

Past, Present, and Future: An Interview with Malaysian Writer Chua Kok Yee

Zainor Izat Zainal

Azalea Ahmad Kushairi

Universiti Putra Malaysia



Introduction

The career of Malaysian author and artist Chua Kok Yee has evolved from the corporate finance sector into literature, academia, and visual storytelling. He trained in accounting at Universiti Malaya and spent more than 25 years in the corporate world. Chua began writing around 20 years ago while building his corporate career. He made his

literary debut in 2007 by co-authoring *News From Home* alongside Shih-Li Kow and Rumaizah Abu Bakar. In 2010, he published his own highly praised collection of short stories, *Without Anchovies*. His writing achieved significant national impact when three stories from this collection were selected as required reading for the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (Malaysian Certificate of Education) English Literature syllabus. He continued to build his literary portfolio by contributing to anthologies such as *Best Of Malaysian Short Fiction in English 2010-2020* (2022), *Ronggeng-Ronggeng- Malaysia Short Stories* (2019), *Remang* (2017), *Little Basket: New Malaysian Writing* (2016), *KL Noir Blue* (2014), *Black and White and Other New Short Stories from Malaysia* (2012) and winning the second Fixi Novo Malaysian Novel contest in 2022 for his debut novel *Not A Monster*, and publishing another short story collection, *The Muse and Other Stories*, with Penguin Random House SEA in 2023. Chua's success in writing led to an academic appointment as an Adjunct Professor at the Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia in 2024. Blending his writing and artistic talents, he released his debut graphic novel, *Bleeding Scars: The Calamity of Canning* in 2025, a horror story based on an Ipoh urban legend. We conducted an interview with Chua Kok Yee on 27 March 2026, to elucidate his perspective on the chronology of his literary expression, from its formative past to its current manifestations and future potentialities.

The Interview

Zainor Izat Zainal and Azalea Ahmad Kushairi: As an established home-grown Malaysian author in English, you have been described as a "seasoned author". How do you think you have grown as a writer?

Chua Kok Yee: I believe that I have developed more technical skills in my writing. I understand the technical side better now. In the beginning, I had the ideas and stories I wanted to tell, so I just wrote. When I was rewriting or discussing with my editor, we relied heavily on gut feelings regarding what felt right. I didn't know much about story structure or techniques in writing.

Now, after almost 20 years, I have more awareness of my own technique. Entering the academic world and teaching creative writing have certainly helped. They introduced me to terms like "literary devices" which never crossed my mind before; I used to just tell a story. Now I'm a bit more conscious about how I developed my writing. This consciousness helps with revision because I can identify technical weaknesses and improve on these.

Additionally, supporting technology for writers has grown tremendously in the past 20 years. When I started in 2006, technology like Google and Facebook were in their infancy. Nevertheless, research was made easier. For example, if I were writing about a plumber, I don't need to know how to fix a pipe in real life; I can learn the right plumbing language via YouTube or Google so my character sounds at least 80% correct. But recently, for the past two years specifically, AI has also helped. I use ChatGPT and as

such not to write a story, but to spot things like grammar inconsistency, which is much faster than going through a document three or four times.

ZIZ & AAK: After more than 25 years in the corporate world, you decided to take a brief hiatus from your corporate career and accepted the appointment as an adjunct professor in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). Tell us about this appointment and what it does or did for you.

CKY: I am very grateful to UPM because teaching at master's level is one of the most interesting experiences in my life. I got to skip three years of "PhD hell" and two years of "Master's insanity" and jump straight into a real teaching experience. This tenure accelerated my growth as an author because preparing the syllabus forced me to look at my own writing with academic rigour.

I had to teach things like the three-act structure - the beginning, the middle, and the ending. I never had any formal training in literature, but while preparing the syllabus, I realized I was already using this structure in my writing. Now I am more conscious of the things that I teach; I check if I am applying what I tell my students, like using unreliable narrators.

It is also rewarding to see the difference between the corporate and academic world. In the corporate world, I'm just selling diapers, but academicians are training the next brilliant generations of the country. Unfortunately, we live in a capitalist world where money talks louder than brains. My tenure experience has instilled in me a higher

appreciation for teachers and lecturers who are often underpaid and undervalued. I find that the academic world is rewarding but at the same time challenging. Even though I'm back in the corporate world now, I still want to continue to contribute in any way that I can to academia. This is what I feel after taking up the Adjunct Professorship.

ZIZ & AAK: So how did your industrial and literary experience inform or shape your approach to teaching creative writing in UPM? Were there particular methodologies or perspectives that you tried to impart to the students that differ from the conventional academic instruction?

CKY: My corporate experience has made me more focused on getting the work done and getting a result, like a finished story or poem. When students ask how I overcome writer's block, I tell them I don't believe in it. You might be tired, but that isn't a "block". I ask my students: "Would a professor ever tell their Head of Department, 'I have a lecturer's block today and cannot teach'?" You don't have that privilege in the corporate world; an accountant can't claim "accounting block" as an excuse not to close the accounts.

My literary experience on the other hand has shaped me to be a teacher who tries to impart the right attitude toward art. Authors shouldn't have that "writer's block" in order to avoid work. If you are tired, sleep, then wake up and get your work done. My methodology is about flexibility. In class, I show them different approaches - structured versus free-flow – but really, there is no "best" approach; the key is to stay flexible and finish the work because knowledge not applied is a waste.

ZIZ & AAK: What are your observations regarding the challenges of aspiring writers in Malaysia today?

CKY: The first challenge is the economic reality; the book market in Malaysia is relatively small. I only know a few full-time writers doing well; one is Nadia Khan. Most authors must supplement their income with something else, such as copywriting or editing. Out of a 35 million population, perhaps only 15 million are readers, and this group is fragmented into Malay, English, and Chinese audiences. It is often better to have a career that supplements your income, so you aren't under pressure to publish. I don't depend on my books to pay bills, but I can take 10 years between books to ensure the quality meets my standards.

The second challenge is the shortening attention span caused by social media, especially TikTok. Gen Z and Alpha have grown up with instant gratification. In marketing, there is a term called "scroll-stopping content" because you only have two or three seconds to grab someone's interest before they scroll past. In the past, we had centralized pop culture, like the TV show *Lost*, but now everything is fragmented by Netflix and algorithms. These algorithms lock you into a comfort zone, making it harder to discover new genres. I worry that the next generation will see a deep, complex book like *War and Peace* as "torture" rather than literature because they are used to one-minute micro-dramas. The older generation, Gen X for example, looks at things with a longer attention span. We have more patience dealing with things in front of us. We survived the onslaught of the video recorder in the 80s, followed by CDs, cable TVs and the Internet

in the 90s and now streaming services like Netflix and Hulu. We still read books. The book is here to stay. The challenge is how do we engage the younger generations with books?

There's this thing with AI, too. A friend's son was discouraged from writing because he felt AI made it valueless. However, I believe that if you write long enough, you develop a distinctive voice. AI can try to replicate the voice of someone like Salman Rushdie, but it cannot give you an original voice. If you rely on ChatGPT, your work will never truly be yours. My editor friend, Peck Chin, could recognize my "voice" in a book published in 2023 even though some stories were written years earlier during my days with Silverfish. AI is a tool, but it lacks originality; it interprets what is already there. If we all agree that a made-up word like "guru" means "mother," it becomes real to us. Humans can create something out of nothing. AI cannot just come up with something and have people agree to its reality. AI would never be able to replicate a writer's distinctive voice.

ZIZ & AAK: Do you think that the students that you taught in UPM respond differently to you because you are a writer than to other professors?

CKY: That is a question better answered by the students, but I think I managed to command more respect because I was not teaching solely on a theoretical basis, but more on my experience as a published author. I have published books, which adds weight to what I say. A student can't give me the cheeky response of "If you know so much, why haven't you published?"

ZIZ & AAK: Apart from your formal teaching at UPM, you have also been actively involved in conducting writing workshops for the broader public. Could you elaborate on how these two modes of instruction differ? Which is more satisfying for you?

CKY: The biggest difference is the depth of the subject. In a university semester, I have enough time to go deep into every area. Public workshops are more at a surface level because you only have a few hours to work with. I prefer having more time because I get the satisfaction of seeing meaningful growth and progress in the students. Because not everyone can spare 10 weeks. Workshops are a compromise, although I also enjoy informal mentorship.

ZIZ & AAK: Would you consider teaching full time in the future?

CKY: Give me a few more years. I am back in the corporate world now, but I don't want to be there for very long. I honestly find teaching less stressful than the corporate world, where you have to hit sales targets. I did my master's degree specifically so I could continue teaching after I retire from corporate life.

ZIZ & AAK: Your body of work spans diverse genres, like most recently you came up with a graphic novel, and you have also published works in Malay with Chukaria. So, in what ways does your creative approach differ when you write in Malay, as opposed to English?

CKY: Writing in Malay is significantly more time-consuming for me. It is a question of confidence; even when I know what I want to write, I find myself double-checking phrases and usage much more often. The reality is that in my day-to-day corporate life, Malay is either not used widely or used in a very casual manner. Consequently, I rely on tools like Google to ensure my writing doesn't sound awkward or too academic.

Beyond the language itself, there is a difference in the psychology of the reader. To make a story work in Malay, I feel like I have to get into the "Malay psyche" to understand the audience's expectations and make the storytelling effective. I currently have about six short stories written in Malay, totalling roughly 30,000 words - which isn't quite enough for a full collection yet, but I am working on it.

I am also very careful not to use the word "translate" when discussing my work in both languages; I call it "rewriting". A direct translation, like what you get from Google, is often out of context. When I rewrite a story from English to Malay, I often have to change scenes or contexts because certain things simply do not fit into the Malay language or cultural framework. As a writer, I have to recreate the story within the right context rather than just swapping words.

ZIZ & AAK: How do you respond to criticism?

CKY: I have a two-step process: Who and What. First, I ask who is giving the criticism. I pay attention if it's a criticism from a fellow writer like Shih-Li Kow or someone who is an industrial expert like Sharon Bakar or a professor in a university. In this age of social

media, equal access is given to Nobel Prize winners and idiots alike. If it's a criticism from a random person with a manga avatar on the internet, I don't bother.

I also value criticism from editors. A good editor gives me the criticism that I need. But then some editors may not entirely agree with what I've written. A former editor once told me my story was rubbish to my face. But then maybe he wasn't the right editor for horror. We had a disagreement over one of my short stories, where a father uses his daughter's body to grow mushrooms. He didn't believe a father would do that, but I argued that statistics on child abuse show otherwise. By this time, I had started to have a bit more confidence in myself as an author. I eventually published it elsewhere.

ZIZ & AAK: What do you think is the yardstick for a successful writer? K.S. Maniam, for example, has been studied extensively, especially in the postcolonial context. Award-winning writers like Tash Aw and Tan Twan Eng, are recognised globally. How do you want to be remembered as a writer?

CKY: I don't think there should be a universal benchmark for a writer's success. Some people study K.S. Maniam, while others look at the global commercial success of Tash Aw or Tan Twan Eng. For me, success is knowing I made a difference. The fact that my short stories were chosen for the SPM English literature syllabus was already an achievement for me.

My picture of success is that one day, an international award-winning author mentions me in their thank-you note, saying that my story inspired them to start writing. This is how I want to be remembered as a writer.

ZIZ & AAK: We read that you admire Stephen King, Joyce Carol Oates, and Paul Tremblay. Other than these international authors, which Malaysian writers do you look up to as significant influences or inspiration?

CKY: The Malaysian writer I respect the most is Shih-Li Kow. I was privileged to be one of the first people to have access to her work because we were in the same Silverfish writing class.

The story of how we ended up publishing together is interesting. I joined Raman's (the founder of Silverfish Books) 10-week writing course and being the kind of person who always wants an "end" in mind, I approached Raman near the end of the course. I asked him, "Why study a course if you don't get something out of it?" and suggested that the students collaborate on an anthology. At the time, there were about four or five different classes with 8 to 10 people each—roughly 40 to 50 aspiring writers in total.

We put out a call for submissions through email. Initially, everyone was enthusiastic, but as the deadline approached, the group was cut in half. By the time the project reached its final stage, the only two people left who were still submitting and revising were myself and Shih-Li Kow. It was a blessing in disguise because it filtered

out who was truly serious and had the mental fortitude to do the work required to be a writer.

During that process of reading each other's work, I knew immediately that she would be a great writer. She has a flair in linguistic skills. She doesn't need to use bombastic vocabulary or long, complex sentences; she just knows how to choose the right word at the right time and has a perfect sense of timing and structure. I knew she would make it big, long before she started winning international awards.

ZIZ & AAK: You are a member of the Malaysian Writers Society. Can you elaborate on the benefits you have gained from your membership with this organisation?

CKY: I am a member, yes, though I should clarify that I am not an active one; I primarily pay my fees to support the community. The society serves a few main functions. First, it is a networking group for people interested in writing. They organize events, writing retreats, and meetups in cafes to discuss the craft. Secondly, they help with book sales. For example, at events like the Georgetown Literary Festival, they have booths where they sell books for their members, especially those who are self-published. They actually helped me sell copies of *Without Anchovies* and *Not A Monster* there.

My lack of active participation comes from my personal philosophy on writing. As I mentioned, I don't believe in writer's block, and I also don't believe you need a writing "buddy," a specific writing group, or a fancy desk and chair to do your work. I call those "expensive excuses". I don't believe that sitting in a cafe paying RM20 for a

coffee makes me write better; I just don't function that way. However, just because I don't need those things doesn't mean others don't. If someone finds their home is not conducive and they need to go out to a cafe to find their rhythm, I won't dismiss that. I support the society because it provides resources and that sense of community for the writers who need them.

ZIZ & AAK: How do you perceive the future of Malaysian writing in English? And what outcomes would you most wish for it?

CKY: It will be challenging because of the attention span issues with the younger generation as I mentioned. However, I think both threats and opportunities are here. Make use of the many technological tools that are available. For instance, a writer can write one short story and turn it into an animation, a short film, or a podcast. AI makes things like audiobooks easy to produce in minutes. 30 years ago, I wouldn't have thought such things were possible. Recently I tried to turn my graphic novel into an animation, and I'm amazed by how this was enabled. I never thought I could turn my graphic novel into a short film, and I don't even have to be an IT expert to do this. I think this is the age of storytelling in multi formats, platforms and channels. In this sense, a writer may well become a multi-channel creative producer. He or she is no longer someone who just writes, but someone whose ideas of a story can be used in various platforms and media. Perhaps writers can no longer publish in the conventional way. They have to think of all these other ways of storytelling.

ZIZ & AAK: What are you working on now?

CKY: I'm working on a collection of short stories in English, it is about 80% complete and I'm still rewriting and editing it, and when it's complete, I'll start looking for a publisher at the end of this year. I've also started working on a novel, but it is still a work in progress. I hope to finish it by next year.