

“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – VI: Lin Dong (Born in 1944 in the tropical rainforest of the State of Selangor, Malaya)

Friday 30 November 2007, by [KHOO Agnes](#) (Date first published: 30 September 2007).

This is a condensed version of Chapter Four: “LIN DONG (Born in 1944 in the tropical rainforest of the State of Selangor, Malaya)”, of Agnes Khoo’s book *“Life As the River Flows” - Women’s Oral History on the Malayan struggle for Independence* (Published by Merlin Press, United Kingdom, 2007).

See also:

Part I : [“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – I: About the book](#)

Part II: [“Life As the River Flows - Women’s Oral History on the Malayan struggle for Independence” – II: An Introduction](#)

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

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

Part V (Chapter 3): [“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – V: Lin Mei \(Born in 1937, Singapore\)](#)

Part VII (Chapter 5): [“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – VII: Suria \(Born in 1951, Thailand\)](#)

Part VIII (Chapter 6): [“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – VIII : Guan Shui Lian \(Born in 1946, Perak, Malaysia\)](#)

Part IX (Chapter 7): [“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – IX: Xiu Ning \(Born in 1927, Malaysia\)](#)

Part X (Chapter 8): [“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – X: Siti Meriyam Binti Idris \(Siti Meriyam daughter of Idris\) alias ATOM \(Born in 1927, Malaysia\)](#)

Part XI (Chapter 9): [“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – XI: Huang Xue Ying \(Born in 1934, Perlis, Malaysia\)](#)

Part XII (Chapter 10): “Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – XII: Qiang Lin (Born in 1955, Ipoh, Malaysia)

She is the eldest daughter of a well-known revolutionary couple. She was trained as a medical doctor in China and Vietnam. She joined the guerrillas in Southern Thailand in 1971. Her husband who had passed away long time ago was a party leader. Eloquent and intelligent, Lin Dong commands respect immediately of whoever that meets her.

“The happiest thing that had happened to me as a doctor in the army was to successfully save the lives of wounded and sick comrades. A comrade whose leg looked beyond help was saved after my medical care. Now he can walk around like an ordinary person and even work normally. I feel very satisfied. Combining western and oriental medicine in our practice can really do wonders! The credit is due to the hard work of the entire medical team. Washing the wounds and looking after the wounded and sick was the work of every member of the medical team. As doctors, we have to practice humanitarian principles so no matter how angry or unjustified we feel we have been treated, we still have to do our best. “

Inspired by China and Third World Struggles - I joined my family in China in 1957 and went to school there. I was very much influenced by the revolutionary thoughts of the time. I promised myself that if I failed to enter the University, I would volunteer in the poorest and remotest part of China, the Northwest, or any place where my motherland needed me most. We saw in China the amazing power and strength of anti-imperialist struggles in Latin America, Asia and Africa. We were moved by their struggles and were full of idealism. It was at the height of the Third World people's struggles for independence. Cuba was a good example, the USA wanted to control Cuba but China was right behind Fidel Castro. I still remember the overwhelming welcome Castro got when he visited Beijing. The spirit of internationalism was very much encouraged then, even though we knew little about other countries. But there was this strong commitment to work for the good of others. Our ideals and passion to give everything of ourselves without expecting anything in return for our effort and sacrifices are not always understood by the youths today.

Childhood and Family - I was born in the Malayan jungle because both my parents were in the anti-Japanese army. Soon after my birth, I was sent to my grandmother. When I turned 13, my parents who had already gone to China then, asked me to join them so that I could have a good education there. I had no impression of my parents before that. I was reluctant to leave my grandmother at first and afraid too, to travel so far to a strange place all on my own. Two years later, I finally decided to leave because my Uncle did not treat me well. I was to arrive at where my mother was to pick me up but she did not turn up. The sea journey from Malaya to China was unbearable, I was sea sick all the time. Since no one picked me up in Guangzhou, my guide sent me onwards to Beijing with his relative. His relative was originally from Malaya too but he was deported to China by the British government. He was a student from the Wuhan University, so he took me to Wuhan first and we spent a night there. It was a very difficult journey because neither of us had enough money. When we finally arrived in Beijing, he could only afford a small room for the both of us in a very cheap hotel. He let me sleep on the bed and he slept on the floor. The hotel owner became suspicious and thought he was a trafficker. So he reported us to the public security bureau. The police called on us in the middle of the night. After we told them the truth, they advised us to go to the Overseas Chinese Liaison Bureau. But they could not help me locate my mother either. I actually had an Uncle studying in China at that time too but I lost his address along the way. I was only thirteen years old and straight from the countryside of Malaya, everything was too overwhelming. The only thing I knew about my Uncle was that he was a rather well known activist and music student, living in Jiao Dao Kou in Beijing. I did not even get his name right. Eventually, they managed to trace him and I found my mother, who came to see me that night. I had no feeling

for her when we first met. She was a stranger to me. She came with three other friends and they had bought tickets to watch a ballet – perhaps “The Swan Lake”. She told me to wait for them; they would fetch me after the show. Actually, I did not even know among the three of them, who was my mother. Even though people said we resembled each other, I felt much closer to my grandmother who brought me up. Even later on in China, I spent most of my time living on my own, so I do not have strong family ties or values. I do not feel the need to be with my family all the time.

Moving to Vietnam - I studied for 6 years in a normal girls’ school in Beijing and there were 10 of us in the same class, who were from overseas, mainly Indonesia and Malaysia. Upon graduation, the Party let us choose where and what we wanted to study. So I entered the Guangzhou Jinan University to study political economy. Later on, the Party leadership decided to transfer me to Vietnam to study medicine instead. The Cultural Revolution had begun by that time. The Party had asked China to give us medical training but this was rejected. Ho Chin Minh, the leader of the Vietnam Communist Party agreed to accept us, so we went to Hanoi instead.

After 5 years in Vietnam, I returned to Beijing for further studies. By then I was fluent in Vietnamese. I stayed in Beijing for another two years to further my medical studies. Immediately after that, we were sent back to the Thai-Malayan border to join the guerrillas’ army. My whole family was involved in the struggle, besides our parents, my younger brother and two other sisters all joined the guerrillas. My sisters and I all studied medicine. We were hardly with our parents in the guerrillas’ army though, they were dispatched to infiltrate Malaysia as leaders of the Southbound Assault Troops, by then Malaya had already become Malaysia. Unfortunately, shortly after 1989’s Peace Agreement, one of my sisters died of cancer. The other sister of mine returned to Malaysia with her husband who was also in the guerrillas. And I chose to stay on in Thailand. After we left the jungle, I used to take up paid jobs outside the village. Unfortunately, our medical qualification is not recognised in Thailand, so I cannot practice my profession. I was trained in Western medicine but Thailand does not recognise the training I have had in China and Vietnam. Since my knowledge of oriental medicine is rudimentary and is only limited to herbal cures most commonly needed in the guerrillas army, I do not have a license to practise it either.

An Independent Spirit - I do not think much about my parents being Party cadres. I do not rely on anyone and do not take advantage of my parents’ position. Even though my husband was also a Party leader, we continued to maintain our individuality and independence even after our marriage. We continued to have our own life and work. Usually in the guerrilla army, we listened and obeyed our leaders but I never did that completely, including with my husband. I tended to argue with them if there was anything I could not agree with. As a result, I was asked to evaluate and criticise myself every year. My husband even accused me of extreme individuality and heroism.

Being a doctor in the guerrillas’ army - we are no different from our comrades in the guerrillas except that as doctors, we were seldom sent to carry food or go on long trips, so in comparison, we suffered the least physical hardship. Our work was challenging in other ways; for instance, when our comrades became seriously ill, we had to think and work very hard for an effective cure, despite the lack of resources and proper conditions in the jungle. We had to stay alert all the time, to monitor our patients’ conditions continuously and solve whatever complications that arose immediately. I had to devise my own treatment and curative prescriptions everyday. The doctors in the army were dispersed to different areas and camps, each doctor had to take care of about 1,000 soldiers. There was no doctor in some of the smaller units so if anyone got ill or became injured there, we had to run all the way to save them.

First-hand experience of the Vietnam War - From 1964-1969, some of my comrades and I were in Hanoi to study medicine, we learnt a lot in the Vietnam War. We saw Chinese-made vehicles moving endlessly at night. There were also many Chinese students in Vietnam then. Vietnam was

divided by then, Hanoi was the capital of the communist government in the North and the US army was stationed in South Vietnam. At that time, China and Russia were supporting North Vietnam with a lot of resources, China also sent its own soldiers to fight in the war.

At the peak of the war, the US bombed Hanoi continuously. After each round of bombing, a whole load of wounded would be sent to our hospital. Many died on the way. These were mostly poor peasants. The US were bombing civilians and villages. Usually the bombing took place at night or at dawn. The US planes would fly very low over us. Usually we could not sleep and had to work round the clock to save lives after an air raid. I was sometimes so exhausted that I would doze off to sleep even during an operation! But I do not give up because I was driven by a sense of responsibility. I also knew that I had to learn as much as I could because once I joined the guerrillas' army; there would be no one to teach me. On the contrary, many people would be dependent on me by that time.

Dedication to the revolution - We all had to make sacrifices in revolutionary struggles, that is why we chose to return to Malaya despite the good conditions offered to us in China. We returned on our own free will, the Party did not force us. On my way to the jungle, we had to pass through the 'white areas' such as Bangkok in Thailand. I returned around the time of the famous student uprising in Bangkok against the military dictatorship in 1974. Soon after I arrived in the jungle, the massacre of the Thammasat University students by the military took place. The military was arresting people everywhere. The Thai student staged another uprising in 1975 and when they were brutally suppressed by the military again, many fled into the jungle to join the Communist Party of Thailand.

I decided to return to the Thai-Malaysia border because I felt that I had a mission. I was influenced by Mao Zedong thoughts, we were taught to follow Chairman Mao's instructions to go down into the countryside and up into the mountains. Our mission was to liberate all humankind. I did not think about my own career like some young people think nowadays. I only thought that since the Party had groomed and trained me, I must go where the Party wanted me.

Getting Used to Life in the Jungle - I was not used to the jungle at all, I did not even know how to take a bath in the river or out in the open like my comrades did. I was also slow in my movement, so I could never catch up with them. There was nothing like a bathroom in the jungle, usually we had to bathe in small streams or rivers. I was not used to it initially, so I would keep my underwear on as I bathed. Bath time was restricted to half an hour for everybody, which included the journey from our campsite to the river and back. We bathed in groups of 20 to 30 people at a time. Men and women bathed separately and at different times. Since we had only a few scoops to fetch water, we all had to wait for our turns. I was always the last one to get ready. Usually, I only managed to change half of my clothes when bathing because I was too slow to wash the whole set. One day, I would wash my trousers and the next day, my shirt. I was always teased that I would die of hunger if we had to rush for food because I could never compete.

Operating on Injuries from Landmine Explosions - Such operations were the most difficult. These wounds tended to be very messy. A woman comrade had an entire piece of flesh on her backside and her thigh blown off in a landmine explosion. To make it worse, all kinds of shrapnel, sand and mud were embedded in her open wounds. Fortunately, another doctor was with me. We tried our best to treat her. We had to remove all the sand and mud, which had got into the tiny holes made by shrapnel all over her legs. These holes were extremely difficult to find. Yet we could not simply amputate both her legs, so we resorted to locate all these tiny holes one by one painstakingly. We tried to remove the shrapnel, sand and mud with great care. It was like sifting gold from sand. At the same time, we had to be careful not to damage her blood vessels and nerves too. That operation took us more than 10 hours. We had to disinfect her wounds continuously during the process. Landmines wounds cannot be operated upon like normal wounds, the normal rules and procedures did not apply. It would be much easier if normal rules and prescribed methods could be followed.

Given the sparse conditions inside the jungle, we could not take X-rays of her wounds, so we could not tell for sure if all the foreign bodies were completely removed and if her wounds were cleaned properly. Sure enough, after her operation, she contracted a serious infection, which was deadly, causing her skin to develop purple-red patches.

This was the first case ever we encountered in the guerrillas even though I had seen it before in Vietnam. Soldiers who suffered American bombings during the Vietnam War also contracted similar infections. According to Western Medicine, we would have to amputate her entire leg from the hip. But this was too big an operation for our circumstances; it would need a lot of blood transfusion, which we could not do. Furthermore, she would have serious problem surviving in the army if she lost both her legs. Finally, we decided to try a combination of western and oriental medical treatment to save her legs, even though it was a gamble. If we failed, she would surely die. Luckily, for us, her wounds began to heal slowly. We applied mountain herbs on her wounds for a very long period after that. We could only take a wait-and-see attitude during the laborious treatment and let her own body do the healing. Even the nerves of her toes were destroyed one by one because of the infection. In order to make sure that she could use her toes and walk again after the treatment, we had to fix a wooden board underneath her feet to stabilise her toes. Fortunately, tiny new pieces of skin were beginning to form new skin. Chinese mountain herbs can be such a wonderful medicine! It took us more than one month of collective effort to stabilise her condition. Now she can walk normally and even tap rubber, even though she has flat feet. We realised in the jungle that many things we had learnt in medical school could not be applied directly because battlefield wounds and injuries tended to be out of the ordinary.

Equality in the Army - It is not true that the women are better than the men in the army or vice-versa. Objectively speaking, overall men are physically stronger than women. Of course, even our own 10 fingers are not of the same length, so there would be male comrades who were weaker and female comrades who were stronger. Therefore, it is quite normal that individual men can be weaker or less capable than individual women in the army. While men maybe able to carry heavier loads over long distances, women are better at withstanding hunger. The men tended to become hungry faster than the women even though we were all given the same amount of food. For those of us who did not have to do much physical work, we tried to share our food with those who needed it more.

I have encountered many problems and controversies in the army. Sometimes, it discouraged me so much that I would rather be an ordinary soldier. As a doctor, I was treated more like a servant because some comrades including some party leaders tended to interpret the slogan: "to serve the masses" literally. So they saw themselves as 'the masses' who are to be 'served' by the doctors. We had to deal with very unreasonable demands and expectations sometimes. We also tended to be picked on more for little mistakes or problems. In a normal hospital, there is mutual respect between the doctor and patient but this was not the case in the guerrilla. I think our patients in China and Vietnam treated us better than our own comrades did. There were clear rules and policies to abide by in China or Vietnam but not so in the guerrillas. As a doctor, it is our duty to save life that is in danger, regardless if it belongs to a common soldier or an important leader. At the beginning, balancing the role of being a doctor and a comrade was difficult. Despite all these, after a few years of hard work and trial and error, we managed to build two hospitals inside the jungle, for those patients who needed to be segregated because they suffered from infectious diseases. So step by step, the medical service in the army became more structured and systematic.

Every year, our peers and leaders assessed us on our performance in terms of 1st Class, 2nd Class and so on. It seemed rather democratic on the surface, that everyone could evaluate the others. However, the result tended to be the same every year. It seemed that junior comrades could never get 1st Class honours, no matter how hard they tried. I have never understood why the 1st class

honours were always reserved for our senior comrades and party cadres even though these people may not have done much physical work. They still got 1st class honours without doing any essential tasks or duties. Consequently, no one thought much about the merit system anymore; after all, we were there for the revolution not for the rewards. So I resolved to give my very best especially because we were medical doctors in a revolutionary army! Perhaps, this is the reason why I persisted in my duty as a doctor right to the end of our armed struggle.