

Straddling the South China Sea: Tropical Speculative Futures of Borneo and Malaysia

L. Han

Independent Scholar, the Tropics

Abstract

In the year 2119, two sisters, Jules and Nina, live in a nation divided by the South China Sea, struggling to survive tropical environmental disasters unleashed by human-induced climate change that have exacerbated tensions between the federal government and Bornean states. Sarawak has declared independence from Malaysia and, together with Sabah, Brunei, and Kalimantan, has formed the Borneo Treaty Organisation to keep safe from other nations greedy for their natural resources and plentiful land fortified against the rising seas. The West Malaysians call this a “Civil War”; the Sabahans and Sarawakians call it the “War of Independence”. During a negotiated ceasefire, Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak each welcome their people home; in the case of the once Bornean Malaysian states, people return to embrace citizenship of the newly independent Sabah and Sarawak. In Sarawak, Jules asks her sister, Nina, to come home, away from the new Malaysia that has absorbed Singapore in exchange for land as the island nation submerges. Sarawak is willing to accept West Malaysian spouses and children of native Sarawakians, but West Malaysians are reluctant to move as they are fearful of never being trusted and of being thought of as spies. Then in Malaysia, Nina’s 15-year-old daughter receives an official letter from the Ministry of Defence to report for National Service.

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Prelude

When we were little, my sister and I straddled the South China Sea. Our mother's parents lived in Ipoh, a former tin mining town in the northwestern state of Perak whose glory days under British colonial rule were not entirely lost, with stately colonial buildings and fountains and huge bungalows of former tin mining tycoons still standing even in 2080. In those days, tourists too were still visiting West Malaysia on the southernmost tip of mainland Southeast Asia.

When she married our father, our mother moved to Sarawak, which was then one of two states of Malaysian Borneo. It was there that my sister and I were born and raised. We are native Sarawakians. Our father's people live in a longhouse upriver.

In Sarawak, our mother taught us to be swimming dragons. She also taught us to follow her ancestors' ancient qigong practices, grounding ourselves, circulating our energy, and going through the four Tiger qigong flows. But my sister and I loved most to be swimming dragons. We started together in the deep. Sometimes, we started in hot, churning waters. Other times, we were in calm, cool depths. Many times, we were in different places, but always we rose to the surface, twisting and turning, stretching and weaving, until we reached the surface and breathed.

It has been a long time since we have been swimming dragons together.

Jules at Base Camp, Mount Santubong, Sarawak 2119

— in the second year of the “War of Independence”

This morning, while the construction teams are building foundations for new dwellings, workplaces, and farming plots on these slopes, I am teaching the children history. We have been studying the history of Sarawak and its place in Southeast Asia. It is important that the children understand how we got to where we are. Many of them have at least one parent on active duty or in the command centre or in one of the medical stations around our new Nation. We are in the second year of the War of Independence, but the ceasefire has been enforced for two months now. This is a ceasefire to allow Sarawakians and Sabahans scattered around the globe to return home to claim their new citizenship.

At this time when resources are scarce, with every country channelling all their efforts to protect their lands from rising seas and increasingly wild and extreme natural disasters, travel is both a luxury and possibly a fatal exercise. Thus, the call to

Sarawakians and Sabahans to return to their homelands is directed mostly to those residing and working in West Malaysia, Singapore, and other Southeast Asian nations. To put it bluntly, our Nation is at war. Some call it a “civil war,” but the Sarawakians and Sabahans have already declared their independence from Malaysia, and we consider ourselves independent nations. To us, we are fighting a war to retain our independence and national sovereignty.

The truth is that the three governments recognise the difficulties faced by families of mixed marriages and mixed parentage. Among the governments and citizenry there is a real fear of traitors and spies among the people making this journey across the South China Sea. Can the West Malaysians married to Sarawakians be trusted as true citizens of Sarawak? Will their loyalty ever waver? What of the families they leave behind? Will Sarawakians and Sabahans be trusted if they choose to remain in West Malaysia? Will there ever be peace between us, and will we ever be allowed to travel across the South China Sea freely again after this bloody partition?

In the past few weeks, I have taken the school children through the Sarawak history of the pre-Brooke dynasty, the rise of the White Rajahs, World War II, and the Japanese occupation. We are studying the formation of Malaysia, what the West Malaysians called the Emergency and what the Indonesians called “*Konfrontasi*” (the Confrontation), and now, the breakaway of Singapore—or its expulsion, depending on which side you choose to believe.

In class, I follow closely the prescribed syllabus of our new independent government—explaining how a “*free Sarawak for Sarawakians*” was our rallying cry and social media tagline. We are teaching the children about Sarawak and Sabah’s breakaway and the decision to become independent nations, free from the greed and oppression of the West Malaysian colonisers.

Lisa Nahar raises her hand, “Mr Lee Kwan Yew was a freedom fighter, like our Premier?”

“Yes, Lisa! Very good! Lee knew that Singapore was not given equal status or a fair share compared with the other Malaysian states. He was brave. Singapore was a tiny island compared to the land size of West Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak. Then within 20 years, Mr Lee had led Singapore far ahead of the Malaysia it had broken away from. Singapore had left Malaysia behind.”

“But now, Malaysia controls Singapore?” This question comes from Marcus Tang; his father heads one of the hydro dam divisions that supplies electricity throughout our new nation.

"Yes, they have taken it over. Singapore is powerful in many ways, but it is tiny and it depends on Johor for its drinking water. Malaysia says eventually it will be submerged by the rising seas so its people need land to live on. Malaysia is offering Singaporeans land, to rent and to survive on, but it is at a cost, as you can see."

"The cost of independence!" chirps Tania, whose mother fell in the First Rebellion against the then federal government's army barracks at the Old Penrissen Camp.

"Rising seas are caused by global warming, right, Teacher Jules? The polar ice caps have melted and the seas are rising and that's why island nations like the Maldives and..."

"Kiribati!"

"Tuvalu!"

"Marshall Islands!"

"But not Borneo," says Kit Peng soberly. Her father is a survivor of the Battle at Ria Camp, where her oldest brother was killed, just two days short of his 19th birthday.

"No, because we are a large island, the third largest in the world. We are losing some low-lying areas, but we are safe here in the highlands."

"My father says Malaysia is the coloniser." This is from Faiz Amin; his father is a colonel in our army and is rarely at home in the hills. Faiz never knows when he will be home or where he has gone. He is on active duty. He could be on any of our borders with Sabah, Brunei or Kalimantan, or on the seas with our navy. Our army, navy, and air force must work together to protect us from West Malaysian colonisers.

"Yes, that is true. They took over when the British left. Those White Rajahs had reaped what they could, and after World War II, the British Empire was disintegrating. They brokered a deal and created this false nation called Malaysia. What made them think we had anything in common? That we belonged together as a nation of people? It was a fiction perpetuated by the white colonisers."

It is not that I am not teaching particularly precocious children; rather, these are the offspring of the generation fighting for survival in a world rife with disasters and corporations and governments that start wars for limited resources. So-called natural disasters have plagued Earth since the last century coronavirus pandemic of 2020-2021: hurricanes of greater intensity, earthquakes triggering tsunamis, once dormant volcanoes erupting.

We are at war to preserve water, food, and energy for our people. With our oil reserves, hydro dams, and a large expanse of land replete with rainforests, and wildlife, Sarawak has all these precious resources in abundance, while the population in West Malaysia has much less. On this island of Borneo, we are now free and independent, with resources sufficient for our people. We don't need to be controlled by a federal government that has always taken the lion's share for its own people on the mainland with its huge capital and satellite cities. We no longer need to be second-class citizens in our own land.

Since our breakaway, life has changed for all of us: Sarawakians, Sabahans, Malaysians, and the former Singaporeans. Perhaps clear symbols of this change are the lights of those iconic monoliths of a progressive, *developed* Malaysia, the Merdeka 118, the Exchange 106 and the Petronas Twin Towers. They are scarcely lit up at night now—just enough to make sure the air force pilots can avoid them in the night skies. They no longer have access to the energy powered by the hydro dams of Sarawak.

In today's lesson, I explain to the children that now in 2119, we Sarawakians have a more powerful form of protection: the Borneo Alliance Treaty Organisation made up of Brunei, Sabah, Nusantara-led Kalimantan, and ourselves, Sarawak.

Nina at Bukit Gasing, Selangor, Malaysia 2119

— in the second year of the “Civil War”

My husband comes home late at night when the children are asleep. We work at the power plant on high ground, but I come home early to take care of the children. Despite everything, the government allows us to bring our children home to our hill-pods where we can have some sort of family life. There are boarding schools on high ground at Cameron Highlands and Fraser's Hill, but we are holding off sending them there yet.

We are not at the stage of the Taiwanese and Japanese, who keep all their children safe in secret bunkers and apparently in caves in case of open warfare or nuclear attack. There are permanent skirmishes on the high seas between different nations' fishing vessels. No matter what has been agreed on paper or through diplomatic negotiations regarding fishing rights in the waters of the Andaman Sea, the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea, the fisherfolk who ply the waters are fighting for a shrinking pool of marine life. While once the Spratly Islands and Luconia Shoals were disputed, they are now submerged. Oil rigs mark where the islands had once been, popular for their beautiful beaches and divers' underwater paradises.

The truce between the new Malaysia and its former states, Sabah and Sarawak, is just that, a truce. While Singapore reluctantly returned to the fold in the face of aggressive moves by the giants in East Asia and a diminishing supply of food and water, as well as rapidly rising seas that are predicted to eventually submerge the entire island nation, the Bornean states broke away. The land of my birth claimed its independent. Those of us who were born in either Bornean state of Sarawak or Sabah are being offered a chance to return. We can even bring our families, even if they are West Malaysian-born. The Premier says we will be welcomed back home, but there is a deadline to do so.

My sister has asked me to come home. She says we will be safer there and that our children will have a better future. In Sarawak there are more resources to sustain life in this new world, with its changing climate and its dwindling resources.

But I cannot because my husband will not leave his parents and his sister and autistic brother to an uncertain life in the new Malaysia. He says he could not live with himself if he fled to relative safety, leaving them behind. Would he really be accepted in Sarawak, anyway? Or would he always be viewed with suspicion, as a spy by Sarawak and a traitor by the new Malaysia-2117, named as such for the year when the Bornean states broke away and the Singaporeans, stranded on a diminishing, shrinking island, returned to a new Malaysia?

So, we stay here: 15-year-old Sarah and 13-year-old Noel, my husband Kai Meng, and I. And we have family life with Kai's parents, his brother, and his sister—who leaves their home only to go to work in the munitions factory and to collect their rations. We know we are not alone. We believe we can protect each other, that the government will keep us safe, that Malaysia-2117 can do without the resources of the new independent nations that were once part of this country, and that there is enough for us here on this peninsula. But sometimes I catch a look or a frown when I say something they don't understand or don't agree with. I am still an outsider, the Sarawakian, a traitor even though I didn't join those who broke away from the motherland. So, I must always be careful to be grateful, to be humble, and to agree with their politics, to earn their trust.

Sometimes, I dream of my childhood self, sitting with my sister at our grandmother's side, listening to her stories of a different tropical world, of a different Sarawak. Our grandmother used to tell us about her own grandmother's childhood when she could take day trips to Damai Beach or visit the semi-wild orangutans at Semenggoh and plan explorations in the Sarawak Chamber at Gunung Mulu National Park, the largest cave chamber in the world which was full of bats and the rustlings of a myriad of insects—so different to the present, when it is used to store emergency supplies in

case of a prolonged war. This was when people could have leisure time, and when they enjoyed the outdoors and did not fear nature's ferocity and unpredictable whims. It was a time when people could care about animals and their survival. Today, animals are measured by their usefulness as guard dogs, beasts of burden, and meat.

The borders to our peninsula, this new Malaysia-2117, are heavily guarded. Lawless individuals of different nationalities lurk at the Thai border while ever more boldly, pirates ply the waters of the Straits of Malacca and the Sulu and Celebes seas. Our workplace, the power plant that feeds energy to our capital and the offices of the government, is safe. At least, this is what we are told, and it does seem that we are safe, too. We hear from our news portals that everyone is digging in deep, that governments are concentrating on buffering their defences against the rising tides rather than against marauders who might infiltrate our borders and steal what goods they can.

Jules, climbing at Mount Santubong, Sarawak 2119

— in the second year of the “War of Independence”

Today, after history class, I take the children on a scheduled climb. In the old days, children had Physical Education to get some exercise and to learn some sports. Here in independent Sarawak, our children learn how to climb. We are told that others all around the world do, too, even the children of the wealthy. Badminton, football, sepak takraw—they are games of a past when sport could be either a leisure activity or a professional career. No more, today.

So, for us, from a young age, we Sarawakians must all learn how to climb, how to carry packs, and how to navigate on the narrow trails that twist and turn, up and down, the steep hills we now live in. Yes, there are plateaus and flatlands still, but these are reserved for large multi-storeyed buildings and storage containers.

I am taking care of the 10-year-olds today. These children are quite fit and already able to climb, but there are always a few outliers and a few who would get lost in a flash or who are accident-prone. The class is relatively large; there are 35 students, and I am not allowed to train them on my own. Andee is helping out today. He is tall and thin and wears his hair long, in a ponytail. The children look up to him, but a few stay with me. I am less threatening, I think. I take my time over the rocks and up the cliffs.

I give the children a little treat when we reach the platform midway to the top. I had saved my rations and made mini red bean buns for them. The children's faces light up when I take them out of my backpack.

"A whole red bean bun for me?" little Joey asks.

She beams widely when I say yes.

Some children gobble their buns down, while others savour the taste and the texture. I'm not a great baker, but I know the school fare can get boring and tasteless. And many parents don't have the time or the cooking implements to prepare homemade meals after a long day at work. Although I have a husband, we have no children, so there is less to take care of after school is finished for the day.

Our decision not to have children bothers my sister, but she can't do anything about it. Why would I want to bring children into this world? It is a savage and dangerous world, and who knows how long humans can find ways to keep adapting to the changing climate that our ancestors provoked? I quickly grew adept at spurning any young men who might have considered me as a possible mate on this perilous journey of life.

My chosen companion Isak, a relatively old professor who, when not teaching, fills his time—not with churning out academic papers in journals that no one reads like the professors of times gone by, but by innovating the most efficient methods of breeding, growing, cooking, and packaging protein-filled mealworms and crickets for tasty snacks. He is, in fact, what people might call the Steve Jobs of the 2100s. However, unlike the great innovators of the 20th and 21st centuries, Isak, channels any profits from his numerous patents of superfoods and innovative processes into efforts to keep our people alive and healthy during this time of uncertain climate change. These efforts range from the construction of dwellings in the highlands for those whose homes have been swallowed up by the Sarawak River and the South China Sea to desalination plants and reservoirs for potable water.

As I chew on my own little bun, I think about my sister's children, Sarah and Noel. I hope they are good climbers. I don't know. Communication has been cut between families and friends divided by the South China Sea. We are in the middle of a war of independence, after all.

So, it is not surprising that there is a deadline for Sarawakians to claim their citizenship of this new Nation and to come home.

Nina at Bukit Gasing, Selangor, Malaysia 2119

— in the second year of the “Civil War”

“The Ministry of Defence says *Tahniah!* Congratulations,” Sarah declares as she shows me her tablet. “I’ve been called up to start training in the navy.”

“But you’re only 15!” I grab the tablet and read the government email with the attached embossed Ministry letter spelling out the details.

“They’ve lowered the age again today, Mum,” Noel says. “Malik in my class, his dad is in the Ministry of Defence. He says we need to bolster our forces. I wouldn’t be surprised if they come for us 13-year-olds soon.”

He turns to his sister, “But don’t worry, Sarah. You’re not going into battle. They’re just making sure you’re well trained and ready in case we need to go back to war.”

“The news broadcast at school just now said the ceasefire would probably continue. No one wants to go back to war. I think the Prime Minister doesn’t want any more blood lost over Sabah’s and Sarawak’s declaration of independence,” Sarah agrees. But her worried eyes belie her calm tone. The children have classmates whose older siblings never came home after the ceasefire was agreed upon. A full week of mourning (but with shifts continuing and no public holiday declared), and a symbolic funeral for those who perished in the Civil War was held at Padang Merdeka. It was televised to all households in the country, of course, including those of our new comrades in Singapore.

My son is 13, and his sister is just two years older, and they’re talking in such a matter-of-fact way about national service, war, and deaths in battle. The truth is that childhood is a luxury enjoyed by previous generations. Childhood now is about equipping oneself with the physical prowess and patriotic zeal necessary to survive in this uncertain world. It’s about making sure we can endure the Earth’s unpredictable “natural” disasters and the scramble for resources to keep life going.

I leave the children in the kitchen with their cricket protein bars and enriched milk and go into the study I share with Kai. He’s not home yet, and I need the space to think. I thought we had three more years before Sarah needed to go into national service. Now, it’s going to happen in a few weeks. Training in the navy for two years. After that, tests to decide what Sarah should study: medicine, engineering, technology, agriculture and alternative food production, education, the military forces, or basic labour for the heavy construction work. There’s not much else. Our youngsters have to be equipped with useful skills to help the country keep everyone afloat as our land

mass shrinks, alternative food production ramps up, and the population becomes increasingly fearful and desperate. Yet, we are relatively well off—refugees from Myanmar and Thailand are finding their way into our land borders, while others from as far as South Asia are reminiscent of the boat people who fled to our shores from Vietnam long ago in the mid-1970s. They are losing themselves within the masses of unskilled labourers and the homeless eking out a life in deserted low-lying areas or on higher ground where they can find shelter hiding in the new villages.

What is the alternative?

Imprisonment. A life on the run. All of us jailed for sheltering a citizen who is not performing her civic duties. Or even stripped of our jobs and privileges for being unpatriotic.

Even if we had the money, there is no one we know whom we could bribe to keep Sarah safe from the battlefield. Those days of rampant bribery and corruption, draining the country's coffers both in Malaysia and in Sarawak when they were held in the palms of power-hungry, greedy men who wanted to live forever, are long gone.

I know there is an alternative, but I don't know if things are any better in Sarawak. My sister has asked me to come home. Life is better there, she says. The population is much smaller in a land mass almost equal in size to that of Peninsular Malaysia. There is more for everyone, and Sarawakians are protected by the Borneo Alliance Treaty Organisation. She says that everyone knows that with the whole might of Indonesia backing the capital city Nusantara in Kalimantan, Brunei, Sabah, and Sarawak are safe. Over here on the peninsula, the bond that holds those four entities together seems tenuous. Our government tells us that the united front is a façade and that before too long, the true intentions of the largest partner will emerge and the Bornean states will be absorbed by the mighty colossus, Indonesia. My sister dismisses this as a fabrication and insists that my family will be better off in the newly independent Sarawak. There is more for everyone, she says. No one is a second-class citizen; everyone is equal. But this is typically what Sarawakians say when they try to entice us home.

Jules, preparing a home, Sarawak 2119

— in the second year of the “War of Independence”

I realise just how much Isak, my companion, the old professor, loves me when he tells me that we will prepare a home for my sister and her family. This man, who has lived

his life to prepare Sarawakians to be independent and free after years of oppression by colonial powers—the White Rajahs, the British, the Japanese, the Peninsular Malaysians—is now allowing a young family with children to enter his home, to disturb his professorial sanctuary.

We have a spare room and also my study. My sister and her husband can have the spare room, and we will convert the study for the children. It will be easy to find Nina and Kai jobs. They are skilled and experienced. The children will soon learn the ways of Sarawakians. And the longhouse life, now moved up into the hilly areas, will not just be stories anymore. They can hear the old stories from Isak's people and from our late father's, too. They can even live their own stories in the longhouses if they want to. This is what I believe.

Nina, in Janda Baik, Pahang, Malaysia 2119

— in the second year of the “Civil War”

The paperwork has taken a long time. Although the Malaysia-2117 government has agreed to allow Sarawakians to go home, it is a long and tedious task, especially for a West Malaysian partner and Malaysia-born children. I could have gone home easily, but my family is not only of Peninsula Malaysia but are assets of the country: one child is of an age to begin her military training, and my husband is a qualified engineer.

Finally, we are given permission to leave, and the new Sarawak Nation has accepted us. The children have said goodbye to their friends and teachers. Some have called them traitors to their faces while others turned their backs on them. Some teachers have told the children they are deeply disappointed, but others have been kind. Perhaps they know there is a better life for the children in the land where hornbills still fly and where orangutans still roam at Batang Ai and Lanjak Entimau.

Our next-door neighbours on the left spit at the children when they come home from school for the last time. The neighbour on the right peeks from behind her curtains. She smiles a tremulous smile and waves her fingers before drawing her curtains again. This is hard to bear, but Sarah has been excused from National Service, and we are looking forward to a future in a nation that has habitable land, natural resources, and relative safety from marauding thieves and refugees spilling over from bordering countries.

We are now in Janda Baik to say goodbye to Kai's parents and his sister and brother. Kai's father is in a wheelchair at the dining table. He has not been mobile for many

years, but his mother is still physically fit and strong for her age. She is crying silently now, though. Tears are trickling down her cheeks as we eat our “makan selamat”, the meal shared before a journey. Kai’s sister is stony-faced, but there is no mistaking the despair in her eyes. His autistic brother sits alone in his corner of the dining table.

I cannot blame my mother-in-law. Her eldest child is leaving, and he can never come back. He will be deemed a traitor, as will her only grandchildren. All three, and I, the one who corrupts, can never return to this family home.

This is our last supper.

Jules, a welcome home, Sarawak 2119

— in the second year of the “War of Independence”

We are waiting for my sister and her family at the military installation where returning citizens land and disembark. They are processed at immigration; we expect this to be a long wait. But surprisingly, it doesn’t take that long.

My sister and her children emerge among the bedraggled group. I think that Kai must still be held up in immigration, but my sister tells us that we can leave now. We don’t need to wait.

“Is there some kind of quarantine period?” I ask my sister.

“No,” my sister holds her children’s hands tightly.

It is Sarah who tells me, “Father is not coming. Not now, anyway. He is staying with Kong-Kong and Poh-Poh, and to help Auntie Su-Lyn and Uncle Jai.”

I hug them all together in a huddle. “I am so glad to see you all.”

There is nothing more I can say.

Nina, in the Borneo Highlands, Sarawak 2119

— in the second year of the “War of Independence”

My children have a better future now. They have a school life, a childhood of sorts. They will go into National Service when they are 18, and they will have choices among

worthwhile professions, to help build this new Nation. The ceasefire remains, as all three nations recoup and try to rebuild. We Sarawakians and Sabahans pray the war of independence will never resume. We are independent now. We are free, and we're not asking for reparations for all those years of Malaysian colonial rule. Our shared history is too entangled and too sad.

There are too many families that are now broken and can never be together again. But we will survive the unexpected that the Earth throws at us in spite of the future that our ancestors shaped for us with their folly and greed.

My sister and I are swimming dragons together again. Following our mother's ancient practices, we are twisting and reaching out and up. We breathe evenly and smoothly when we break the surface. My husband is a filial son, but this has somehow turned him into an enemy to his wife and children in this cruel, uncertain world. While we may never physically be at war with each other, technically, the new Malaysia, Malaysia-2117, will never accept the independent Sarawak and independent Sabah, and the doors will soon close to those who might wish to be embraced as citizens in these new nations.

Each nation is preoccupied with protecting and feeding its own people, with building something out of a world of rising seas full of unknown plagues and an angry, threatening environment. Our governments can't spare much more time on individual families unless they offer something unique and irresistible and powerful. We don't have anything like that. We are an ordinary family in 2119. That's all.

Somehow in our new nation that is surviving on this evolving planet, my sister and I are still swimming dragons, and we're finding our way.

L. Han is a writer and a teacher. A digital nomad, she makes her home in different parts of the world, mostly the tropics.