more collaborationist stance. Yet it is altogether more complicated than that in the world of *The Gift of Rain*, since the fairly straightforward ethical landscape of *The Redundancy of Courage* is replaced here by something altogether more complex.

Yet in another sense, the books powerfully align – for the net effect of both books is to resist any simple identification of power with the colonial, with formal European colonialism. Or to put this another way, to resist any simple identification of Imperialism just with the West. The simple dichotomy colonizer – colonized is complicated in the course of each novel, though in very different ways, and the net result of that complication does a couple of things. First, it shows how the legacy of colonization has created a syncretic, not Manichaeic, cultural space, in which colonizer and colonized have blurred in terms of cultural identities in ways that are profoundly important, particularly in post-colonial contexts in which the Western model of a nation-state is less the reality than a multiethnic and multilingual polity. Second, this doesn't efface the reality of imperial domination that helped create that syncretic reality, but as the setting of the novels reminds us, this reality is itself not univocal or simple. There are any number of potential imperial forces out there in the world, and not all of them stem from Europe. Or to put this another way, the world may be firmly post-colonial by now, in the sense that the European colonial domination of most of the world has since been reduced to a few small islands, but it is some distance from being post-imperial in the sense of nations having full self-determination and sovereignty. Despite Timothy Mo, perhaps courage isn't redundant, although as Tan Twan Eng shows, it often takes surprising forms.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is the focus of one of the only articles on *The Redundancy of Courage* (out of a sparse dozen or so secondary discussions) that goes beyond plot summary and mapping of the events of the novel onto the history of East Timor. But Wijesinha's analysis seems to embrace the fashionable notion that national identity is a "construct" chosen by the individual "based on psychological and political factors (that are themselves constructs) rather than on what might more readily be defined as facts concerning people and places" (32). This makes the novel seem far more like those of Salman Rushdie (cited by Wijesinha as a relevant parallel) than is actually the case.

<sup>2</sup> Pheng Cheah presents a useful analysis of the complex comprador role played by the Chinese diaspora from the colonial period to today.

<sup>3</sup> Cheah distinguishes between two forms of Chinese cosmopolitanism, one linked to mercantilism and exploitation and the other – which he calls *huaqiao* cosmopolitanism – linked to progressive and revolutionary forces. Cheah could have added a discussion of *The Redundancy of Courage* to his discussion of fiction by Ninotcka Rosca and Pramoedya, as one way of describing Adolph's own journey would be from the one to the other form of cosmopolitanism.

<sup>4</sup> The one critical essay on *The Gift of Rain* published to date by Lim views this “‘happy’ self-reconciliation” as essentially self-mystifying, advancing a critique of notions of self-autonomy deriving from Žižek.

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