Physician and writer Dr Han Suyin was best known for her book *A Many-Splendoured Thing* that became a Hollywood hit but few are aware of Dr Han’s time in Malaya. Ms Ina Zhang, NTU alumna (HSS/2013) and journalist, in her new book *Han Suyin in Malaya* sets out to trace the steps of Dr Han Suyin’s 12-year stay at Malaya against a troubled era set in post-WWII conditions as a physician, writer, and public intellectual.

Drawing upon extensive materials, this book is a deeply meticulous study that unearths, reconstructs and packs together the 12 years that Dr Han Suyin spent in Malaya to an unprecedented degree.

The book is published in Chinese, and Ms Zhang is currently working on an English version. We speak to Ms Zhang to find out more.

Tell us a bit about yourself.
I have always been interested in history; and being a non-local-born Singaporean, I get to know Singapore by studying its history. In particular, I am drawn to monographic studies of people who had left their marks in history in one way or another. Dr Han Suyin was one of them. In fact, I have published, in *Lianhe Zaobao*, the local Chinese paper, a number of essays on other historical figures as well, including writers, artists, and intellectuals from both the East and the West who came to Malaya in pre- and post-war years. A collection of these essays is expected to be released at the end of this year.

How significant was the Malayan period in Dr Han Suyin’s life?
In my opinion, very significant. Malaya played a critical role in providing the circumstances, thus giving her the platforms and opportunities to participate in public discourse actively. Following the publication of her bestseller *A Many-Splendoured Thing*, she went on writing in Malaya, all on regional themes, including three full-length novels, two novellas and a good number of essays. At the same time, as her literary works, her Eurasian identity, and her controversial views about the Chinese mainland.

However, I noticed that when it came to Dr Han Suyin’s 12-year stay in Malaya, there was hardly any meaningful research or notable mention in academia or even in mainstream media. For someone of her stature, this was something that surprised me, and represented an exciting opportunity to explore a relatively unknown territory and reconstruct this ‘missing period’ in her life.

What motivated you to undertake a study on Dr Han Suyin’s life and why Malaya?
Dr Han Suyin as a person was intriguing to me because she had so many dimensions. Firstly, she was a Eurasian during a period where such a characteristic was highly uncommon and also less accepted in society; secondly, she was a well-known figure in the international literary scene; and at the same time, she was also a very outspoken public figure who often attracted controversy for her opinions and thoughts.

I believe these are also the reasons which made her such a fascinating subject, as some research and studies have been done on her literary works, her Eurasian identity, and her controversial views about the Chinese mainland.

**DISCOVERING HAN SUYIN IN MALAYA**
So to me, when we talk about Dr Han Suyin, we have to talk about Malaya. It was an indispensable period of her life that contributed to the type of person, writer and physician she matured into.

**During the course of your research, what impressed you most about Dr Han Suyin?**
I would say it was the duality in her character. Despite her social status, Dr Han Suyin was someone who concerned herself with the problems of the unprivileged groups in society that were unable to speak up for themselves. She had no qualms about expressing her honest opinions in public, even if it came with a risk of upsetting certain groups of people and may result in some inconveniences. Yet on the other hand, she was aware that because she was adored by Hollywood and the Western audiences, she could get away with speaking her mind, and deal with the repercussions while still remaining a relevant voice in the public sphere.

**Tell me about your meeting with Dr Han Suyin in 2012**
She was already 96 when we visited her at her home in Lausanne, Switzerland. Together with her family, we celebrated her birthday, which turned out to be the last one before she passed away in late 2012. Her love for literature was clear in the way she responded positively to the books we brought for her.

**Which is your favourite Dr Han Suyin book?**
Basing on my research, I’ll have to mention two books – …And The Rain My Drink and The Crippled Tree. I like these two books because they captured valuable pieces in the history of post-war Malaya and modern China respectively.

**How was it like conducting the research?**
Practically, it was demanding because I was juggling the Masters programme on a part-time basis together with my full-time job at the time.

When I began my research in 2009, I had to visit the library in the evenings to view the microfilms and bring the materials home to study because the archives were not available online yet.

It was also near impossible to trace the whereabouts of every single person who was acquainted to Dr Han Suyin during her stay in Malaya because hardly any records were kept then. But thankfully, in one way or another through my interactions, I was able to obtain several leads and connect to a good number of people including the woman who used to work as Dr Han Suyin’s domestic helper.

**What was most challenging in putting this book together?**
To me, a person has to be evaluated in stages. Personality, behaviour, and mind evolve over time, making it such that it is virtually impossible to rely on a singular narrative to describe anyone.

In presenting the “Malaya period” in the life of Dr Han Suyin, which made up part of the life journey of this famous yet contradictory figure, I’m mindful that whatever goes into the book has to be objective, complete, fair and as accurate as possible. As a researcher and writer, I search and piece together information, verify them against relevant records, statements and evidences, and present to the reader what has proven itself to be highly factual.

It is up to the reader to look at the materials and information in my book, and form their own interpretations and judgements of Dr Han Suyin during the 12 years she spent in Malaya.