



**On Art and
Artifice: A
Conversation with
Tan Twan Eng**

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SARE: Southeast Asian Review of English, Vol. 54, Issue 2, 2017



Tan Twan Eng, June 2017, Tallinn, Estonia © TTE

Tan Twan Eng was born in Penang and grew up in Penang and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. His debut novel, *The Gift of Rain*, was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2007. His second and latest novel, *The Garden of Evening Mists*, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2012. It won the Man Asian Literary Prize, an award created in 2007 to draw global attention to works by Asian writers, in 2012 and the Walter Scott Prize for best historical fiction in 2013. It won yet another honour by being shortlisted for the 2014 IMPAC Dublin Prize, the world's most valuable annual literary award for a single work of fiction published in English. Both novels have been translated into more than 25 languages. Tan was the International Writer in Residence at Nanyang Technological University in 2016 and is one of the patrons of the Young Walter Scott Prize. He is currently working on his third novel.

This interview is a composite of face-to-face and e-mail conversations that took place between 2011 and 2017. The personal interviews were conducted in various parts of the Klang Valley during Tan's annual returns home to Malaysia.

It has been ten years since your first novel, *The Gift of Rain* [2007], debuted. Global reception to the novel has been amazing. With the benefit of hindsight, what are your views and feelings towards *The Gift of Rain* now? Have they evolved over time? Are there parts of the novel you are particularly proud of, or wish you could rework, either by adding to or subtracting from the published work?

When I was writing *The Gift of Rain* I was unaware of any rules I should not break. Like it or not, once a writer's first novel has been written and published, that sense of freedom won't be present when he writes his subsequent novels. I'm proud of the fact that the novel has resonated with readers worldwide. I wouldn't go back to my published novels and make changes to them, for whatever reasons. It cheats the readers who've already read the books, who've already formed their own ideas about them. Using the movies as an example, Ridley Scott tinkered

with his 'Blade Runner' so often that there are now seven different versions of it. George Lucas received almost universal opprobrium too when he tweaked the original Star Wars trilogy and re-issued them.

The Japanese Occupation of Malaya [1941–1945] has been a popular historical period which Malaysian novelists, including yourself, Tash Aw, and Rani Manicka, have used as a setting for their works. Singaporean writer, Vyvyanne Loh, too, uses the Japanese Occupation as the background for her novel, *Breaking the Tongue* [2005]. Why did you pick this particular period for *The Gift of Rain*?

The setting was dictated by the story. Anyone who writes fiction will understand that. I can't speak for other writers but, for me, an idea for a story doesn't give me a choice of where and when to set it. I'm interested in that period. It's such a largely ignored or unknown period of Malaysia's past. I have friends around my age who have only the barest idea of what the Japanese Occupation involved.

The Japanese Occupation has been described as a major watershed in the history of Malaysia. Yet, as historian Paul H. Kratoska has written, "remarkably little is known about what happened"; popular understanding of the period "is in any case full of misconceptions." Were you concerned, while writing *The Gift of Rain*, that your fictional narrative of the period might inadvertently add to the existing misconceptions?

Not at all. My lawyer's training meant that I tried to be as accurate as I could in depicting the facts. But ultimately one shouldn't look to fiction writers for definitive answers; one looks to them for questions. If "remarkably little is known about what happened", then I hope someone who has read *The Gift of Rain* – or any other novels set in that period – will feel compelled to find out more about it, if he or she is interested in it.

Both *Breaking the Tongue* and *The Gift of Rain* employ the Occupation as a narrative device through which the young-adult protagonists, Claude Lim and Philip Hutton, respectively, grapple with and come to terms with their identity. Claude, an ethnic Chinese who was raised by his Anglophile parents to denigrate all things Chinese, finally reclaims his Chineseness through his association with Ling-Li, a young Chinese spy. Philip, on the other hand, who, although in the beginning identifies with neither the British nor Chinese parts of his identity, in the end is accepting of all the cultural influences that have shaped him. This is arguably suggested by Philip's final embrace of his full name, Philip Khoo-Hutton. Was this the conclusion you sought to write? Does it reflect your personal belief as well?

I prefer to let the readers come to their own conclusions. As Gabriel García Márquez remarked in an interview with *The Paris Review*, reading a novel is a private relationship between the reader and the book. I've been asked on a few occasions: if my books were to be made into movies, which actors would I choose to play the characters? I refuse to answer those questions too, as it's unfair to readers, who have formed their own ideas.

***The Gift of Rain* has a homoerotic kernel which, interestingly enough, was largely overlooked on initial reception. I have made a case elsewhere that what the two main characters, Philip Hutton and Endo-san, share is effectively an intense love relationship which, although romantic, is in the end sustained without the apparent conscious realization of either party. It is a lop-sided relationship of power silently structured**

by the principles of *shudō*, the Japanese “way of loving youths” between an adult male and a young adult male. Did you silently and purposely work *shudō* into the novel without naming it as such?

I’ve never even heard of *shudō* until you mentioned it. The fact that different readers can view *The Gift of Rain* from their own angles is, I feel, one of the strengths of the novel.

Do you personally see the queer dimension of *The Gift of Rain* as central to understanding the relationship between Philip and Endo, and the novel as a whole?

Not at all. The relationship is more about ignorance and knowledge, youth and experience. And sacrifice, of course.

You were quoted saying in an interview that you preferred “discerning readers” to approach *The Gift of Rain* not as a “gay novel” but as a story of self-discovery and betrayal, set in Penang during the traumatic years of the Japanese Occupation in World War II. Were you concerned that *The Gift of Rain* might be ghettoised by reviewers and readers?

No. Each person reads into the novel what he or she wants to. The fact that it’s able to be interpreted in a variety of ways is a testament to how each of us sees things differently. In “A Handful of Dust”, Evelyn Waugh wrote, “It would be a dull world if we all thought alike.”

How difficult was it for you to write your second novel, *The Garden of Evening Mists* [2012], considering the general truism that the follow-up is always harder to write, especially when the first one had been so warmly received?

It was a huge and daunting challenge, as I seek to improve with every book I write. Being a writer is, as in all professions, a process of growth and maturity and learning, and this process should be reflected in his works and how he sees the world.

There were also technical aspects I had to take into account. For example, if I used a striking description or a turn of phrase, I would wonder if I hadn’t already used it before in *The Gift of Rain*, or in a short story I’d written. I was more demanding of myself. Every book is different, with its own problems and challenges, and rewards.

Like *The Gift of Rain*, *The Garden of Evening Mists* is set in Malaya/Malaysia, albeit in Cameron Highlands, instead of Penang. It brings to life Teoh Yun Ling, a female protagonist to explore the shared issues of love, loss, and the persistence of memory amidst the upheavals of war. Could you tell us about your experience in bringing Yun Ling, as opposed Philip Hutton, to life? Did it take a different mode of thinking for you to create a differently gendered character?

I found it difficult at first. Philip Hutton was a man growing up in the 1930s, and there were no societal constraints on his movements. He could go anywhere on his own, and do almost anything he wanted to do. But Yun Ling is a woman living in the 1950s during the Malayan Emergency [1948–1960], so she can’t plausibly go around places

on her own, due to reasons of propriety and safety. Her movements would have been more curtailed than if she were a man. But aside from that, I viewed Yun Ling as a human being, with all our own fears and hopes and dreams and anxieties and strengths and weaknesses, and that was how I created her.

Stylistically, *The Garden of Evening Mists* is markedly different from *The Gift of Rain*. The second novel is more subdued and restrained, and less ornate in its descriptions. Clearly you were seeking to evolve your writing style. Can you tell us more?

My writing style *is* evolving. Also, the two books are different; Yun Ling is a totally different character from Philip Hutton, so her voice had to be different too. She's more controlled, more secretive, and subdued. I found that as I grow older, I begin to pare down the language I use, to try to get to the essence of what I want to say, to what the story requires.

There are fascinating structural parallels between *The Garden of Evening Mists* and *The Gift of Rain*. In both novels, the Japanese main characters, Nakamura Aritomo and Hayato Endo, have troubled links to the Emperor of Japan. Both men are outsiders in Japanese society. But in Malaya they develop unbreakable bonds with the locals, namely Yun Ling and Philip. They impart certain Japanese knowledge and values to their companions before exiting their lives prematurely, leaving them with gnawing memories that prevent them for life from having relationships with anyone else. What is it about this parallel structure that appeals to you?

The Garden of Evening Mists explores the next step of Malaya's evolution into Malaysia, the rapid changes that were happening after the war: the Emergency, the struggle for Independence. The scope of this second novel is smaller; almost every scene is confined to the garden and its immediate surroundings. With this novel I dealt with, among other things, questions of art and artifice, what is natural and what isn't, and the impermanence of memory. The concept of *shakkei* – borrowed scenery – plays a prominent role in the novel. To what extent can we believe – and trust – what we see, hear, know, and remember?

You employed Japanese gardening and tattooing as key tropes in *The Garden of Evening Mists*. You created Aritomo, Yun Ling's lover, as a former gardener of the Emperor of Japan, who lives and tends to his own garden in Cameron Highlands. Aritomo is also a *horimono* tattooist. It is only towards the end of the novel that the reader learns about how the two tropes more than overlap. How did you imagine your readers would react to this final revelation? How did you want or were hoping your readers would respond?

I can't dictate how I want or hope readers to react. Each will have his own reactions. Remember what Márquez said: the relationship between the reader and the book is a private one. To me I felt that the overlapping of the two 'tropes' was a natural progression. Both arts deal with concepts of artifice and illusion, with revelation and concealment. They reflect one another in a hall of mirrors.

***The Garden of Evening Mists* has two minor Japanese characters, Tatsuji and Teruzen, who are obviously gay lovers. What was your impetus in coming up with these characters?**

The section was originally from a short story I had written – a longer and slightly different version. I felt that it would fit seamlessly into *The Garden of Evening Mists* once I made some changes to it. Yun Ling had experienced – first hand – the war on one side of the battlefield, and I wanted her to hear the other side of it. In war, there are always casualties on both sides of the conflict.

Orhan Pamuk recently wrote that “novelists do not consciously dwell on what they do when they write their novels”, and that “The author of a novel is not always the best placed to interpret it, and eventually others may become more familiar with the text than he is.” How would you respond to these issues? Do you “consciously dwell” on what you are doing when you write fiction? And would you agree with what was said about the text and reader interpretation?

I consciously dwell on what I’m doing when I write. Wouldn’t you say that all writers have to? We have to decide on which word to use, the structure of our sentences, the placement of punctuation marks and which punctuation marks to use, the scenes we wish to describe to move the story along; we have to ascertain that the dialogue is realistic; we have to control the mood, the tone, the atmosphere so that it works for the entire book. Writing a novel is not an automatic, repetitive action like, for example, riding a stationary exercise bicycle or swimming laps in a pool. But while I’m aware that I’m consciously dwelling on the writing process, my subconscious isn’t sitting idly by – it’s also infiltrating itself into the text. Perhaps it’s only halfway through writing the novel that the writer sits back and starts to recognise the pattern in the weave, which he wasn’t consciously aware of at the beginning. But it’s still an incomplete pattern, vague, with no fixed shape or form.

There are various ways to interpret a novel. Other people apart from the writer of a novel may become more familiar with the text but, as I said earlier, each person will bring his or her own issues or interests into the process – which may ultimately either cloud the interpretation, or cast a new and original light on the book.

One of the most striking things about your novels is the poetic way in which you use language to weave compelling stories that reverberate with readers. Can you say something about your philosophical view of language, how you have come to acquire such an intimate knowledge of the way it works? Were you interested in language as a child?

I started reading at a very young age, and I had parents who did not restrict me from reading whatever I wanted, however adult the themes of the books. Many of the things I read just flew past my head, of course. But deep in my subconscious I’m sure I was absorbing the techniques of writing without being aware of it. I was catholic in my tastes when I was young, so I read a lot of bad novels as well as quality ones. After some time you begin to refine your sensibilities, to attune your ear to what sounds clumsy and clichéd on the page, and what sounds original and timeless.

Studying *aikido* also sharpened how I perceived the world – I learned to be more observant of the smaller things, I learned to be more sensitive to the natural world. I’m constantly writing, even when I’m not at my desk – I’m thinking of how to describe the things I see, trying to come up with an original, striking metaphor or simile. It’s getting more and more difficult, but because I abhor resorting to clichés, I force myself to do this. It enrages me when I come across clichéd descriptions or phrases in a book I’m reading - it just shouts to me that the writer was too lazy to excavate deeper into himself and come up with something that was his own, something that’s original and true.

As a writer I have to keep teaching myself to look at something commonplace in a new and different light. I get euphoric when I hit on a description that's original and illuminating, and yet so familiar that it makes you think, "Yes, that's exactly what it looks/sounds/smells/feels like! Why didn't I see it before?" And because as I grow older I begin to appreciate the beauty of nature more and more, I try to bring that appreciation into my writing. I enjoy reading poetic, lyrical writing, so it's only natural that I try to infuse my writing with those elements too. This sensitivity to the nuances of language is, I suppose, similar to cultivating an ear for dissonance and harmony in music.

I rewrite endlessly too, in order to smoothen all the edges. I'll work tirelessly on a single sentence until it sounds right to me. It perplexes me when some writers tell me proudly that they only rewrite once, or not at all, or that they refuse to heed their editors' advice. When I was teaching a creative writing program in NTU [Nanyang Technological University] last year [in 2016], one of my students asked me, 'How many times do you expect us to rewrite our assignment?' I replied, 'Until it sounds right.' And they sighed and rolled their eyes.

My experience as a lawyer also influences how I write. While people may joke that it's the lawyer's sacred duty to obfuscate the issues, in fact the opposite is true – as a lawyer I have to be sensitive to all the nuances of every word I use, I have to select the most apt choice to express myself with the utmost clarity so that there can be no dispute as to what I want to express.

Since the publication of *The Gift of Rain* and *The Garden of Evening Mists*, a number of critical essays as well as theses have been written on your novels. I am aware that you've read some of these. What is the experience like for you to read other people's extended take on your novels? And has any part of these secondary criticisms tempered your thinking about writing?

It's a strange feeling, especially when some of their hypotheses are so far off the mark. The ones that I remember and which are thought-provoking are usually those which don't attempt to compress and squash the books into the boxes of their pre-constructed, preconceived theories, but which allow the texts to breathe and lead them to conclusions that they may not have intended or favoured.

I wouldn't say that any of these secondary criticisms have tempered my views about writing, or my writing. The person I have to please is myself when I write. You can't please everyone, and you shouldn't. But that doesn't mean you can be self-indulgent in your writing. Writing is called a "discipline" after all.

As a writer I've been shaped by the books I've read, by the authors I admire; people like Kazuo Ishiguro, Salman Rushdie, Rose Tremain, Penelope Lively, Vladimir Nabokov, Julian Barnes, Martin Booth, Somerset Maugham, and Colm Tóibín. Ultimately my main aim is to tell a strong story and tell it well.

What is a "strong story" to you?

The characters must come across as believable and real. It doesn't matter if they're unlikeable. In fact, for me the most interesting characters are the unlikeable ones, for example Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, or Masuji Ono in *An Artist of The Floating World*. The writing and the story should be free of clichés; they shouldn't be pretentious or self-indulgent, and they shouldn't waste the reader's time.

What is your writing routine like when working on a longer piece of writing such as a novel?

I try my best to treat writing as a nine to five job. I have fixed hours every day when I write. I have no daily word limit I have to reach. Sometimes I spend the day revising what I had written already. Some days are spent on research and reading up on new elements I want to include in the book. If the writing is going well, then I'll keep at it until late in the evening. When I'm not at my desk writing, one part of my mind will be thinking about it.

You have written two novels, and several short stories, including “Somewhere Above the Clouds”. Do you intend to expand into other genres in the near or distant future?

I'm writing more short stories, although I find it constricting to have to limit my word count. For me, a story should not be wasted, but expanded into a novel to explore all its possibilities, to allow it to breathe.

The last I heard, *The Garden of Evening Mists* was being adapted into film. What's the status of that? Is *The Gift of Rain* in the process of being adapted as well?

The script for *The Garden of Evening Mists* is going through its long process of rewrites at the moment. My fervent wish for the final version is that the filmmakers take the trouble to understand the characters thoroughly – thoroughly! – so that they, the characters, don't act or speak in any way that's embarrassingly twee or clichéd or out of character. As for *The Gift of Rain*, the film rights have not been sold. I doubt it will, because to do justice to it will require a massive budget.

How would you see yourself as a writer: Malaysian, postcolonial, diasporic, transnational, Asian, or perhaps Southeast Asian? How do you position yourself as a writer, in other words?

Labels are limiting, and tend to pigeonhole writers. I avoid them. I'm a writer.

Many would agree with that. Nonetheless, writers tend to be constructed by readers, reviewers, and scholars as predominantly one, the other, or several things at once. Publishers' marketing strategies, too, play a key role in positioning writers and their work differently in different markets, often without the writers having any say in the matter.

Invariably, once writers come to be positioned as, say, postcolonial, they are often, whether they like it or not, silently expected to carry in their writing the burden of that ascription. They will almost always be expected to subvert Orientalist stereotypes of the “East”, intervene in national and global debates on power and oppression, and the like.

Likewise, as you mentioned in one of our earlier conversations, that, as a fiction writer, you have no agenda, least of all political, beyond telling a strong story. This is all good, except that the issue gets somewhat complicated when detractors argue that a global Asian novel, such as *The Gift of Rain*, often not only does not write back to the “West”, it also tends to exoticise the “East” for the consumption of the “West”. How would you respond to that?

As you've said, such positioning of writers is often done without any say by the writers themselves. There's nothing I can do about that. I can't change what other people think writers ought to do. My main aim is to keep honing my craft, to keep improving as a writer.

I've found that, in bookstores outside Asia, my books are shelved alphabetically, according to my surname. It's only in Malaysia and Singapore that I usually find my books are categorised by my nationality. Ironic, isn't it?

As for the question of "exoticising the East", Márquez has remarked that what outsiders find hard to believe in his stories is often commonplace Latin American reality. Settings of novels may be "exotic" but ultimately their characters are not; they have the same concerns as any real person in any part of the world. They want to understand the world, to dream, to love, and to be loved.

You stated in a separate interview recently that people generally thought of you or expected you to be pliable, and that you're far from that. Why do you think people thought that and expected you to be that way? How different would you say you are as a public figure, as compared to your private self or as you appear to your closer friends?

People often overlook the fact that when a writer is on a public stage, he's doing a job. I'm amiable and easygoing during public events and at literary festivals and talks, and I do my best to be professional in my conduct, but I draw a thick line between those occasions and what happens when I'm not "performing". There is a marked separation between the author and his books. There have been a number of occasions when people I hardly know have overstepped this line, when they were pushy and demanding and obnoxious, and I have had to firmly and bluntly draw their attention to the boundaries. I'm a very private person. My friends know that I'm irreverent and don't suffer fools. My friends certainly also are similar!

You belong to a new generation of transnational Malaysian writers that includes Tash Aw, Rani Manicka, and Preeta Samarasan. How do you see your fiction as similar to or different from the works of your contemporaries, as well as those of the previous generation of Malaysian writers, such as Lloyd Fernando and K. S. Maniam?

Our interests, influences, and backgrounds are different, so our fiction and writing styles are different. We're similar in that we're all transnational, but I'm regularly back in Malaysia for months at a time. I have friends and family in Malaysia, and I'm still Malaysian. I've never read Rani Manicka's works, or Lloyd Fernando's or K. S. Maniam's, so I can't say anything about them.

Let's broaden the scope to Southeast Asia and Asia in general. What is your opinion on the recent novels in English or English translation from Asia that you've read? What do you admire and why?

Yiyun Li's debut collection of short stories, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*, and Mary Yukari Waters' *The Laws of Evening*. Li's writing is deceptively simple and fresh. Waters' stories, set in post-war Japan, have a subdued melancholy to them. One of the recent novels – written in English – that I liked is Vyvyanne Loh's *Breaking the Tongue*. Judy Fong Bates's *The Year of Finding Memory*, a family memoir I recently read, has also stayed with me. It's a moving, beautifully written book. Others are Tash Aw's resonant *Strangers on a Pier* and *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* by Sonny Liew. It's not a novel, but Saidah Rastam's *Rosalie and Other Love Songs* is marvellous – it tells us the history of Malaya/Malaysia through the songs of our past.

Fiction in English and English translation from Asia is fast gaining popularity in the global fiction market, if it has not already become the “in” thing to read. Why do you think that is the case? Would you say it has helped to bring more attention to your own writing?

Asia is looming ever larger and larger in the consciousness of readers around the world. I hope it's not the “in” thing because that implies that its popularity will wane. It's not just in the field of fiction, but economic, social and political interest in Asia is growing too. I can't say for certain that it has helped in my case, but it couldn't have hurt. The fact that there are more people moving around the world, from country to country, helps to spread the awareness of writers from their own countries. There's also a greater awareness of the various literary festivals held in Asia too.

You are no stranger to literary awards, festivals, and initiatives. What has the experience been like for you thus far?

Literary awards are helpful for new authors to draw the media's attention to their novels. My experience has been enriching and informative. I've met a lot of wonderful people, but also a great number of strange and unusual ones. With each year there seems to be another armful of new literary awards sprouting up, and there's a danger that this may dilute the effectiveness of these awards and cause 'awards fatigue' for readers.

A unique literary prize that was founded in the last few years is the Walter Scott Prize [WSP]. It's been running now for eight years and it's gone from strength to strength. Its focus is on historical fiction, and its longlists and shortlists have been eclectic and far-ranging.

Two years ago the WSP's patrons, the Duke and Duchess of Buccleuch, started an offshoot prize to the WSP, the Young Walter Scott Prize [YWSP], to encourage young people to write historical fiction. It was a surprise and an honour for me when they invited me to be one of the patrons for the YWSP. Presenting the awards to the YWSP's two winners in June this year at the Borders Book Festival, I also learned more about the programmes and workshops organised by the YWSP throughout the year to encourage young people to write historical fiction. It's extremely heartening to see the enthusiasm and the talent out there.

Thank you, Twan Eng, for taking the time to share your views. We eagerly look forward to the publication of your third novel in 2018.