

Chiew-Siah Tei - author of Little Hut of Leaping Fishes - tours Bangkok, Singapore & Malaysia, June

By Pan Macmillan Asia

Dated: Jun 03, 2008

Little Hut of Leaping Fishes, by Malaysian Chiew-Siah Tei, was longlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize. Set against the backdrop of an ever changing China, it is a historical novel like no other; with a freshness and an immediacy to the writing

Chiew-Siah TEI

Little Hut of Leaping Fishes

A gloriously sweeping novel set in China at the end of the nineteenth century

Author tour:

Bangkok June 17th 2008

Singapore June 18th 2008

Kuala Lumpur June 19-20th 2008

“A powerful and important story of duty and sacrifice in a time when China was threatened on all sides by the West and the smell of opium filled the air.”

Xinran, author of *The Good Women of China*

Mingzhi is born to be a mandarin.

As the first grandson of the formidable Master Chai, his life is mapped out from the moment of his birth. Yet as Mingzhi grows, he begins to question his privileged heritage: Master Chai – feudal landlord and opium farmer – may rule the household, beating out orders with his dragon stick, but, increasingly, Mingzhi rails against the confines and corruption of the family mansion. Eager to escape the secrets and shadows that lurk in its corners, to flee from the adultery and treachery, the rivalries and jealousies that mark its boundaries, he soon realizes his only path to freedom is through leaning.

But this is the nineteenth century, a time when the West is eager to seize a slice of the East. As the foreign devils encroach on China, Mingzhi is torn between two cultures; in a changing world, he must make a choice between the past and the future.

Set against the backdrop of an ever changing China, *Little Hut of Leaping Fishes* is a historical novel like no other; with a freshness and an immediacy to the writing, it tells a compelling story of childhood, family and ambition.

Chiew-Siah Tei was born and raised in Tampin, a small town in southern Malaysia. A bilingual writer, she has won a series of awards with her Chinese prose, including the Hua Zong International Chinese Fiction Award. She scripted *Night Swimmer* which won Best Short Film at Vendome International Film Festival.

Her play, *Three Thousand Troubled Threads*, was staged at Edinburgh International Festival.

Notes to editors:

- *Little Hut of Leaping Fishes* has already gained regional recognition by being longlisted for the 2007

Man Asian Literary Prize. The nomination acknowledges its fine writing and genuine tone from an Asian author.

- As a book of Picador Asia, it was published with regional expertise and commitment throughout the whole editorial, cover design and marketing planning process to better match readers' taste in East Asia. The book will be simultaneously published in the UK and Australia, under the Picador brand.
- Scottish writer Alasdair Gray offered a nice review in his blog on the early chapters of *Little Hut of Leaping Fishes*
- Chiew-Siah TEI is available for media interviews, in both English and Mandarin.
- Review copies are available for upon requests.
- Foreign language rights of *Little Hut of Leaping Fishes* have been sold to France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Portugal, Spain; via literary agency Toby Eady Associates.

Extract:

A loud gong marks the opening of the Peking opera: *The Legend of Lady White Snake* is unveiled.

*

Little White, the snake demon played by Golden Swallow, fights against Master Qinghai, the monk who is determined to separate this snake demon from her human husband. Golden Swallow waves and flaps his long flowing sleeves, and swirls, round and round. But Master Qinghai seems stronger. Little White is pushed to the floor, mourning.

All eyes are on the stage. Mingzhi quietly sneaks in, hiding himself among the crowd, Charcoal following him closely.

Master Qinghai steps forward. Little Green, the faithful maid of Little White, rushes to stop him from hurting her mistress.

Mingzhi strains his eyes. This green snake, Little Green, looks familiar. Her round eyes, sharp nose and delicate lips . . .

Little Sparrow? Mingzhi is stunned to see his friend, almost unrecognizable, in heavy make-up and the maid's costume. But Charcoal has spotted him; he barks joyfully, wags his tail, jumps onto the stage and runs to Little Sparrow.

The musicians drop their large and small gongs, drum and clapper, yueqin and huqin, erhu and sanxian, all fall clinking and clattering. Golden Swallow shrinks into a corner; the monk actor brandishes the spear in his hand; Little Sparrow stands still while Charcoal passionately rubs his back against the petrified actor's legs.

The crowd exchange queries, their voices droning in commotion.

A black dog on stage, on my birthday! Trembling with rage, Master Chai braces himself with his dragon stick. Worse than a broken cup. He watches Charcoal happily jump down from the stage, threading his way through the crowd, running towards the back of the hall.

To Mingzhi, the master's beloved eldest grandson.

Numbed to his feet, Mingzhi exchanges a quick glance with Little Sparrow on the stage. They look into each other's eyes, dull and lifeless.

For the first time, Mingzhi is punished: no dinner, and he is not allowed to leave his room until the opera troupe has completed all its performances. Likang and Da Niang are warned, too, to keep an eye on their son's behaviour, and a maid is assigned to keep track of and report on Mingzhi's whereabouts.

Worst of all, Mingzhi is forced to give up Charcoal. The master of the house insists: a black dog brings

bad luck. Mingzhi begs: 'Let me keep Charcoal! I will keep him in my room; he won't get out again!'

Master Chai howls: 'I said no black dog in my house. Do you understand?' His chest feels tight, and he clutches at his heart with one hand.

Mingyuan steps forward and massages his grandfather's back and shoulders. Master Chai heaves a long sigh, feeling relieved. That he has a second grandson.

*

Little Sparrow disappears from the stage after the unfinished first performance – a cruel punishment for a budding actor.

Longing for Worldly Pleasure replaces The Legend of Lady White Snake on the following nights. Golden Swallow monopolizes the stage playing the nun, a solo performance. His most faithful fan, Er Niang, glues herself to her seat, the best in the front row, and fixes her eyes on her beloved actor.

Thinking about Mingzhi being punished, Er Niang smiles, echoing Shi Fan, the nun on the stage, and hums:

' . . . I want to go down the mountain and seek a lover.

I don't care if he beats me, scolds me, laughs at me, maligns me . . . '

From the stage Golden Swallow glances over, and their gazes meet.

*

Mingzhi stares at the blank paper, all night, and writes nothing. The opera music roams around the mansion and travels to the west court. Golden Swallow's singing, in crisp, clear, long and drawn-out words, is heard:

' . . . It is only because my father was fond of reading the Buddhist scriptures

And my mother liked to intone Buddha's name.

Every day they burned incense at the temple and worshipped Buddha.

After birth I was sickly,

So they dedicated me to the Buddhist faith

And made me live as a nun . . . '

Mingzhi imagines the unhappy, secluded nun sitting alone in her room in front of a set of muyi, tapping the wooden frog drums with a stick to give emphasis as she chants sutras. Her daily task as a nun. Like a prisoner, counting her days.

Like him.

Mingzhi wets his brush with abundant ink, pressing down forcefully on the paper, making a huge dot. Black. Hopeless. He flops in his chair and lays his face on the desk. His streaming tears soak the paper, blotching the ink, smearing his cheek.

Literary Fiction June 9780330456197 Picador Asia

Picador Asia is an imprint of Pan Macmillan

Category	Arts, Literature, Publishing
Tags	chiew-siah tei, picador asia, toby eady, little hut of leaping fishes, malaysian, man asian literary prize, china
Email	Click to email author
Country	Hong Kong