
BOXED MEMORIES

Doreen Lee

A Word of Introduction

I recorded this story in August 2002, in Jakarta, Indonesia.¹ Rather than introducing this short story as a fiction, I would like to characterize my narrative account as a dramatized and deeply personal response to my grandfather's (Kisran Yioda) illuminating tale of his role in the Indonesian nationalist movement during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies. It is his story that I reproduce here as an exercise in exploring disappearing memories, the complexities of being part of a diasporic and ethnically marked community in Indonesia, as well as a reconsideration of those locally specific conditions and agents which enabled the Indonesian revolution.

The story of Kisran Yioda—or Jio Kwang Tjong, as he is also known—presents a momentary suspension of the negative and communal associations assigned to Chinese-Indonesians throughout Indonesian history. His account of his wartime activities has prompted me to rethink both the relation of Indonesian nationalism to “Chinese,” and the stability of “Chinese-ness.” In particular, I question the practice of assigning ethnic identities and assuming the presence of antagonistic inter-ethnic relations when analyses of the “Chinese problem” in Indonesia are attempted. A generic History of the Chinese in Indonesia may only hint at a hyphenated relationship

¹ More precisely, I heard it in July 2002, and wrote it down in August. I wasn't sure whom the story was meant for, nor did I think that members of my family, who read mainly in Chinese and Bahasa Indonesia, would read it. But I intended for the story to be remembered, so that it became more than a whiff of family lore. With that said, I would like to thank Tyrell Haberkorn for being my first reader. I would also like to thank Jim Siegel very much for his generous suggestion that I submit this story for publication, and for his thoughtful comments on this preface.

between the seemingly separate categories, “Chinese” and “Indonesia(n),” while reinscribing a presumed continuity within the unitary form of “Chineseness” itself.²

As an exercise also in self-reflection, the self constituted here—my self, rather than my grandfather’s—is specific to a backwards look at one’s own historical baggage. For someone growing up in Indonesia, I remained blissfully unaware of all these traversals in history and geographical space by my own family. Who am “I” then, writing this story? In English, no less. As an anthropologist-in-training, embedded within the context of the American academy, I realized as I listened to my grandfather tell his story that my interest was piqued at two levels. First, I was intrigued that my family possessed something recognizable as history, which existed as an untapped reserve of memory. Second, I was implicated (in it). To bridge these two dimensions of interest, to situate my self in relation to an ever widening and backwards reaching diasporic consciousness, one needs to return to language.

I have tried to capture as much as possible the rhythms and sentiments of my grandfather’s generation—related at times in Cantonese, in Hokkien, and in Mandarin (he shifts to Mandarin when speaking to me directly). These alternating rhythms of dialect-switching mark the specific spaces these languages occupy in his life. Hokkien was the lingua franca most commonly associated with the Chinese-Indonesians in Medan, so much so that *pribumi* Indonesians engaged in trade or work with them would learn a smattering, or sometimes more, of it. Cantonese was my grandfather’s mother tongue, a familial and domestic language for him. Meanwhile, Mandarin, propelled by overseas-Chinese nationalism devoted to the new Republic of China, was the language acquired by later generations who learned it in the short-lived Chinese language schools in Indonesia.

After three generations of diluted-language production, I, representative of many of my (New Order) generation, have been rendered almost monolingual. Here is an interesting predicament—If one cannot speak or read “Chinese,” then what makes one “Chinese”? After the banning of most Chinese publications and the closing of Chinese-language schools in 1957 under the Sukarno regime, language and culture have been estranged in Indonesia. Consequently, the transmission of “Chinese language” has significantly altered. After 1957, Chinese language became even more tightly knit into the family, as it passed out of formal educational institutions. The domestication of

² It is at this point that I should say that the term “Chinese-Indonesian” is not widely used as a means of identification within Indonesia. Historically, identities were not formed through a process that tied and subordinated ethnicity to nationality through the use of the hyphen, as in the United States, where ethnic groups gained entry into the American nation through a process of assimilation. Hence Italian-Americans, German-Americans, Irish-Americans . . . the list goes on. In Indonesia, the constructedness of a specifically “Indonesian” identity at the turn of the century was what, in large part, allowed disparate ethnic groups to imagine their claim to the nation, and to recognize each other as equal constituents of their new nation. The umbrella structure of the Indonesian nation was meant to encompass all other structures of identity, so that one could be, for example, both Javanese and Indonesian simultaneously. The option did not hold for the Chinese, however, who retained their inassimilable “Chinese-ness.” The category “Indonesian” could not contain the category “Chinese,” which remained outside and in opposition to the nation. My thanks to Jim Siegel for pointing out to me that the existence of hyphenated identities belongs particularly to the English language.

Chinese language(s) by both the Indonesian government and Chinese-Indonesian families succeeded in relegating Chinese script into a cultural relic of the past. I therefore have no access to script. I am illiterate in Chinese. Chinese language exists only as speech. I am one of a species whose resurgent interest in Chinese ethnicity can only be carried out through other (colonial, post-colonial) languages. Let those be, in this case, English or Indonesian. So while I am able to hear the meaning of the words, be they Hokkien, Hakka, or Cantonese, these are not my languages.³ Ask me to parse them out and I produce a mongrel sentence—each word with no relation to the next. Coming out of my mouth, each specific dialect-word becomes an undifferentiated mass. My lack of identification with things so essentially, culturally “Chinese” as Chinese language and script produces ambivalence in me when I am confronted with the seemingly unassailable fact of my ethnicity. Yet that position provides no respite from being identified in Indonesia as myself, essentially, “Chinese.” How many, like me, have internalized “Chineseness” as the source of our otherness, but are unable to articulate what it means?

These literal and literary excursions may help reshape our understandings of Chinese ethnicity in Indonesia for the future.⁴ As such, the lines that demarcate “the Chinese” have become visible at various historical moments, but always in relation to particular circumstances where identity-practice and capital consumption come to stand in for ethnicity.⁵ I am certain there are many more stories such as my grandfather’s across the Archipelago and further still. The reclaiming of these alternative histories must be done via other means—through the force of other languages foreign to it, without losing the meaning of the “original,” which we cannot view as *one*, even if it is whole. The “original” reflects the Indies in revolution, reflects the ingredients of what made modern “Indonesia” (or conversely, what made Indonesia modern). Our grasp on the syntax of this language can only be partial. I have had, by example, to write my own script for it, being unable to document it by other means. The archive, at this moment, is human, is still alive, and so creates other possibilities for research.

³ Mandarin is nowadays generally accepted as the dominant Chinese language, but dialects are also recognizably “Chinese” and are acknowledged to have cultural legitimacy as such. The more interesting issue in the context of Indonesia would be the certitude with which many people hear, and name, a language as “Chinese,” often without knowing the meanings of any of the words.

⁴ I have noted a tentative attempt in popular literature, and in the print and television media in Indonesia post-1998, to explore Chinese-Indonesian identity. For example, the greater availability of novels such as *Ca-bau-kan*, by Remy Syllado, which focuses on inter-racial concubinage in the late-Dutch colonial era; or the popular TV-series “Amanda” (SCTV, 2002), where features phenotypically (and very attractive, pop-ionic) Chinese teenagers as urban, middle-class characters without any overt mention of ethnicity. Is this a token dissolution of their “Chineseness,” so that they are meant to portray typical Indonesian *remaja*? Perhaps a revived interest in colonial-era Indo-Chinese literature will occur in the coming years, but, once again, the cultural politics involved in asserting such obviously ethnicized interests at the level of national or high culture remain contentious.

⁵ See James T. Siegel, “Thoughts on the Violence of May 13 and 14, 1998, in Jakarta,” in *Violence and the State in Suharto’s Indonesia*, ed. Benedict R. O’G. Anderson (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2001).

For those scholars interested in diasporic Chinese families, I offer this further bit of information. The setting for the story is as follows: a reunion in Jakarta between my grandfather, seventy-eight years old; his older sister, eighty-three, whom I will call my grandmother⁶; my aunt, who is her daughter (both my grandfather's sister and my aunt live in Singapore); and my grandfather's youngest sister, seventy years old, who had been repatriated to Nanjing, China, where she has lived for the last five decades, in order to escape anti-Chinese persecution in Indonesia.

Boxed Memories: Recording Family Histories, Finding Forgotten Heroes

This is the end, because I am laughing as I write this. It is good, I know, that the words have transpired without action, that I am forgetting as I record. There is safety in words, in my changing memory—I've boxed you in, in acid-free paper. Safe, safe, no need for lock and key.

I am remembering what I once cared about, before you. It is a relief to my senses that they are no longer deadened. I feel a slight tingling in my fingers and spine. A moribund takeover—my body is mine once more? It listens to me, belongs to me, my hands tremble of their own accord. Mine. Some thing else has taken root. Do you know your own history? I don't mean yours. Beyond your self, there is meaning in the lives lost before you. I am talking about family, romance colored by generations interspersed between. We were involved in bigger things once. Matters of the heart, livelihood, and nation joined in danger, reddened by ignorance and more than a few slices of pain. My family watched others pay in blood while we grieved.

Why should I care? I am watching you, my forebears, gray in the hair and face, bravely hold your tongues in silence. You are not going to die heroes of the country. You may not even die a valiant death for your children. And your grandchildren; do they know the truth? Are you ashamed of the war? Today you talked magic for the first time, and I listened in wonder, not knowing what questions to ask. My historian's mind recorded furiously, heard the guns, the Japanese soldiers, the nervous tinkling of your comrade's bicycle, but I was mute, unable to ask what I wanted. I wanted to say: yes, but how did you, my grandfather, become involved in the war? War was around you, but how did you get in it? How did you join the resistance? Where did you find the courage that secrecy and truth needed? You were the mouthpiece of the resistance when the radios were dead, the silence enforced by the invading army. You, the secret civilian, harbored more than your share of heroes and families. Instead, I asked, yes, but how did you get so FAR? As far as Kota Pinang! You said. In trucks, in huddles of the Indonesian rebel forces, you spread news of the Japanese army's movements smuggled via small sheets of Chinese newspapers printed in Hongkong. I imagine small sheets of rough newsprint, done in blue ink, on purpose, small and easily hidden. In the handlebars of an innocuous young Chinese man. Lee Fook looked like an old coolie, but

⁶ My maternal grandfather's older sister is my paternal grandmother because of a cross-cousin marriage between their children, i.e. my parents.

he was the vanguard of the resistance movement around Kisaran. There are ordinary heroes, but poor Lee Fook died of malaria, his grave forgotten, but for you grandfather, and your older brother.⁷

You were not beaten, but you hid in the fields, while they looked for you.⁸ It was so simple, it seemed. The war was coming, times were hard, and food was scarce.

My grandmother interjects: "I can still hear them coming at three in the morning, banging on my door with guns! I was never more scared than at that moment. Hey! I hid in the dark in the corner, praying they wouldn't come in to harm me and my young sister. That was when I knew, I suspected."

"Suspected what?" I asked.

"That Third Brother had asked me to harbor the man they were looking for! That man came twice to dinner, a small thin thing, of course I didn't refuse. That Lee Fook was who they were looking for, and when he left, as hurriedly as when he came, Third Brother came back to ask, 'Sister, did he leave anything?' What things? I said. He didn't leave anything at all! That was when I knew."

Lee Fook was the primary disseminator of the post that came in, through his handlebars, he risked the most for all of us. (my grandfather said)

My grandmother continued with the story: "The one that got it bad was the boss of the *kopi tiam*! He sold food at the train station and knew nothing, but they beat him to within an inch of his life! He was English-educated, what did he know? He couldn't even read what we smuggled in!"⁹

⁷ I am uncertain of the exact location of Lee Fook's grave, but, according to my grandfather, he died young, without any commemoration of his wartime activities. He was unmarried, and, it appears, without extended family relations in Sumatra.

⁸ My maternal grandfather held a minor position with the Lee Rubber Co. The "fields" he mentioned were part of the rubber plantations of the Lee Rubber holdings, where members of the resistance network near Kisaran held their covert nighttime meetings to avoid detection by the Japanese forces.

⁹ *Kopi Tiam*: vernacular Hokkien term for "coffee shop," an instantly recognizable term in cities with sizeable Hokkien-speaking populations, such as Singapore, Penang, Malacca, Kuala Lumpur, and Medan. The significance of the English-educated Chinese in this story points to the heterogeneity within the Chinese population in Indonesia at the time. The existence of a strata of English-speaking Chinese in Medan and Kisaran reflects cross-straits relations with the cultural worlds of British colonial city-centers in Penang and Singapore, rather than a natural or logical affinity for the Dutch language, for reasons to do with geographic proximity, and extended/fictive kin networks that stretched across the straits of Malacca. It further points to class differentiation in Medan and Kisaran at the time, for only the wealthy Chinese-Indonesians could afford to send their children to Dutch-language schools. I would like to emphasize the paradoxical ways in which the Chinese-Indonesian community participated in the Indonesian nationalist movement; that access to knowledge at this time was both restricted by the Japanese, and impeded by the Chinese script used for communication. The impenetrability of the text to outsiders is precisely what protects and aids the Indonesian resistance movement in these parts of Sumatra, while rendering a particular value to the authenticity of the ethnic Chinese, who mobilizes his (the gendered pronoun is appropriate here) cultural and transnational networks to enable access to contraband information. The merging of a normally reviled difference in Indonesia—i.e., the inassimilable quality of "Chineseness—with the specific value that this cultural cache performs during revolution, subverts our normative understanding of nationalism as an ethnically monolithic enterprise.

"But the photo studio owner, he knew."

"Right, they came one day asking for the negatives of pictures of Lee Fook. He had gone there to take pictures once, and the owners knew it, but they never gave him up. Never. They said they didn't know anything about the man in question."

"Now that was integrity," my grandfather said appreciatively. (*They were speaking in Hokkien, quickly, quickly, like everyone around them at the time. 1940-something? They couldn't remember. It was before Independence.*) "He never sold anyone out, was never a traitor although he got beaten terribly too."

He spooned some more food in his mouth. Rice, vegetables, fish. When they were feeling really nostalgic for the hunger of their youth, they would sigh for weak rice porridge, mixed with sweet potatoes. Root vegetables, the universal sustenance of the poor. That day they were also eating plain steamed tapioca leaves with sambal,¹⁰ and I suspect that the taste of those bitter leaves contained some essence of the past. For my grandmother and her sister, sitting there more than five decades later, they marked the year when my father was born, born into the war of such hunger that the young mother and her even younger sibling stole tapioca leaves from their neighbor's garden. That sour-faced stingy neighbor of theirs had a garden plot comfortably swathed in green stalks. Not so many that he would not notice, so my grandmother picked from different trees each day to the next. The kindly wife of this sullen Chinese man said not a word about their thieving. Instead, and this was the height of her kindness, she sent over a precious chicken one day when she learned that someone in the family was ill. My grandmother shakes her head at the cruelty of the year and the kindness of the woman, all mingled in one fragrance of steamed tapioca leaves. I had never eaten one, even when they were featured on our dinner table. I was one generation removed from those that could "taste bitterness," a euphemism for enduring, indeed eating, hardship.

"And so what happened?" I felt bound to ask. The moment demanded it, filled as it was with good humor and cup after cup of Chinese green tea.

"The school teacher, he survived detention without a beating by the Japanese. He lived, and many of our comrades died. That was how we knew he had given us up, given names, shamefacedly cooperated, all because he was newly married and his wife was newly pregnant."

My aunt is shocked. "But he was such a nice man!" The schoolteacher in question had held in her mind the special position of respect reserved for those literary scholars well-versed in Chinese history. He had even gone on to teach in Singapore after the war.

"Why else do you think we hated him? He did not have a good life, no one spoke well of him after that."

And I understood that the shameful knowledge the schoolteacher lived with was compounded by the silence enforced upon him by his former acquaintances. He had broken their vow of silence, and now lived in the penury of their contempt.

¹⁰ Chili paste pounded with spices and shrimp paste (*belachan*).

My aunt probed some more. My grandfather was a reticent man by most standards, but I interpreted his pause as dramatic effect.

"He died in the worst way possible, in his own scandal. He fell in love with a girl student of his, a very young girl whom he used to tutor. She would come to his house, and he was hopelessly in love with her. He was already past sixty and still married! Everyone knew too! So in the end he wrote her a long love letter, and killed himself. You could say he died of love." My grandfather shook his head, disturbed by the failed last years of the aged schoolteacher, *who could have done the right thing* and died long ago.

Bring it back to war, bring it back to war, I chanted childishly in my mind. Post-war Chinese Singaporean mores did not interest me. Bring it back to war. My grandmother's lovely wrinkles stretched into something unpleasant, reflecting an age of frowning that was her life-memory of all that war became. It became her family being imprisoned, her husband shot by pirates in a rushed attempt to cross the Straits of Malacca, his illness and impoverishment, subsequent death, her life as a struggling widow. This chronological narrative of history was never framed as an autobiography, but came woven with a grim collective of rabid soldiers, the absence of a husband, and a kind of tarnished glory that bound her youth in black and white.

She looked across the table at her brother, my grandfather, and poured him more tea.

"Kung-Kung,"¹¹ I said, "What did you get out of it?"

But I didn't really say that. What I heard myself say was "Why didn't you ever tell me, or any of your grandchildren?"

I was afraid that he would say we never had the time for it, nor would we understand. Does it take a profound education to understand war? Or learn the tension between living and staying alive? I had neither of those tools then, but my greed to know, to grasp in my hand an imagined history of the man in front of me, focused my attention. I knew he had a hole in his heart, my grandfather, but now I wanted to know whether he felt it, and if it was plugged up, this heart, with silence. I felt a murderous desire to have his true heart come flowing out of his mouth, in whatever dialect he pleased, so I could possess courage and war in the same breath.

But my grandfather, he followed through with a sudden grin of glory, as if hearing my hidden question.

"They gave me a medal, you know. I still have it upstairs with my other treasures."¹²

I imagined brass and ribbons.

¹¹ Maternal grandfather, in Mandarin. In standard pinyin, it would be written as "Gong-Gong." I use a different spelling in continuity with a system of phonetic transcription that my family employed for my benefit whenever a Chinese character had to be written down. This was the way in which I "read" Chinese.

¹² The "they" in question would be the Indonesian military post-1945.

I felt an unease in wanting to witness these artifacts. I imagined opening little boxes of his life, knowing full well that one only does so in conclusion. And so I put off asking to see this treasure, hoping I would not one day have to unearth it in the way I had foreseen.

My grandfather had chosen to answer a particular question, leaving aside another. If he had chosen the one I had enunciated in those exact words, he would have to call into effect the present, the nowness of the decades between his life and those of his descendants. But if he had truly answered the first, he would have had to say what I wanted to hear; that is, what the war left him with was a blank slate, the ability to call himself a man and not a revolutionary. That he got married, had children, struggled hard to raise them, and in return was given a mundane nationality that he no longer desired to change.

And so he has his driver's license that tells you Date of Birth, Occupation, Place of Birth, Married (in...), Chinese-Indonesian. His name tells you where he was born, raised, resisted, and married. Kisran, Kisaran without a vowel.