



Photography: Emma Pei Cover image courtesy of Hachette Australia.

# IN THE GOOD BOOKS

Canberra author EMMA PEI YIN explores her HAKKA heritage in her much-anticipated debut novel, *WHEN SLEEPING WOMEN WAKE*, a celebration of the bravery of WOMEN RESISTANCE FIGHTERS during the Japanese occupation of HONG KONG

words TESS DE VINIE DE RÉGIE

Everyone has a book in them, so the saying goes – although most of us may never muster up the motivation to put pen to paper. For British-born, Hong Kong-raised, Canberra-based Emma Pei Yin, her novel had quietly been taking shape in her mind over a period of decades. “I’d lie in bed at night and picture scenes of these resistance fighters,” says Pei Yin. “I knew that I had to do something about that.”

And that she did. Her debut novel, *When Sleeping Women Wake* – a fictionalised account of the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong from 1941-45 – will be published on June 25. Following interest from multiple publishers, it was snapped up at auction in March 2024 by Hachette Australia and Quercus Fiction in the UK as part of a two-book agreement, while in the US, Ballantine Books secured the rights in a six-figure deal.

The book centres on three women: Mingzhu, a polyglot trapped in her role as ‘First Wife’ of a wealthy man; Qiang, Mingzhu’s headstrong daughter; and Biyu, the family’s maid. The three women risk their lives in the struggle, helping to liberate ‘comfort women’ and prisoners of war, mirroring the courage of real-life fighters from the East River Column, a guerilla group active in the resistance to the occupation.

The novel draws on Pei Yin’s own Hakka heritage, a southern Han Chinese subgroup that played a key role in the resistance against Japanese colonialism in Hong Kong and Taiwan, particularly (and is considered to have played a disproportionately influential role in Chinese history, generally). “I had heard so many stories from both sides of my grandparents,” notes Pei Yin, although her grandparents were reticent to share too many details of their own ordeal. “My grandfather never told us exactly what his parents did – he will only speak about what the Japanese did and how that impacted the people in the village and himself as a child,” she explains. “Chinese people tend not to want to talk about their experiences. I mean, we don’t even like to talk about our health in my family.”

An only child, Pei Yin was born in Barking, London and was “pretty much raised” by her grandparents (her aforementioned grandfather was an accomplished calligrapher whom she credits with inspiring her love of books). “My parents had to work several jobs to get by,” she recalls. “For the Chinese community [in the late ‘80s], it wasn’t as easy to get into certain fields of work, so they took whatever jobs they could.” The family moved to Hong Kong when Pei Yin’s father decided to open his own cosmetics packaging business.

Pei Yin was initially planning on returning to the UK, where she had been accepted into the New York Film Academy, which had a campus in London at the time, to study screenwriting and acting. But some Australian friends from high school in Hong Kong planted in her mind the idea of a sea change. “They were always like, ‘It’s so sunny here; the beaches are great.’ And I thought, *Yeah, let’s do it.*” She bought a one-way ticket and made the move by herself in 2009. “The rest was history – I haven’t left,” she smiles. She became an Australian citizen in 2016.

She studied public relations and marketing at the Canberra Institute of Technology; she also holds a Bachelor of Arts in creative writing and

publishing from Perth’s Curtin University and, this year, has started a graduate certificate in editing and publishing at Sydney’s Macquarie University.

Pei Yin worked from 2021-23 as a bookseller at The Book Cow, an independent store in Canberra’s Kingston. It was in that role that, in 2023, she made the shortlist for Young Bookseller of the Year (for booksellers 35 and younger), a prize awarded by bookshop not-for-profit BookPeople and Penguin Random House Australia. She has also penned book reviews for the Sydney-based Aniko Press and contributed to the *Mekong Review*, a publication focusing on Asian and diaspora voices in literature, *The Hong Kong Review*, *HerCanberra*, *Future Women* and *Being Asian Australian*.

But it was her 30th birthday in 2018 that made her reevaluate her career trajectory. “I knew that writing was the thing that I had to do,” she says. Pei Yin quit her day job to focus on becoming a published author – although, she laughs, “Maybe I should have found another job first”. After receiving five agent offers in two weeks, she signed with Laurie Robertson of London-based literary agency Peters Fraser and Dunlop in November 2023.

Since 2023, she has helmed Yinfluence Editorial (Yin being her Chinese name, translating as “abundance”), where she undertakes editing and proofreading for fellow writers as well as copywriting for businesses. As for the second instalment of her two-book deal, we can expect more historical fiction, although she isn’t at liberty to divulge much else at this stage – other than “it’s a slice of history that has been extremely overlooked”.

Pei Yin has seen firsthand the difficulties in getting more representation for Asian voices in the publishing industry. In 2023, her young adult manuscript *Chasing Echoes in the Rain* was shortlisted for a mentorship program highlighting “creators who identify as First Nations, People of Colour, LGBTQIA+ and/or living with disability”, run by advocacy group Voices from the Intersection in partnership with Allen & Unwin. “I actually received agent interest in Australia,” she explains. But the project didn’t go any further. “I remember one email saying, ‘We loved your story, but we already have an Asian author slated for next year’. And I thought, *I had no idea there was a quota on Asian authors.* That took me several weeks to get over because I had to think, *Do I have a chance then?*” Even so, she hasn’t given up on the story. “I still have high hopes for that manuscript,” she adds. “It’s a really personal one.”

“It starts with the gatekeepers – we’re talking about agents, publishers and booksellers,” says Pei Yin of how the industry could be made more inclusive. While working as a bookseller, she set out to diversify the titles that were on sale; one day, she chanced upon *The Marks Left on Her*, the debut work of Hong Kong-born, UK-based author Di Lebowitz, on Instagram. “When I heard about that book, I was like, ‘We need to get it into Australia’. And we [ordered] in 10 copies and it sold out within a couple of weeks.” She believes that if booksellers made recommendations based purely on personal taste, they would risk narrowing the reading horizons of their customers. “I cannot read a fantasy novel to save my life,” she laughs. “But as a bookseller, it’s my job to understand what’s interesting about it and then share that with readers.” HB