

2023

From real life to story – and back again: Using autobiographical fiction writing to understand self, others and family generations

Alberta N. Adji
Edith Cowan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2022-2026>

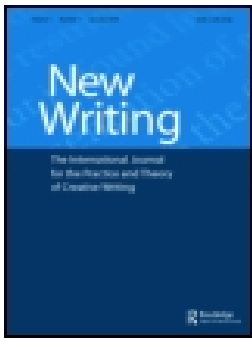


Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

10.1080/14790726.2023.2187065

Adji, A. N. (2023). From real life to story – and back again: using autobiographical fiction writing to understand self, others and family generations. *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*, 20(4), 407-419. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2023.2187065>

This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2022-2026/1961>



New Writing

The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmnw20>

From real life to story – and back again: using autobiographical fiction writing to understand self, others and family generations

Alberta Natasia Adji

To cite this article: Alberta Natasia Adji (2023): From real life to story – and back again: using autobiographical fiction writing to understand self, others and family generations, *New Writing*, DOI: [10.1080/14790726.2023.2187065](https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2023.2187065)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2023.2187065>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 10 Mar 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

From real life to story – and back again: using autobiographical fiction writing to understand self, others and family generations

Alberta Natasia Adji 

School of Arts and Humanities, Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia

ABSTRACT

Writing autobiographically includes complicated responsibilities to the subjects involved: to family members, friends, colleagues, and even cultural communities. This article explores creative developments occurring during the process of writing an autobiographical novel called 'The longing', which is drawn from a recollection of intergenerational lived experiences of a middle-class Chinese Indonesian family from 1956 to 2018. I reflect on my strategies and approaches on tackling challenges that arose while using autobiographical material and autofictional techniques to write fiction and communicating cultural complexities for it allows agreeable distance between the author and her writing subject. In the article, I also argue that the use of terms such as life writing, autobiographical fiction and generational novel is most fitting for my project, since they form the postmodern life narratives produced by culturally and historically marginalised women.

ARTICLE HISTORY


Received 9 June 2022
Revised 4 January 2023
Accepted 27 February 2023

KEYWORDS

Autobiographical fiction;
creative developments; life
writing; generational novel;
Chinese Indonesian context

Revelations

I was 10 then, sitting on a wooden chair in my grandmother's restaurant as I saw her make *bakwans* (beef balls) and *hiwans* (fish balls) in hot broth before sprinkling them with fried shallots and spring onions, serving them to customers with warm rice, tomato or sambal sauce, and sweet, iced tea. In this memory too, was my late grandfather, eating salted peanuts, noodles and pork crackling while chatting idly to the customers. The echoes of school days, family chatters, party banquets and neighbourhood events emerged in fragments, intertwined with our sense of love, violence, sickness, loss and triumph: the stories of intergenerational origins. My family was always on the back of my mind as I was drafting 'The longing', my fiction project that depicts the lived experiences of three generations of Chinese Indonesian women from my family – my late grandmother portrayed as Ah Lam (the matriarch of the family who runs a family restaurant), my mother as Ming Zhu (who marries a Javanese man and converts to Islam) and myself as Dido (a Peranakan woman who works as a documentary filmmaker) – within a long timeline that

CONTACT Alberta Natasia Adji  aadji@our.ecu.edu.au

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

spans from 1956 to 2014 in Surabaya, East Java. The portrayed lives of Dido (narrated in first-person), her mother Ming Zhu and her grandmother Ah Lam (both written in third person) illustrate the three phases of acculturation of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia: initiation (navigating the life and interaction with others), union (merging of the Javanese and Chinese groups through intercultural relationships) and growth (the complex but evolving collaborative relationships among people with mixed cultural and ethnic parentage).

In rendering lived experiences and historical events in narrative, fiction does provide much room for capturing and reinventing the ways we remember and address our involvements in things. This does not mean, however, that we are completely free to narrate and represent those closest to us in any fashion we like. When it comes to writing about family members and close acquaintances, there is the unspoken rule regarding the responsibilities to stay true to the integrity of the narrative and to their embodied images (Neale 2017). In the case of the fourth generation of a Chinese-Indonesian family who choose to revisit the grandparents' and parents' dealings with the cultural identity crisis and intergenerational trauma, weaving the stories together can be a daunting task as people remember things differently, and that sensitivity of the subject needs to be addressed mildly and carefully. As a fourth-generation life writer, my story-making involves being mindful of portraying our family life as Chinese Indonesians who have lived from 1956 to 2018, long decades that saw Indonesian Communism under Sukarno (1959–1965), the authoritarian New Order under Suharto (1966–1998), the illiberal Reformasi era (1998–2014), to the uncertain post-Reformasi era (2014–present) while relying on my imaginations to breathe life to these stories.

During the Dutch colonisation (1595–1945), the ethnic Chinese's categorisation as one of the Foreign Orientals – which occupied a higher level than the *pribumi* – became ambivalent as they were given licenses to monopolise the opium trade but soon treated with envy and suspicion over their dubious nationalist loyalty due to their ethnic identity, leading to anti-Chinese violence in various areas of Indonesia during the Revolution period (1945–1949) (Suryadinata 1993). Following the country's independence from the Dutch colonisation in 1945, Chinese Indonesians have continued to be repressed through numerous government policies, particularly the Presidential Decree No. 14/1967 that banned any expressions of Chinese language, religion and culture in public during Suharto's New Order regime, from 1966 to 1998 (Ang 2001; Purdey 2005). They have also continued to struggle with their cultural identity with the anti-Chinese discrimination and state-sponsored violence such as the 1965 Communist Purge, Suharto's assimilationist regulations and the May 1998 Riots, which saw hundreds of Chinese Indonesian women sexually violated, Chinese-owned shops and properties looted, ransacked and destroyed over a three-day period in Jakarta, Medan, Surabaya, Palembang and Solo as the result of the 1997–1998 Asian economic crisis (Suryadinata 1993; Marching 2017). In contemporary Indonesia, which started by the end of the New Order era and motivated by the revocation of discriminative regulations against the Chinese made during the Abdurrahman (Gus Dur) Wahid Presidency, the Chinese have experienced a renewal in their Chinese-ness and more freedom in expressing their ethnic identities in various fields such as culture, language, media and religion (Arifin, Hasbullah, and Pramono 2017). However, the Chinese have once again received considerable attention because of Jakarta's Christian Chinese governor Basuki 'Ahok' Tjahaja Purnama's alleged blasphemy against Islam in early December 2016, which prompted

the long-enduring anti-Chinese narratives and sentiments against the ethnic group despite two decades of policy and societal reforms (Setijadi 2017).

This rebound of 'the politics of indigenism (*pribumi*-ism or *asli*-ism)' or the *pribumi* status in contemporary Indonesia is originally 'a relic of the colonial era' which has sought to exclude those that comprised of foreign new arrivals (*pendatang asing*) such as the Chinese, Arabs, and Indians (Chen 2022, 61). These notions, of *pribumi*-ism, however, have developed to include the Arabs by virtue of a shared Islamic religion (Chen 2022, 62). The notion and status of *pribumi* is interchangeable to that of Native Indonesians (which in Indonesian language mean *orang Indonesia asli* atau *pribumi asli*), which consists of more than one thousand ethnic/subethnic groups such as the Javanese, Sundanese, Acehnese, Madurese, Batak, Balinese, Betawi, Buginese, Kaili, Dayak, Ambon, Dani, Bima, Makassarese, Cirebon, Minahasa, Minangkabau and so forth (Suryadinata, Arifin, and Ananta 2003). In the Indonesian inter-ethnic relationship, many irresponsible indigenist leaders have used the image of the ethnic Chinese as the 'foreign' ethnic group which 'cannot be accepted as one of the *sukubangsa* or Indonesian regional ethnic groups' as well as perceiving the Chinese to be way above the economic disparity and social inequity of the general Native Indonesians to achieve their political objectives (Suryadinata 2004, 233). Thus, such factors have continued to create such tense inter-ethnic relationships between the ethnic Chinese and their *pribumi* counterparts.

Such delicate issues, indeed, make the job of writing lives of those who were affected by it to be intricate. Given the complex nature of most women's lives, my difficulties in writing 'The longing' signal the urge to capture the lived experiences as closely as possible on paper and the need to protect the privacy of those who become my subjects. To accommodate the ethical demand to maintain memories of past violence alive and collective, as well as the significance of the freedom to speak and write about one's life, life writers ought to acknowledge the benefit of employing fiction as the method for writing delicate materials. Tessa Morris-Suzuki notes that the impulse to use the past as a reflection to the present 'seems to intensify in particular eras—in times of imperial expansion, or in periods and places where restrictions on free expression encourage allegorical forms of fiction' (2005, 47). She reckons that fiction can provide much room and 'safe space' for talking about historical events that are still traumatic and even still used to incite fear and resentment among the majority towards the minority. Morris-Suzuki does make an excellent point, but it also echoes another perspective that threatens the validity of that addressed truth. Mario Vargas Llosa once wrote, '[t]he real truth is one thing, and literary truth is another', revealing that truth and fiction always stay across one another at a dichotomy but that does not mean that they cannot meet and intermixture (1992, 79). It is critical to remember that fiction is a method that employs techniques to keep up with reality and shape it with details according to the writer's imagination. A distinct separation often exists between lived experiences as fact and novel as fiction, and at this point the autobiographical novelist must interrupt, to blur the divisions, with the conviction that it is possible to create something subtle and intense that will fill in the blanks from the lived reality or the historical event. After all, even in autobiographies and memoirs, one can never be sure what is autobiographical and what is not. It is the way it is written that makes it believable.

Essentially, 'The longing' is an autobiographical work that derives from the senses of the writer, who draws on her family memories and a deeper perspective on the traces

of social structures as well as traces of past and present that become the novel's settings. This leads the novel to belong to another relevant genre, which is the generational or family novels, which are also known as 'kinship' or 'lineage' novels that typically extend 'in a genealogical fashion' with the characters' lives 'unfold in the process of maturation' (Chizova 2021, 37). In its definition, the generational novel does not simply seek to present the life trajectories of a series of single protagonists but traces 'the lives of numerous family members living in populous domestic communities', with the plot being established 'at the intersection of kinship obligation and personal choice' (Chizova 2021, 37). Family memory, as I fathom, translates as the flashes and fragments of imagery that come up in both our daily routines and unprecedented moments triggered by our emotional and physical connections to the people, animals, and objects we interacted with in the past. It both resides and transmitted into various places: embodied practices, gestures and behaviours, parent-child interaction, person-object interaction, fragments of stories and silences as containers that move us between the past, our consciousness and the present.

I argue that the nature of family history writing also integrates well with the term life writing, for the genre challenges 'the traditional limits of autobiography' since it caters for all modes of personally inflicted texts (Henke 1998, xiii). This plurality of voices, readings and interpretations lends itself well to the definition of life writing itself, which extends to life narratives that situate 'one's place in a familiar history' as one positions oneself 'as ascending from humble origins' (from childhood, girlhood, adulthood and even motherhood) and tells 'an upward story of ... "against the odds"' (which one accomplishes through negotiating cultural tension and integrating into different cultural positions) by reconstructing one's understanding of memory and historicity within one's socio-cultural dimension (Friedman, O'Brien, and McDonald 2021, 716). Novels, in this regard, come as an aide to the shortcomings or limitations of history by testing 'historical hypotheses' through some kind of 'thought-experiment' (Slotkin 2005, 221). Since the novel speculatively recovers the possibilities of a past time, the writer is able to 'explore those alternative possibilities for belief, action, and political change, unrealized by history, which existed in the past' (Slotkin 2005, 221).

Moreover, family history, as Tanya Evans puts it, means 'bringing women's lives to the fore when other forms of history marginalize them' (2020, 319). Such idea of feminism emanates from the fact that in general the history of women is more difficult to locate since theirs is often overshadowed by the men, given its heteronormative and patriarchal-centric origins. On this notion, Evans (2020, 319) further argues that:

There is a symbiotic relationship between family history, social history and women's history. Family historians are passionate about the lives of 'ordinary' people in the past. They feel like family history 'speaks to them' in a way that other forms of history fail to do. In their eyes, 'national history' tends to be 'male and political' and does not engage them in the ways that social history – with its focus on women, the ordinary and the everyday – does. They want national history to become 'personal' so that they can connect to it.

This amounts to the urgent necessity to do a significant proportion of research into genealogical or family work authored by female memoirists and auto/biographers, who can easily identify and call themselves family historians. As a family historian, I discover that historical thinking is a trait often found among lifelong learners, who then express

and apply this knowledge in various modes of writing, my argument is that unearthing, researching and communicating life stories has equipped family historians with immense emotional, social and cultural means and ways to transform their interpretations about themselves and the world, as well as to create alternative narrations to challenge the gendered expectations between women and men. To achieve this, I explore the concepts of family history and family memory, tinged with historical knowledge, perceived from the lens of women's life writing and its ethics.

To guide my practice, I drew on examples of generational/kinship novels by several authors. I picked these examples among others due to these reasons: similar theme of narrating about a Chinese Indonesian family, the integrated use of fiction and autobiographical writing, and the portrayal of interconnected generations of a family, which are all told in the third-person perspective. These generational novels of my choosing are *The Last Dim Sum* (2015) by Clara Ng for her similar narrative theme, cultural ties, and characteristics as well as differences in style and collective points of view in narrating the female quadruplets of a Chinese–Indonesian family; *Alfred and Emily* (2008) by Doris Lessing for her third person perspective and the hybrid (part fiction–part memoir) form of narration, interplay of combining fiction and memoir, as well as evocation of memories and imagery; and *The Good Earth* (1931) by Pearl S. Buck for her detailed and intricate third person narrative about the multiple generations of a Chinese family in the early twentieth century. These generational and family novels have given me an insight into the perspectives and intricacies of writing family, immediate and extended, as well as how to use fiction to shape unknown parts of my late grandmother's life (1935–2008), my mother's forgotten youth years before marrying my father (1968–1992) and forgotten details of my own while still living in Indonesia (1993–2018).

The narrative process and journey

As an experienced fiction writer, I had confidence and a good sense of the challenges and possibilities that would emerge if I chose to walk down the same path. Thus, my first attempt at my doctoral novel was making myself as the primary subject. I was eager to start writing from my personal perspective, using the first-person account. I used my own experience of studying at a local public university for my undergraduate studies from 2012 to 2016, and then for my master's degree from 2016 to 2017 at the same university, and then working there for a short period as a young researcher and then a junior lecturer at another university (a private one) until August 2018. I created Dido, a mixed-ethnic young woman of Chinese and Javanese as well as an embodiment of myself, and her fraternal twin brother Fajar, who looked more Javanese and therefore granted the social opportunities as a member of the majority. I narrated these series of traumatic periods of being marginalised and treated differently while enrolled in one of the student organisations, when my numerous attempts to blend in with my *pribumi* or Native Indonesian peers were met with rejection and ostracism.

After producing four chapters, I realised that it was quickly becoming much harder to continue writing in first person. I felt like there was no distance between what was written on paper and the real truth. Everything felt constraining, too close and clinging, to the point that I could hardly come up with any new story direction. I found myself asking this question: What if I just simply chose to selectively recollect these parts of my life

and be more objective to look at these memories as something intergenerational? During this time, I came across the it-narratives genre, the one that allows authors to write from the first-person perspective of everyday objects as evocative artefacts that embody meaning.

Later on, I received a suggestion to try writing my entire novel in third person account since it would also give me fluidity to write between subjects, since my aim was to narrate the story from three generations of Chinese Indonesian women who live in Surabaya. I started inventing characters like my late maternal grandmother (called Ah Lam), my mother (named Ming Zhu), and me (called Dido) who bear many similar characteristics and experiences to the real people had. As an attempt to capture the memories and the lived experiences of my family and I, I drafted characters that are pragmatic, down-to-earth, assertive, but at the same time obsessive, authoritative, and unsympathetic under certain circumstances. I divided the timeline into three major parts: the first one is about Ah Lam's formative years (1956–1968) when she becomes her family's breadwinner by running a small restaurant in Surabaya, the second tells Ming Zhu's part of the story (1970–1986) where she grows up while enduring her father's abusive treatments and ends up getting married and becoming a homemaker, and the third narrates Dido's experience of becoming a documentary filmmaker and growing up at the end of Suharto's authoritative period and witnessing the blasphemy trial of former Jakarta governor Basuki 'Ahok' Tjahaja Purnama (1993–2018).

I drafted the details of what happen in each of their lives by jotting down small stories that I pulled from memory. As I made a timeline that notes the specific events of the Chinese Indonesian nuance that would be included in 'The longing', I realised I had to carefully consider the degree of their importance and meaning to the present-day Post-Reformasi Indonesia, dubbed 'the age of uncertainty', which started by the end of 2000s (Lindsey 2018). Post-Reformasi, labelled the 'New-Neo Order' by scholars and civil society champions, is the ongoing period when the electoral and liberal democracy is 'under threat from populism and renewed conservatism' (Lindsey 2018). I started researching and collecting streamlines of fragments/snapshots of historical, cultural, and political events that can be used as the backdrop of the narrative. I became determined to weave another Chinese Indonesian family representation through fiction, by highlighting on certain points, such as the simplicity of their everyday life and the hardships of maintaining and raising a family to influence people in a positive way, and to show that diversity exists, even among the homogenised ethnic Chinese people.

The process of autobiographical writing enables writers to question and clarify their emotions, responses, purpose, and direction, and to create meaning from seemingly random events and situations. Once ready, I plunged myself into a fictional rendering about the forgotten life of my late grandmother, who had to wade through life that was fraught with challenging 'women duties', of which she had little control. The first chapter of 'The longing' begins with a narration that depicts Ah Lam, the portrayal of my grandmother, as a mild-mannered, unassuming, and accommodating young maiden who accepts her fate of being married off to an artistically talented but pretentious young man who is abusive and dislikes hard work. Despite already having a relationship with another man whom she loves, Ah Lam surrenders to her father's wishes to marrying the man of his choice, whom she scarcely knows. During Ah Lam's marriage to Cheng Lei, the embodiment of my grandfather, family, and cultural conflicts occurs.

As the narrative continues, Ah Lam's personality soon develops, and she takes charge of her life and struggles as the main breadwinner for her family by running a small family restaurant. Since my grandparents had already passed away a couple of years ago, I made up most of the countless details of their daily life in the novel, including their arguments and conversations. I made sure not to leave out any important details of Ah Lam's life story to show that her life and her family's life as restaurant owners.

When I wrote about how she struggled to run her restaurant and bring up her two eldest invalid children, I relied on the oral stories that my mother has repeated to me for years. I imagined myself doing time travels between the present and the 1960s and 1970s while listening to them talking and arguing in their dining room or bedroom. While writing the details of Ah Lam's family life, I imagined myself being ten again, visiting my grandparents' restaurant and house on school holidays to eat *bakwan* (beef balls) and fried *siomays* (Chinese diaspora dumplings) and listen to my grandparents criticising each other. What words did they use to get back at each other? How did my grandmother manage her helpers at her busy restaurant? What complaints did she have about her daily hardships? Building such characters became the first step that I had to take, to show how deeply rooted the traditional patriarchal culture is for the Chinese Indonesians in general, which, to my opinion, causes numerous complexities for their own situation. From my point of view, this notion acts like a strategy to search for a common ground between me as the writer and outsiders as the imagined audience.

Once her part in the narrative is done, the succeeding character, Ah Lam's daughter Ming Zhu, later takes charge of the story by becoming a deceptively rebellious young woman who chooses her own subject of study in the university and marries the man that her parents disapprove. Being an embodiment of my mother, Ming Zhu is intellectually gifted, curious, good-natured but headstrong to a fault. She spends most of her youth trying to please her authoritative father by becoming an obedient, straight-A daughter who tries to do everything correctly to avoid her father's abuses. I made Ming Zhu into a rebellious but naïve narrator. Her narration emphasises her insecurity and subjectivity. She marries Arya, a Muslim Javanese man who is ten years her senior. Ming Zhu, just graduating from university, becomes a homemaker at twenty-four. Ming Zhu, just graduating from university, converts to her husband's religion and becomes a mother to twins, Arya and Dido. I imagined her disappointment when her husband's family, being wealthy and disapproving of her Chinese background, keeps criticising her for her lack of Islamic knowledge, and this causes her later separation from Arya, although their love is strong enough that they eventually re-marry regardless of their families' blessings. It was easy to portray Ming Zhu and Arya since I already had a clear idea of my parents' personalities and marriage life, which slightly resembles their novelistic portrayal.

Between the pair of twins, Dido, the youngest, grows up to become conscious of her apparent Chineseness, especially when it comes to perceiving hatred and prejudice imposed on her, as she grapples with how to respond. The image of Dido is presented as an 'Ampyang' woman – the name of a snack made of Chinese nuts and Javanese brown sugar and a slang to refer to Chinese-Javanese people. To portray these invisible cultural and religious tension between the Chinese and Javanese, Dido must be someone who holds the uncomfortable blend of cultural heritage, having her standing at the cross-road of two opposing worlds, a presence not easily tolerated by either of the cultural

groups. She becomes a documentary filmmaker with an independent media to document the struggles of the Samin people, a minority Javanese group in rural Central Java, as her way to make sense of the current politic upheaval and her own conflicted identity. Dido eventually accepts Ah Lam's death and her parents' plan to remarry, while still educating herself regarding the economy and socio-political struggles of the underrepresented groups. The depicted lives of Dido, her mother Ming Zhu and her grandmother Ah Lam represent the three phases of acculturation of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia: the initiation (navigating how to live and work with each other), the union (the merging of the two groups through interethnic and interfaith marriage), and the growth (the complex but growing collaborative relationships among the people who have hybrid cultural and ethnic parentage).

Family narratives, as I have found out, may create 'altered explications of a life', especially for contemporary feminist writers who often portray their mothers as 'oppressed by the social constraints of their era' (Neale 2017, 112). These writers do not necessarily narrate new events, but they simply re-shape and re-think what happened by drawing from their contemporary insights. By giving voice and highlighting perspectives of family members who are voiceless as well as trying to evoke family memories as a kind of archive and recorded history should be the primary goals in biographical family projects. Writers can protect the identities of those depicted by fictionalising, and that how writers/researchers present both delicate and unverifiable materials is of great importance.

While doing a significant amount of archival research that was relevant to the work, including secondary sources about marginalisation and violence imposed on the Chinese Indonesians: the 1965–66 mass killings, the May 1998 riots, and the December 2016 Jakarta protests, and I learned that this cycle of violence has made many Chinese women develop cultural trauma as members of a collectivity who have been subjected to irrevocable disruption. I tried to portray such traumatic reaction to the state-sponsored violence by making the heroines in the novel to be guarded, wary and distant in their interactions with their *pribumi* friends and acquaintances, especially males, and that these heroines make sure their daughters are enrolled in Chinese-populated Christian schools to protect them from experiencing a similar incident. What did the Chinese and Javanese people eat and drink? How did the two ethnic groups interact? What books did they read? What slang terms did they use in their daily conversation? What shows did they watch? What kind of music did they listen to? What clothes did people wear at home and at public places? What kind of games that the children play? What were the names of the popular places they went to? Besides reading scholarly books, essays, and articles, I also read old newspapers, memoirs, and novels. One afternoon browsing at a second-hand book shop in Fremantle, I came across a novel, *Monkeys in the Dark*, by Blanche d'Alpuget, an Australian journalist who wrote about the chaos following the coup of 1965 in Jakarta. It was such an eye-opening document that made me realise the significance of historical events happening in Indonesia in the eyes of the Western world: a world of stormy political upheavals and colliding interests, activists, and politicians. D'Alpuget narrated the specific turning points that more or less accurately happened during this momentous period. Her carefully detailed narration serves like a documentary that records the inner world of the chaos, making it easy for readers to imagine the tension, disorder, and anxiety that was going on. Among other things, I

got the picture of how to give a thick sense of social and political context to my own novel.

However, since the time setting was from 1958 to 2018, I felt obliged to write in such a coherent and chronological way or otherwise I would not be able to present my family's lived experiences and memories in its wholeness, devoid of gaps. I wanted to present them exactly as how they really happened. However, I forgot that I was writing a novel and not a memoir. Robin Hemley notably states that many people, despite their interesting lived experiences, 'falter when they attempt to tell their stories' because 'they focus on content rather than form', thus failing to understand the fact that 'a memoir is supposed to be true' while 'a novel isn't' (1994, 35). Indeed, a novel is supposed to be produced from 'fiction transformed from fact rather than unadulterated fact' (Hemley 1994, 35).

Due to this ethical and the performance of this creative, expressive, and explorative writing process, I found writing in the first-person voice was confining and too close to my own worldview to cater for that of others. Indeed, while the gender-neutral first-person singular pronoun is common in the Western feminist literature tradition as an expression of individualism, if employed in producing generational/kinship/lineage novels, it creates a barrier between the individualistic 'I' and the collectivism of the Chinese Indonesian society. Meanwhile, the third-person viewpoint is more suitable to accommodate my aims, since: (1) it is more impartial compared to the first-person narrative voice in the way that the characters do not necessarily refer to particular people but can refer to anyone else, and (2) it is representational for the way the third person voice represents the collectiveness or the communal nature of the generational/kinship/lineage/family novels.

Later, I also discovered that memories – in this case family memories or recollections – are not supposed to be chronological either. Writing a family history novel should be imagined like doing a jigsaw puzzle. The narrated memories should be treated like oddly shaped interlocking and tessellating pieces that require assembly before creating a complete picture of a life story. They come in fragments or snapshots based on specific experiences, each with disjointed beats of memory serving as narrative anchors that may create connections and form the bigger picture later. Memories pulled from the past – albeit disordered and chaotic – are good starting points for writing. I just need to organise them by developing a strong understanding of time, which is essential in the act of life writing. Consequently, I was advised to liberate myself from writing the novel in the sequential order, so I could create a series of interrelated scenes that, albeit occurring in different periods, may thematically intersect, and resonate with one another. I soon excavated cues and ideas that came naturally to me and arranged them into story events.

As I have just spent several years writing scholarly articles, my narrative style was slightly formal, structured, and simplistic in manner – I was concerned with having to develop a flexible, less constrained writing style. I tried to overcome it by joining a freewriting workshop and doing many exercises of writing freely from memories of favourite foods and places visited at childhood, while at the same time suspending judgement – not paying attention to grammar and spelling and instead focusing more on the details of visual images that came from all the senses (e.g. sight, touch, sound, smell, and taste). These freewriting exercises required us to embark on the experience and to convey it from within and with sensitivities. With the obligation of 'show' rather than 'tell' in fiction writing, we need to dive into our own feelings and emotions to engage

with the deeper parts of ourselves which are concealed or not easily attainable – something that we may not be capable of doing simply by writing about the facts of our lives. Thus, during the process of engaging myself in writing the sensory details, I was able to portray scenes vividly and even came up with more details about the annual trips to Songgoriti, East Java, with my late maternal grandparents and aunt that I have forgotten due to the many years that have gone by. I was able to minimise the impact of the internal critic and play loose with both the characters and the time frame.

Autobiographical fiction is, in truth, about the imagination of lived experiences. There is enormous freedom in fiction, in which I try to generate my own answer to the difficult questions surrounding the so-called ‘Chinese problem’. I envision the details of my characters’ lives in the past and how their former actions determine events that will happen in the future. What seemed clear to me was that I had to let myself be open and write anything that came to mind and preserve stories from disappearing. In my case, fiction serves as an artistic form with imaginary elements that is constructed by the narrators’ assertion.

By using the third-person account, the author’s lived experiences can be narrated as if they happened to someone else, with the traits of the protagonists are fictionalised. Indeed, my novel is designed to remind people that there are ‘moderate’ Chinese Indonesians who want to be a part of Indonesian life and the local Javanese culture, and tackle issues of cultural memory and history. As an academic, I was also concerned with the questions that Pei-Chen Liao identifies as ‘the reliability and ethics of life writing’, which include the extent of truth that one tells when remembering a certain life period, the way, and the reason one makes representations, to whom or in support of ‘the silenced others, a past of trauma and shame’ (2018, 508). Such issue corresponds to what happened in the 1970s when autobiography scholars like James Olney, Paul John Eakin, and Marlene Kadar turned their attention to the fictional aspects in life writing and no longer to its degree of truthfulness. This scholarly shift ended up blurring the dualistic paradigm that challenges the fiction/non-fiction dichotomy and determining both the rationale and the boundary of life writing. However, Eakin asserts that it is essential to remember that these profound changes in life writing area were not proposed ‘to expel truth from the house of autobiography’, but rather ‘to install fiction in its stead’ (1985, 4). In relating fiction to the idea of representing kinship, Taguchi and Majumdar argue that fiction makes our world approachable and helps us imagine relations differently, and that is why it allows the imagined possibilities of kinship to thrive, as they are ‘a lived reality’ that we belong to (2021, 2).

Even though I write in English, my characters are all Indonesian, and are thus removed from Western readers not only culturally but also linguistically. In a sense, all autobiographical fiction is a form of translation. The author ought to ‘translate’, which is to make the essence of his/her culture of origin understandable to that of the intended readers. Language issues are indeed fundamental in the case of creating autobiographical fiction about non-English characters. A vital question governing the translation studies is whether translators should leave the deep-rooted ‘foreign’ world of the original manuscript untouched or aim to make the translated version go as natural as if it had been written in the second language. In my early writing stage, this question had much impact in guiding me to think about how I should conduct my narrative, like whether I should include footnotes with short descriptions to accompany each ‘foreign’ term mentioned. This often came up in the form of food names, cultural practices, and slang. I had

to carefully consider whether by doing so would make the narrative informative or off-putting for readers. I also had to repeatedly remind myself not to pepper my narrative with too many unknown terms and put short descriptive narration instead. Yet, I still opted to put enough 'foreignness' in my novel since I strived to introduce lesser-known details of Indonesian culture, whether they have Chinese or Javanese roots.

Conclusion

What I see from producing these small life writing stories is that by rendering and stringing them together and then transforming them into fiction may facilitate me to preserve painful but significant parts of our life when my family and I struggled to adapt to the major culture. By doing so, I can negotiate both truth and apprehension in the process of forging a new, socially, and culturally justifiable fiction narrative significant to my family's and my own continuity. To me, being able to write the story is the key. The three heroines in my novel may be belittled by others, exiled, and dispatched from their past, home, loved ones, and themselves – and even at the same time they long not to be – but they all have come to accept these conditions. Therefore, 'The longing' has become a hybrid work that combines elements of fictional and metafictional life writing, encompassing testimony, confessions, and letters while sustaining 'new lenses' on perceiving how family memories, issues, and dynamics are accentuated in the novel. The idea of writing a generational novel, I reckon, enables intimate relationships between two entities or even realities such as local values, structures, practices, and other social frameworks to negotiate, co-exist, and integrate as it extends to cater multiple facts, fictions, and both of their entanglements.

There were limitations to this undertaking, of course, as I could not attain direct access to the personal, intimate testimonies of my grandparents due to their passing a couple of years back, such as their ways of dealing with the Communist mass killings and daily struggles during Suharto's repressive New Order. I'd like to think that my parents' and my memories of them, of our way in obtaining the essence of emotions out of them, would provide me with more than enough resources to weave the stories together. Moreover, due to the travel restrictions of COVID-19, I had to rely on my own imagination and the virtual exploration in digital spaces to approach stories of trauma, of family commemorations and address them in increasingly evocative ways. The seeds for this project were sown from my mother's oral stories and our memories of my grandparents. The images of these women revealed to me their worldview, including their strong family values and faith as middle-class Chinese Indonesian families and devout Christians.

Exploring intergenerational relationships involves dealing with cultural disparities existing between generations of a family; in 'The longing' it is also about generations of women adapting to their local culture, challenging societal constraints, constantly negotiating and reformulating their place and perspectives as ethnic minority Chinese women. I set my family's intergenerational relationships and ethnic marginalisation in family and academic environments where intergenerational and intercultural interactions occur regardless of characters' roles and hierarchies. While characters and events were sometimes inspired by observations of real people and situations, some themes developed as part of reflective practice and further research, for example into patterns of family relationships or dynamics of Indonesian politics and democratisation. Through

embracing a thoughtful and compassionate approach when constructing characters and scenes, I managed to maintain a more consistent narrative that is closely tied with imagined face-to-face encounters and sensitive matters; it helped me decide what to include or leave out.

Contextualising delicate family circumstances through fiction allows space for mindful improvisation: I could construct female characters with some unconventional traits whose challenging of societal constraints serves to critique those boundaries. This encourages recognition of how some stories and voices might accentuate particularities of lived experiences that have often been overlooked by mainstream narrative to produce new knowledge. For instance, the depiction of Ah Lam's battle with domestic violence is more focused on her efforts in channelling her struggles into caring for her children and grandchildren, adopting a positive outlook on life by being friendly to her customers and kind to her helpers. My approach to my grandmother's posthumous representation includes portraying Ah Lam's experiences overall in a positive light, showing her to be much engaged with and attentive to her family, clientele, relatives and neighbours as the family matriarch. Such strategy aims to emphasise Ah Lam's strength, compassion and determination while not minimising the shame and suffering caused by domestic violence. Through depicting intercultural friendships such as Ah Lam's warm interactions with her neighbours and helpers, Ming Zhu's and Arya's intercultural marriage and Dido's mixed-ethnic identity and activist filmmaking, this project manages to position women in ways rarely represented by newspapers, films, soap operas, or even Indonesian novels, and hence contribute to the discourse on multicultural situations of contemporary Indonesia.

Acknowledgements

The writing of the article has recorded the trajectory of my thinking process and writing experimentation of the doctoral creative project. I am grateful for the support of my supervisors, Dr Marcella Polain and Dr Ffion Murphy, who have guided me in the process of writing the novel and the exegesis; their encouraging feedback has inspired me to write this article. This work was supported by a Higher Degree by Research Scholarship from Edith Cowan University.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Alberta Natasia Adji is a contemporary author, researcher and a PhD candidate in creative writing at Edith Cowan University. Her doctoral creative research is concerned with family history within a Chinese-Indonesian context and the genre of auto/biographical fiction.

ORCID

Alberta Natasia Adji  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3966-7809>

References

- Ang, I. 2001. *On not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*. London: Routledge.
- Arifin, E. N., M. S. Hasbullah, and A. Pramono. 2017. "Chinese Indonesians: How Many, Who and Where?" *Asian Ethnicity* 18 (3): 310–329. doi:10.1080/14631369.2016.1227236.
- Chen, J. 2022. "Representing Chinese Indonesians: Pribumi Discourse and Regional Elections in Post-reform Indonesia." *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 41 (1): 59–87. doi:10.1177/18681034211036716.
- Chizova, K. 2021. *Kinship Novels of Early Modern Korea: Between Genealogical Time and the Domestic Everyday*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Eakin, P. J. 1985. *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-invention*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Evans, T. 2020. "The Emotions of Family History and the Development of Historical Knowledge." *Rethinking History* 24 (3-4): 310–331. doi:10.1080/13642529.2020.1847895.
- Friedman, S., D. O'Brien, and I. McDonald. 2021. "Deflecting Privilege: Class Identity and the Intergenerational Self." *Sociology* 55 (4): 716–733. doi:10.1177/0038038520982225.
- Hemley, R. 1994. *Turning Life into Fiction*. Minneapolis: Story Press.
- Henke, S. A. 1998. *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life Writing*. New York: Macmillan.
- Liao, P.-C. 2018. "Life Writing, Cultural Memory, and Historical Mediation in Julie Otsuka's *When the Emperor was Divine*." *Life Writing* 15 (4): 505–521. doi:10.1080/14484528.2018.1446666.
- Lindsey, T. 2018. "Post-Reformasi Indonesia: The Age of Uncertainty." *Australian Institute of International Affairs*. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/post-reformasi-indonesia-the-age-of-uncertainty/>.
- Llosa, M. V. 1992. *A Writer's Reality*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Marching, S. T. 2017. "The Mass Rape of the Ethnic Chinese in May 1998 and the War on Terror." *Pacific News* 27: 18–21. http://www.pacific-geographies.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/06/pn27_marching.pdf.
- Morris-Suzuki, T. 2005. *The Past Within Us: Media, Memory, History*. London: Verso.
- Neale, L. 2017. "The Ethics and Intentionality of Writing Family." *Vitae Scholastica* 34 (2): 110–126. <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11937/76657>.
- Purdey, J. 2005. "Anti-Chinese Violence and Transitions in Indonesia: June 1998–October 1999." In *Chinese Indonesians: Remembering, Distorting, Forgetting*, edited by T. Lindsey, and H. Pausacker, 14–40. Victoria: Monash University Press.
- Setijadi, C. 2017. "Chinese Indonesians in the Eyes of the pribumi Public." *ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute* 73: 1–12. <http://hdl.handle.net/11540/7545>.
- Slotkin, R. 2005. "Fiction for the Purposes of History." *Rethinking History* 9 (2-3): 221–236. doi:10.1080/13642520500149152.
- Suryadinata, L. 1993. "The State and Chinese Minority in Indonesia." In *Chinese Adaptation and Diversity: Essays on Society and Literature in Indonesia, Malaysia & Singapore*, edited by L. Suryadinata, 77–100. Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- Suryadinata, L. 2004. "Ethnic Chinese and Nation-building: Concluding Remarks." In *Ethnic Relations and Nation-building in Southeast Asia*, edited by L. Suryadinata, 230–240. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS).
- Suryadinata, L., E. N. Arifin, and A. Ananta. 2003. *Indonesia's Population: Ethnicity and Religion in a Changing Political Landscape*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS).
- Taguchi, Y., and A. Majumdar. 2021. "Kinship as Fiction: Exploring the Dynamism of Intimate Relationships in South Asia." *Contemporary South Asia* 29 (1): 1–9. doi:10.1080/09584935.2021.1884661.