

Suyin Han and medical practice in the early 1950s Hong Kong

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Suyin Han (韓素音, 1917–2012) was a renowned doctor and author. Her 1952 novel *A Many-Splendoured Thing* was adapted into an Oscar-winning Hollywood movie *Love Is a Many-Splendoured Thing*, bringing her worldwide fame. The story depicts the love affair between a female doctor and a male war correspondent in Hong Kong during 1949 and 1950.¹

Han was born Rosalie Matilda Kuanghu Chou (周光胡) in Henan, China in 1917 to a railway engineer father and a Belgian mother. She was known as Elizabeth Tang after marrying Paohuang Tang, a Kuomintang military officer, in 1938. While in London for her husband's work as a military attaché to the United Kingdom, Han attended the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine. Paohuang Tang died in 1947 during the civil war in China. Upon receiving her medical degree from the University of London the following year, Han wished to move to Hong Kong to be close to China.² Serendipitously, she was introduced to Prof Gordon King, then head of obstetrics and gynaecology at The University of Hong Kong, who was visiting London at the time. He secured her a job in Hong Kong.

Between 1949 and 1952, Han worked at Queen Mary Hospital, an experience she drew on for her autobiography *My House Has Two Doors*. The book contains vivid descriptions of the medical landscape in the early post-war era when Hong Kong was flooded with refugees from the mainland.

In her first role at the hospital as an assistant in the obstetrics and gynaecology department, Han worked alongside Dr Daphne Chun (who later succeeded Prof King as the first local professor), whom Han greatly admired:

*'Daphne's hands were a marvel; tiny and so able, so nimble! She was quite happy operating all day, and I both envied and resented her enthusiasm, the beam upon her face when yet another belly had to be opened...'*³

Gynaecological work was somewhat different in those days:

*'Many a young girl is still brought to me to be examined before marriage. Many times a week I write a certificate beginning: "I...certify this girl to be a virgin..."'*⁴

Realising gynaecology was not her vocation,

Han joined the pathology department as a demonstrator, working under Prof Pao-chang Hou, in February 1950 (Fig). She was assigned to study liver pathology and observed the professor's work.

*'As for Hou Paochang, there was ecstasy upon his face as he plunged his hands into a corpse and palpated an unsuspected cancer.'*⁵

*'The livers we examined were very often gorged with flukes...Like a stream of swimmers the grey-brown parasites came lizarding down when we opened gall bladders and bile ducts, and Hou would wade in joyfully with gloved hands shouting, "Ha, ha". He was looking for possible cancerous or precancerous changes due to the flukes, since liver cancer was also very prevalent in the fluke-infested regions of South China.'*⁶

Leprosy was prevalent then. Dr Olaf Skinsnes (Fig), who was destined to teach in China, joined the pathology department in 1949 as he was stranded in Hong Kong. There, he began his research on the pathology and immunology of leprosy, eventually becoming an international expert in the disease. He co-founded the Hay Ling Chau Leprosarium.⁷

*'In that winter, lepers were batted back and forth across the border with China. The Chinese pushed them into Hong Kong; they were found, brought to hospital, certified lepers, pushed back across the border.'*⁸

Han changed track again in May 1950 when the post of casualty officer fell vacant. She applied for two reasons: first, she wanted to return to clinical work and second, the benefits included a government flat. She was appointed women's assistant medical officer in July and oversaw the casualty department despite being a junior doctor with no prior experience. Prof David Todd, then an intern recruited to cover after-office hours, recalled Han typing furiously in her office between patients.⁹

The rapid influx of refugees kept the casualty department busy with around 90 cases a day. Infections, particularly pulmonary tuberculosis, were common.

'Everything came to Casualty. Rare cases of leprosy, lupus, tetanus, enlarged spleen from long-term malarial, syphilitic, tuberculous meningitis (mostly children and very common in Hong Kong), accidents and suicides, homicides, fishermen blown

*up by the dynamite they used for fishing, early cancers and late cancers, pneumonias and jaundices and brain abscesses and the insane...Everything uncanny, impossible and fantastic came to Casualty.*¹⁰

Reflecting some of the population's low socio-economic status, there were many critically ill children brought in too late.

*It was a child, wrapped in layers of clothing. We undid the layers, and the abdomen appeared. There was practically nothing else but glistening abdomen, enormously distended, semi-transparent, netted in a lace pattern of veins, looking as if at any moment it might burst like an overblown balloon. Around the navel were a dozen of those round brown marks, like owls' eyes, which the Chinese herbalist burns through slices of ginger root with a wax wick, to draw out the sickness. Above this monstrous sphere sat the chest, a tiny bird's cage; then the face of a miniature querulous monkey, the blind wide eyes bleak with dying. "How long has it been ill?" And the invariable answer: "Oh, a long, long time..." "Then why did you not come earlier?" And again, the same answer as always: "M'chee...we did not know...The baby died in the lift, on the way to the Babies' Ward."*¹¹

In those days, operation of the casualty department depended on dressers (male nurses), whom Han held in high regard.

*'The dressers of Casualty were seasoned men with tremendous experience...they knew far more than many young doctors, and they also knew how to save lives...They were cheerful, devoted and immensely courteous to the patients.'*¹⁰

What did Han think about her job as a casualty officer?

*'Casualty work was exactly what I could do. Though looked down upon by more snobbish housemen in medicine and surgery (because Casualty did not lead to better jobs, it was a dead-end), it was for me occasion for my talent in diagnosis.'*¹⁰

In 1952, Han married Leonard F Comber, a



FIG. Staff of the Department of Pathology of The University of Hong Kong, taken outside the School of Pathology in 1950. Sitting in the front row are Dr CT Huang (left), Suyin Han (second from left), Prof Pao-chang Hou (middle) and Dr Olaf Skinsnes (right). Image courtesy of the Hong Kong Museum of Medical Sciences

British officer in the Malayan Special Branch. The church ceremony was attended by eminent guests, including Governor Sir Alexander Grantham and Dr Kok-cheang Yeo, director of medical services, and the bride was given away by Prof Lindsay Ride.¹² The couple moved to Johor Bahru in Malaysia, where she worked as a general practitioner for roughly 10 years before devoting herself full-time to writing. She later relocated to Switzerland and died there in Lausanne in 2012. Her legacy lives on through her books, which continue to find new readers around the world.

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