

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

dimanche 16 décembre 2007, par [KHOO Agnes](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 30 septembre 2007).

This is a condensed version of Chapter Six : « Guan Shui Lian (Born in 1946, Perak, Malaysia) », 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 VI (Chapter 4) : [“Life as the River Flows - Women in the Malayan anti-colonial struggle” – VI: Lin Dong \(Born in 1944 in the tropical rainforest of the State of Selangor, Malaya\)](#)

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

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)

“Circumstances forced me to join the guerrillas. One thing led to another. I do not regret having chosen this path. The context at that time made everything I did seemed so natural. I was politicised by the age of 16 and had been a guerrilla member for more than 30 years. But I am no less human than someone who did not become one. I have been through many experiences, which many people will never know. “

I was born in a small town in Malaysia. My family was evicted together with many Chinese, into ‘concentration camps’ (New Villages) by the British. These so-called ‘new villages’ were really concentration camps surrounded by layers of barbed wire, even with electricity running through it. A deep trench was also dug around it to separate us from the outside world. Women were often strip-searched before we were allowed to leave or enter the camps. The residents of these villages were evicted from the mountainous and rural areas all over Malaya. This was between 1948 and 1950.

I was the youngest in the family, we were poor and life was very difficult. The Japanese had left Malaysia and the British imperialists had just returned. My father fell ill just before I was born and never got well again. My mother was superstitious and believed that I was the cause of his illness, so she gave me away. It was difficult to find foster parents then because times were hard and I was a girl. Finally, I was adopted by a good-hearted woman who had already adopted 2 other girls before me. And she also had a daughter and 3 sons of her own. She took me in as a ‘child-bride’, so that I would become the wife of her youngest son when I grew up.

As a child of 6 or 8 years old, I already knew that the CPM was very active in my area. My brother was already a party and a guerrilla member and was active in our neighbourhood. We used to hear exchange of gunfire between government troops and the CPM guerrillas in the middle of the night. Our house was next to the police station so my foster mother improvised a kind of air-raid shelter under our bed. She was a supporter of the CPM too. She would buy food for the guerrillas and send it through my brother. She would wear new shoes to the field in the morning, gave them to the guerrillas and returned in the evening with old and tattered ones. My second brother was an underground member of the CPM too. It was natural to be part of the revolutionary movement at that time. Nearly every youth in our village was in one way or another part of it.

**A brother martyred** - My brother was shot dead by the government troop as he helped a group of guerrillas to get food. They stripped him down to his underwear, tied his body to a truck and dragged him like a dead dog for more than 10 kilometres back to our village. His body was so unrecognisable by the time it was brought home. My second brother was soon arrested too and was imprisoned for many years, charged for being a CPM member and sentenced to indefinite detention. At that time, China was willing to accept those deported from Malaya. So he asked to go to Fuzhou, China instead. He still lives there today. So my mother was left with her third youngest son, my future husband who was still very young then. But he had to assume the responsibility as the head of the family even at the age of 13. He worked as a manual worker in the rubber plantation, the pay was pitifully low, just a little more than one dollar a month. Even though he did not have any chance to study, he was a very capable boy. When our makeshift house became rotten and old, he offered himself as an apprentice to a carpenter in exchange for building materials to construct a new house for the family.

**The State of Emergency** - During the Emergency period, our camp was under curfew from six in the morning to 6 in the evening. The British government used Malay soldiers to guard the Chinese camps. As young girls, we used to be very wary of these guards because they would harass us. There

were many informants and spies in the village too. One day, we were suddenly ordered to assemble outside our home and all the houses were searched. Then the traitors were brought in by trucks to pinpoint suspected CPM elements. Such incidents happened often during my childhood. My mother was once arrested like this. My sister and I cried very hard when she was taken away. We were penniless and could only live on plain porridge while she was in prison.

Became involved through youth activities - I only went to school at the age of 10. I studied for 5 years and did night classes for the last year. After that, I became a seamstress. By this time, different political parties and their affiliated organizations had become very active all over Malaya, such as the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA), the Labour Party and so on. The MCA was especially active in our area ; many of its members were formerly from the CPM too. Since the CPM had already gone underground and had retreated to the north, near the Thai border, people joined the MCA instead. Even though I was still very young, I could already tell that the top leadership in the MCA were rich capitalists who supported the Alliance government (i.e. UMNO), so I did not like them. I was more attracted to the Labour Party and eventually joined their education classes. The other party, which was also active, was the PPP (People's Progressive Party). They were perceived as pro-China and nationalistic. Some of its members and leaders were former CPM members too. On the other hand, most of the Labour Party members tended to be left-leaning students and intellectuals.

In the education classes organized by the Labour Party, we were taught ideas about simplicity, innocence, oppression and exploitation. I was young and naïve then, no matter how hard the teacher tried, I still could not understand. But I do remember vividly the lessons about capitalist exploitation and oppression and the difference between the 'oppressors' and the 'oppressed'. We also learnt to sing and compose many progressive songs.

**The Labour Party** - I became an active member in the party and was asked to join a speaking contest. We were given a text to memorise and we were taught oratorical skills by some left-wing students. I practised very hard and my teachers were equally dedicated. Even though I forgot part of my speech because I was so nervous, I still won a prize ! The theme of my speech was about why we opposed the formation of the Federation of Malaysia. In our opinion, this was a neo-colonial plot of the British to try to rule us more subtly. By then, Singapore had already seceded from Malaysia. Through the mediation of the British, Sabah and Sarawak in the East combined with Peninsula Malaysia to form the Federation of Malaysia. I was by this time, gradually groomed to become a leader of the party. I was elected to the Executive Committee of one of its local branches. One by one, the government arrested our Committee members. No one was spared.

By 1965 or 1966, we had already formed a Women's Committee in every party branch. Honestly, I was no good at all as a leader but there was no choice, our party was losing all its leaders and cadres because of the government's frequent arrests. When I became the Chairperson of the Women's Committee of the Perak Division of the party, there was hardly any leader left. Those of us who were not yet arrested had to rise to the situation. Fortunately, even though some of our leaders had fled and gone underground, they still tried to guide us in our work secretly.

The political situation was so tense and dangerous then. Each time we had a public rally, the speakers must be whisked away immediately after their speeches to avoid arrests. We had to face anti-riot squads at every rally. Even with cultural activities that we organized for the neighbourhood, the government would send in the riot police to disperse us with tear gas. Tang Bao Guang, a party member was caught writing slogans on the wall and the riot police beat him to death. I recalled in one of the indoor meetings we organized, I was among the audience as the Division's representative and many people spoke there. The riot police suddenly charged into our meeting and fired tear gas on us. One man was chased into a trench and beaten to death. The government's repression was

ruthless. They even banned indoor party meetings !

The last party meeting which I attended, was at the beginning of 1967 before I too, became imprisoned. Many party branch leaders came to that meeting and the tension was high. Every one who attended was expecting to be detained. The riot police surrounded us. The Master of Ceremonies (MC) and the Chair of the rally suddenly disappeared to avoid arrests. So we had to find their substitutes on the spot. I became the MC instead. It was a huge rally with more than a thousand people. I led the crowd shouting slogans and I was not scared at all. After that, all of us cadres had to go underground ; no more public meetings because the government was arresting people everywhere under the ISA (Internal Security Act - indefinite detention without trial). Consequently, the Labour Party had to disband itself.

**Arrest** - On the night of my arrest, the police knocked on my door. As soon as my mother opened the door, the police rushed in, shook me off the bed and handcuffed me immediately. My mother was crying and scolding the police at the same time as they took me away. She was very brave ; she followed us to the police station and kept scolding the police at the top of her voice. I knew I was not the only one arrested. There were so many of us that the police station ran out of cells. There were police trucks everywhere with their sirens on that night. But my comrades and I were separated the whole time, we were kept in solitary confinement in cells as small as a toilet. In my cell, I saw the names of prisoners who had stayed there before me ; they carved their names onto the wall. I was interrogated about our leaders, our plans, everything. I was not afraid of the interrogations because I really had nothing to tell. After one month, they released me but I had to report to the police station everyday and was not allowed to move beyond my village.

**Going Underground** - My mother was very happy when I was released from prison. She could hold her head up high in public again. Soon after my release though, I was told to go underground. I was fetched by a motorcycle heading for the countryside. My mother was very sad to see me leave again, she kept crying and begging me to stay. From then on, my mother lived alone ; I was the last among my siblings to leave home. My mother cried all the time after I left.

**Formation of the National Liberation Front** - We organized ourselves in the countryside and started to grow vegetables. We became farmers. Four to five underground members would form a 'point' or cell group, to live and work together ; it was part of our training, preparing us for a harsher future to come. Later, I was transferred to an even remoter rural area to help organize the rice farmers. I used to tap rubber, work in the tin mine and as a construction worker before. But it was my first time to live as a farmer. Since I have always been doing manual work, it was not difficult for me to integrate with the farmers. We were told to help identify young potential recruits for the movement. We tried to inculcate progressive ideas among the farmers. That was how we began to develop different revolutionary zones.

Gradually, an underground movement known as the Malayan National Liberation Front (MNLF) was formed. The leaders tried to link up with the CPM and that was how it later came under the CPM leadership. It was through the MNLF that some members became guerrillas. From the 1970s, under the MNLF, we recruited and trained many comrades all over Malaysia. The masses were very supportive and respectful of us and we became good friends. The MNLF also published many underground materials such as "The Burning Field", "The East is Red" etc. Disseminating these materials were very risky, so we had to devise ingenious methods through our underground channels.

**Last time with my mother** - Living as a fugitive had made me long for mother. One day, I could not stand it any longer and simply took a bus to my sister's home, without telling my comrades. I stayed there for a few days and asked my mother to visit me there. I was so happy to see her again,

the feelings were indescribable ! My mother did not cry at all, she was very strong. In fact, I was the one crying. She told me stories about our friends and comrades back home. We spent 2 days and 2 nights together and I was still crying when I said goodbye to her at the bus stop. She told me that we would meet again but in fact, that was our last time together. I guess she must have cried when she was alone in the bus. Throughout our meeting, she did not once ask me to give up. Both my biological and foster mothers died without knowing that I had joined the guerrillas. And I did not know either when they passed away. I can still see in my mind how my foster mother waited for me to come home everyday. We used to share everything openly with each other.

**A Colourful Life** - My life was never boring, I have had a rich and colourful life. Even now that we have left the jungle, our life is simple but we have enough to eat. We live a good and independent life. Even though I did not do anything heroic or fantastic, and we did not succeed in our revolution, we are proud of ourselves. The difference between being an activist and a guerrilla was that, in the former case, I hardly knew what I was doing and had to be guided. But by the time I joined the guerrilla, it was clear this was to be my life. My existence was closely tied to the survival of my troop. I did not have much education, so it was not easy to grasp the revolutionary theories in abstract. But after all the experiences of being a guerrilla, I now understand what all these mean to me. The revolutionary struggle has become very real, it is no longer abstract to me.