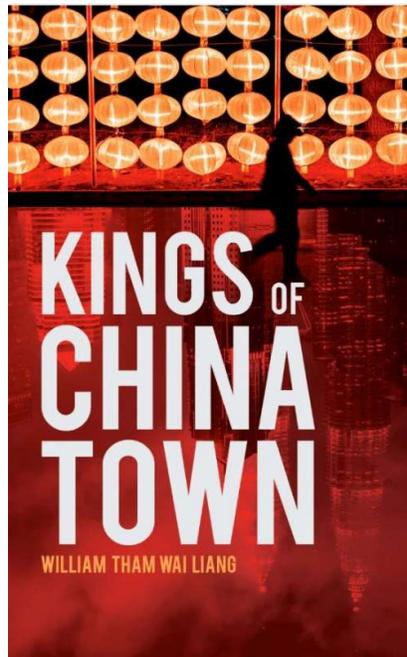


## REVIEWS

### Review of William Tham's *Kings of Chinatown* (2022): A Story About Gangsters, Generational Trauma and Tense Father-Son Relationships

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William Tham Wai Liang, *Kings of Chinatown*, Penang: Clarity Publishing, 2022. 280 pp. ISBN 978-967-17657-7-7.



William Tham Wai Ling's *Kings of Chinatown* has an intriguing premise: the Syndicate, a Malaysian crime organisation headed by the kingpin Wong, is at war with a rival gang. Although Wong has tried his best to keep his son, Gavin, out of harm's way, Gavin is nevertheless drawn into this mysterious world and ends up amid a plot to overthrow his father, led by Wong's chief lieutenant, Foo. Heightening the suspense, Wong is also the target of a dangerously ambitious politician (Fakar) who is working together with a disgraced police inspector (Ramalingam). With Wong being attacked from all sides, he must fight to keep Gavin from running headlong into danger. Meanwhile, Gavin must choose between the father he barely knows or the man who has been like a father to him – before time runs out.

*Kings of Chinatown* plays out like an epic game of chess with its elaborate plot. With so many vying to dethrone the Wong as the “King of Chinatown”, Tham keeps the suspense going, leading the reader to the inevitable violent conclusion that reveals who will be crowned the new king. The novel is populated with violence (as is to be expected of a gangster novel), with graphic and gory descriptions that are surprisingly poignant at times. Through the novel, Tham provides insight into organised crime in Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia’s capital city) and draws from real-life characters and incidents to add authenticity to his plot and portrayals. For example, the novel makes references to Botak Chin (the notorious Malaysian gangster) and discusses the racial riots of May 13, 1969 in reference to Wong Kah Lok.

Published in 2022, *Kings of Chinatown* is the second version of Tham’s 2017 debut novel, *Kings of Petaling Street*. With encouragement from his publisher Rosalind Chua, Tham has reworked his first novel to highlight certain aspects and to tighten the story further. For example, in the second novel, Tham made the choice to further weave the May 13 riots into the plot, an excellent addition that helps contextualise the racial conflicts experienced by the characters in *Kings of Chinatown*. In the rewriting of his novel, Tham also clears up any doubts about the inspiration behind the fearful kingpin, noting that Wong, the titular “King of Chinatown”, was loosely based on the infamous Malaysian gangster Botak Chin, with some inspiration taken from Francis Ford Coppola’s film adaptations of the cult classic *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo. Furthermore, the contentious relationship between Wong and Ramalingam mimics the rivalry between Botak Chin and DSP Kulasingham. These details add layers of authenticity to the novel.

Although *Kings of Chinatown* is a crime novel centring around Malaysian secret societies, Tham glorifies neither the brutal crime bosses nor the politicians and law enforcement officers intent on bringing down the gangs. The novel paints all these rival forces with the same brush, exposing the corruption and the ugliness lurking in the shadows in the glittering city of Kuala Lumpur. Furthermore, Tham’s portrayals of masculinity were fascinating as he highlighted the social pressures upon men to enact certain masculinities to maintain their image among their peers. As a result, most of the gangsters and men in power are seen struggling with fragile masculinity and being internally and externally pressured to embody a macho masculinity to preserve their dignity and demand respect. The failure to embody a macho masculinity resulted in losing respect, and therefore power.

Apart from being a gangster novel, *Kings of Chinatown* is also a story of a father and a son. Or rather, of fathers and sons. This is a recurring theme throughout the novel as it maps out the complicated relationships between fathers and their sons with the characters in the novel

frequently bringing up the idea of sons disappointing their fathers. This is true for Wong and Gavin as well as Fakar and his son, Azhari. In fact, one could say that fathers and sons are disappointed in and disappointing each other as they never match up to the other's expectations. Gavin seems to take this the furthest by choosing Wong's back-stabbing lieutenant Foo as his chosen father.

One of the most impressive things about Tham's novel is the characters' portrayals. The characters are fleshed out well and the reader gets significant insight into their worlds. Tham even goes the extra length to provide detailed backstories for the key players of the novel, even relating the characters' experiences to real life incidents like the May 13 riots, which added depth to their portrayals. However, in some cases, the backstories felt far too elaborate as it slowed the pace somewhat and felt like unnecessary diversions at times. The sheer number of key characters and their detailed backstories meant that it was often a little hard for me to keep track of who was who, especially because characters were often introduced in a cryptic manner (although their identities and motivations became clearer as I kept reading).

For those who enjoy stories about the brutality of organised crime, this novel has some graphic descriptions of violence and murder. However, I must note that the pace of the novel is a little slow and the action mainly begins well after the middle point of the novel. This means that *Kings of Chinatown* is not quite as action-packed as other crime fiction novels. Despite this, Tham still managed to pack a punch and *Kings of Chinatown* will definitely be attractive to readers who enjoy novels like Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*. Tham's novel is especially unique because anglophone fiction based on organised crime tends to be Anglo-American-centric. It was thus interesting to see an organised crime novel in a Malaysian context. Moreover, the author's use of local languages and Malaysian English as well as references to life in Malaysia makes the novel feel more authentic and true-to-life.

Overall, *Kings of Chinatown* is an entertaining read that offers a different type of gangster novel than we're used to, and William Tham's character portrayals are impressive.