

Writing Historical Fiction from a Cross-Cultural Perspective.

Contributed by Lachlan
Sunday, 22 July 2007

Stout Research Centre Chinese New Zealand Seminar Series:

"Writing Historical Fiction from a Cross-Cultural Perspective"
a seminar given by Alison Wong on 2 April 2003

The following seminar is a revised and greatly expanded version of one given in Dunedin on 15 August 2002 as part of the Hocken Library New Zealand Centre Seminar Series.

The future was a time that called into question everything that came before it.
Ivan Klima, *Waiting for the Dark*, *Waiting for the Light*

The novel I am currently writing had its genesis at the Stout Research Centre. In 1996, I received a Reader's Digest-New Zealand Society of Authors Stout Research Centre Fellowship to work on a novel. My original proposal was to work on a contemporary novel set in New Zealand and China, a project I had begun the year before while studying creative writing at Victoria University. However, because of personal circumstances, by the time it came for me to take up the two month Fellowship, I had decided I could no longer write the novel at that time and certainly not in the way that I had originally conceived it. I therefore had to conjure another novel to write.

There's a famous saying (probably misquoted, but I think very relevant here) that writing a novel is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration. It has been my personal experience that when you embark on a novel, as opposed to a poem or a short story, it is such a huge commitment that you have to find something absolutely compelling to write about. It has to capture your imagination and address your obsessions sufficiently so that even if and when the going gets tough or your life intrudes and it takes years and years and you're still not finished, somehow despite it all, you can still keep that commitment to write, there was only thing I could think of that seemed compelling enough at such short notice. And it centred round a piece of family history.

It's interesting that my family didn't talk much about the past or about family history. Like so many Chinese of their generation, my parents were simply too busy working and providing us with an education to talk about the old days. It's that talk - the family stories and mythologies - that can prove so rich for the writer. My father was a good, hardworking man who provided for us and loved us dearly but he was also a man of few words. My mother probably had the words, like a lot of women. but little time to speak them. I also think it would have been different if I had grown up in Auckland close to my mother's family and my grandmother rather than in Hawke's Bay where my father's family was, because sisters, mothers, daughters, grandmothers, and granddaughters are more likely talk. Also there would have been so many more Chinese around. However, when I received the Fellowship at the Stout Research Centre and my father realised I was a writer, he told me something about his grandfather who had come out to New Zealand from Kwangtung (Guangdong) province in 1896. My immediate reaction, apart from fascination and horror that such things might be in my family background, was that this would make a great novel. This tiny bit of family history could be the starting point for something new and fictional. But I wasn't tempted. Historical fiction sounded too hard. It involved too much work, too much research, and something contemporary I could relate to, seemed so much more appealing - that is, until I had to think up a completely new novel to write while on the Fellowship.

I won't elaborate on my great grandfather's story because I don't want to spoil the plot for future readers, however, I am aware that there has been a lot of misleading and inaccurate publicity. Therefore I want to emphasise that I am not writing family history. What my father and relatives were able to tell me was scanty, and the true story is a mystery. I've researched myself and then changed many facts that I do know about. I've interviewed many elderly people, Chinese and non-Chinese. I've taken a bit here and a bit there. I've created something new.

Graham Greene once said writing novels was like espionage - violations of faith and

trust. Writers come across a lot of wonderful material. Some people are into your fiction, others are sure you're writing about them even when you can do about that), and others would be horrified if they, their actions circumstances were portrayed in fiction. Some writers see literature as than the feelings of individuals who may have inspired it. This is where demands of art battle it out. Regardless of the position you take, those confidences - whether of relatives, friends, acquaintances or enemies the consequences. Take for example, Woody Allen's movie Deconstructing

dying to make it you aren't (not a lot or more important ethics and the writers who betray - have to live with Harry.

Allen's character is a novelist who doesn't make any effort to disguise those around him. It's almost like playing God, or perhaps, havoc, with and friends. The biographer and the writer of memoir/autobiography have issue even more keenly. At the least the novelist says that what they're even in cases where it is substantially autobiographical.

his life or that of the lives of family to face this writing is fiction,

Some writers just don't use sensitive material even though it's crying else they wait till certain people are dead before they publish. Many fiction or fictionalise material to such an extent that it bears little original inspiration.

out to be used or writers mix fact and resemblance to the

I never intended to write a historical novel. I wouldn't normally recommend novice writer like myself, without a rich background in history or family first up to write a historical novel, particularly one set in an culture, are not well documented. Why make it hard for yourself? But sometimes compelled to do something hard and no reason is strong enough not to do find yourself in a boat out at sea with only rudimentary skills in sailing, things to anchor you, some things to guide you, something to aim for. been like this for me. It gave me a rough setting - Wellington from the the beginning of WWI - and an idea for a story. Then the novel took on

that a history, attempt place and era which you are it. When you you need some Family history has 1890s through to a life of its own.

It's now set from the 1890s to the 1920s in Wellington, Dunedin, Kwangtung (Guangdong) Province in China and the Western Front during WWI. I've set main characters where my great grandfather lived in Adelaide Road, Newtown, kind of work he did as a fruiterer and greengrocer. But no-one knows what a person. He was an only child, but I have created two brothers. All my are fictional, though some of the minor characters are real life historical was inspired by family history but that history is more like the rich soil in which my novel was planted and watered and has grown, than the novel itself. Well-known events and people have watered the novel and become incorporated into but the novel has a life of its own. It is a work of the imagination fed

some of my doing the he was like as main characters figures. The novel soil in which my novel historical the cell structure, by history.

Brian Castro, a part Chinese novelist who grew up in Hong Kong, Macao Australia, quotes Graham Greene and agrees that writing is like being describes a writer as "someone who does not fit comfortably into watches it secretly". I think there is a lot of truth in that. There is something in the writer's psyche of not quite fitting in with the so-called 'normal' world, an 'otherness' 'not-belonging'. Otherwise why would writers spend so much time writing getting out there and living? Why are writers driven to create other worlds?

and a spy, but he any culture but who is something in the writer's or state of instead of just

There is a specific kind of 'otherness', which is particularly relevant am writing. Immigrants, or minorities of any kind (whether racial, ethnic, otherwise) sometimes talk about living a hyphenated existence, straddling sometimes belonging to both, often belonging to neither.

to the novel I religious or two cultures,

Being a writer, let alone a person, from an ethnic minority like most can be both a curse and a blessing. You've potentially got a slightly which can set you apart in the marketplace. But there is also the danger holed or stereotyped, of being expected to be different when you're not. dominated by characters from a particular ethnicity and perspective. I mine from both Chinese and NZ European perspectives.

things in life, different story to tell, of being pigeon- Many novels are have chosen to tell

There has been little New Zealand fiction written from the Chinese perspective, if you look at the literature of the time, that is the early 1900s, the absent, a people who did not exist. The few instances where Chinese are often racist, stereotypical, unflattering, or at least, alienating. Take short story, Prelude, for instance. Beryl says:

and Chinese were largely referred to are Katherine Mansfield's

"Mother, whatever can I do with these awful hideous Chinese paintings that Chung Wah gave Stanley when he went bankrupt? It's absurd to say that they are valuable, because they were hanging in Chung Wah's fruit shop for months before. I can't make out why Stanley wants them kept. I'm sure he thinks them just as hideous as we do, but it's because of the frames," she said spitefully. "I suppose he thinks the frames might fetch something some day or other."

Here Chinese objects are referred to as 'awful hideous' and perhaps they really were, though of course that is a value judgement, which can be very much influenced by cultural perspectives.

Later in Prelude, Stanley Burnell is on his way home from the office. "At the Chinaman's shop next door he bought pineapple in the pink of condition, and noticing a basket of fresh black cherries he told John to put him in a pound of those as well." The Chinese shopkeeper is referred to as a Chinaman and 'John' instead of as a Chinese, or by his actual name if known. We have a people who have no name and are seen to be all the same so you can call them all 'John'. They aren't really human - they aren't 'people like us'.

In Mansfield's At the Bay, Linda and her father dream of sailing up a Chinese river. It never happens. Instead Linda wears a Chinese shawl. Here the view of the Chinese is not negative but it is an outsider's view. The two stories portray Chinese culture and the Chinese as either ugly and negative or exotic. Where is the insider's view? Where are the ordinary people who just happen to be Chinese? And how in these circumstances can anyone identify with the Chinese or be proud to be one? Certainly, I found reading Prelude alienating and shameful. The reader is meant to sympathise with the European characters, and yet here were people like my own grandfather and great-grandfather who were portrayed in a denigrating manner. This kind of writing divorced me from the New Zealand literary tradition. No one spoke for the people I came from. Although Mansfield was reflecting a common attitude of the day, it becomes a problem in a nation's literature if these kinds of perspective are not balanced with alternatives.

So why am I writing the novel from the New Zealand European or pakeha perspective as well? Why not write it only from the Chinese perspective? Because I want to show both sides of the story. In fact there are many sides, not just two. Prejudice and misunderstanding are not limited to one group. The Chinese were and still can be racist too. And then there were those on both sides who tried to reach out to each other and overcome misunderstanding. My family have been in New Zealand for five generations, if you count my son. I am the third generation born in New Zealand. I have grown up in a largely pakeha-dominated country, with largely pakeha friends. I understand pakeha perspectives, and many of them I feel comfortable with. Also, pakeha history and culture is much better documented than NZ Chinese history and culture. For me, writing the Chinese story of one hundred years ago is more of a challenge than writing the pakeha story of the same time. That being said, there are aspects of Chinese culture that have been passed down to me. I have had to explore aspects of my upbringing and innate attitudes, and recognise their Chineseness.

Writing this novel, I have sometimes felt like I am living a hyphenated existence, moving between different worlds and finding their intersections, and also those huge spaces where they do not meet at all. I have to try to look at the assumptions that we make of other people and their actions and try to find those that do not apply in a cross-cultural context. I quote from Gary Snyder's translation of one of the Cold Mountain (Han-shan) poems:

My heart's not the same as yours.
If your heart was like mine
You'd get it and be right here.

So where is the common ground between cultures and where do our assumptions lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding? How do you write individual, authentic, non-stereotypical characters who realistically live in the times and culture of the day and yet are not always or necessarily bound to those traditions? These are not easy questions. I find it a real challenge to try to address them and do the novel justice.

There can also be a real tension between the demands of fiction and the demands of

history. So far, as much as I have been able, I have tried to make the novel completely historically accurate. Writing something fictional so accurately that it could have really happened is very challenging. Sometimes you have a great idea from a story or metaphorical point of view but it could never have happened, i.e., because the sequence of events does not fit with historical fact or because a particular person could not have been in that place at that time doing that what you as the author want them to do. Many novelists will sacrifice historical accuracy for story. Perhaps the help I have received from so many historians and experts and people with some knowledge of the events and times, and also my grave sense of responsibility, have so far not allowed me to sacrifice accuracy. I'm not certain though, whether I'll be able to keep this up till the end of the book.

The novelist Jim Crace doesn't even try to make his fiction accurate, he unashamedly makes it up. For Crace, the believability of his worlds are paramount. His worlds work for his story but they do not correspond with reality. They are works of the imagination that work in an imaginary world. Some writers combine facts with make-believe or with events which are out of sequence because it works better that way for the story. Other writers like Catherine Chidgey are scrupulous in their research and want every small detail to be accurate. Chidgey says you have to go one way or the other. Either like Crace, make it all up, or like herself, make sure that you get it all right. One of the consequences of getting something wrong, is that some day someone somewhere will notice it and the error will leap out at them and break the fictional spell - that contract that the writer and reader have where the writer says, 'I know what I'm doing, take my hand and come with me, trust me.'

I think it is possible as a novelist to write well about a place, time, and/or culture that is not your own. You must have a good imagination. If you want to provide a lot of detail and be factually and spiritually accurate then you must research very, very well and preferably have or start to have contact with the people, place or culture. However, I do think it is much easier to write if you are an insider, and there are certain things that only an insider could write about - as an insider there is so much that you know without even needing to think about it.

How do I define insider? Insiders are those who think and feel and see themselves as insiders, just as the definition of ethnicity is not one of race but of how one identifies. Although I am racially fully Chinese and I tick Chinese for my ethnicity, in fact, it would be as relevant for me to tick both Chinese and NZ European/pakeha.

I don't think I could have written this novel if I wasn't a Chinese New Zealander. There is a connection, something personal that has kept me going despite all the ups and downs, despite life intruding. But here I must add that although the traumas and responsibilities of life can keep us from writing, it is these things themselves that make the writing what it is. Novelists, short story writers, poets, playwrights, all write from life and about life, even when it's completely fictional.

As a Chinese New Zealander, there is a different feeling to talking with elderly Chinese if you are Chinese yourself and from one of the old families. Even better if you are related or if the person you are talking to was a friend of your grandfather. The provincial, county, clan and village ties (and here I am talking about place of origin in China) are breaking down more with each generation but for my grandparents' and parents' generations they were very important. One person I interviewed said to me that he was only telling me certain things because I was family. And family for the Chinese is traditionally much, much bigger than the Western nuclear or even extended family. It goes back many generations to a common ancestor. We talk of village cousins because we came from the same village in China.

The three years I spent in China during the 80s and 90s have been helpful in writing the novel - seeing the place, seeing villages, interacting with the people and the culture. Modern-day China is very different from the days of my novel and yet there are still carry-overs in terms of place, culture, and ways of interacting and being.

One regret is that I cannot speak or understand Cantonese. When my brother, who is four years older, had to go into hospital for an operation at age four, he could not speak any English. My mother had to tell him that whenever he was thirsty he should say Milo. The nurses commented to my mother about his love of Milo! But I didn't learn Cantonese

because a European woman, who worked in my parents' fruit and vegetable shop, thought that whenever they spoke Chinese to us children, we were actually talking about her behind her back. My parents stopped speaking Chinese and I grew up unable to communicate with my grandparents or elderly relatives. This has been a problem for me personally and also in researching and writing the novel. Imagine this scenario: my mother and father help me by interpreting when I interview elderly non-English speaking Chinese (who, by the way, have often lived here most of their lives.) I ask a question and my parents struggle to translate. A five-minute reply comes back in Cantonese and my parents translate it back to me in one or two sentences. Sometimes you've got to wonder what you missed. Maybe the most valuable thing to you as a writer was in the four and three-quarter minutes that was never translated, not necessarily always in the substance of what was said but in the way it was said or not said. Maybe what you have lost is half a dozen other questions you might have asked if only you had heard those four and three-quarter minutes and been triggered into asking them.

When I was in China I learned Mandarin, which has been invaluable, despite my lack of fluency. As a writer it would be even better if I could read Chinese fluently. However, the characters of my novel spoke Cantonese, not Mandarin. Everything in the novel needs to be in Cantonese and, if I can work it out, in the Cantonese of the day. I know a few Cantonese words because of my background, and sometimes in my interviews I pick up from people certain Cantonese phrases or metaphors, but often I have to think in Mandarin first and then translate, if possible and appropriate, into Cantonese. It doesn't always work. I also have the problem of how to write Cantonese words phonetically. Some of the standard ways of writing romanised Cantonese look ugly, long and difficult to read. They don't look right in a novel, and Chinese writers don't seem to have a standard for writing Cantonese in English, unlike for Mandarin where there are two acceptable systems. Another issue is with Chinese names, places and words that are well-known in English. These are often recognised when written in romanised Mandarin but not if written in the way my characters would have pronounced them. I would like consistency in naming conventions but probably understandability is more important.

Writing the novel has been and continues to be a challenging, even daunting experience for several reasons. Firstly, because I'm not a historian, there is so much to research and to learn. Secondly, because my family has been in New Zealand so long, over the generations the Chineseness of my family has been diluted and there is much to research and learn about the Chinese and Chinese culture and history as it applied one hundred years ago. There is a certain tenuousness about any claim I could make about being an insider writing about Chinese in NZ one hundred years ago. Thirdly, it's just long enough ago so that almost no-one is still alive from the main period I am interested in, or they were so young that their recollections tend to be of later times or from the limited viewpoint of a very young child. Fourthly, the pre-WW1 period appears to be one of the less well documented periods of NZ history. There is probably more about colonial or Victorian New Zealand, about the Chinese during the gold rush, about the women's movement during the late 1800s when women were campaigning for the vote, and so on.

Fifthly, there's so little fiction out there about and/or by the New Zealand Chinese, that the novel is more likely to attract attention and criticism. Because I have started from a place of such ignorance, the challenge I face is to do enough research to write the novel well and yet not get so bogged down in it that the novel is never finished. If I'm going to get the chance to write several novels in my lifetime, I'm going to have to live with the knowledge that despite my best intentions, I'm quite likely to get a few things wrong. One way to minimise errors is to give the novel or parts of it to various historians with specialist knowledge or other people 'in the know' so that they can verify its accuracy. If writing fiction were a crime then I have had many accomplices - more than half of the others giving seminars as part of this series, and countless others associated with the Stout Research Centre, Victoria University, University of Otago, National Library, Historic Places Trust, Wellington City Archives, Defence Library, Hewitson Library, Olveston, etc, etc. Then there are all the individuals I have interviewed, and all the writers who have encouraged me, given me feedback, or with whom I have discussed the knots and problems in the narrative. The list could go on and on.

But even if you make every effort to get everything right, how do you know what is 'true'? Every historian or biographer may give different and conflicting interpretations of the facts, and when you interview people they may give conflicting versions of the 'facts'.

I have had this experience myself. How fictional is history or biography or autobiography/memoir anyway? There is the view that fiction is more honest because it doesn't pretend to be strictly true.

The other thing to remember about my novel is that everything is filtered through the characters. Their interpretations of events and of people may not be true, and the accepted knowledge of the time might not be true either. For instance, it was commonly believed that Lionel Terry, the infamous murderer of Joe Kum Yung in Haining Street, Wellington in 1905, was educated at Eton and Oxford. This was not true but it was reported in all the newspapers at the time. Therefore, although I as the author, through my research know that he attended the boarding school Merton College in Wimbledon, not Merton College, Oxford, my characters and the novel do not know this. Similarly, Dr Truby King is well known for having publicly advocated domestic-focused education for girls because women were physiologically unfit for the strains of academic or professional work. He believed women were designed to be wives and mothers and could only be truly happy in that context. Because of this, one of my characters, who is prominent in the women's movement, denounces King. What is not known by my characters is that although King campaigned against academic education for girls, in practice he was very helpful to a particular medical graduate, Dr Eleanor Baker, who was in need of work and whom he appointed as temporary Assistant Medical Officer at Seacliff Mental Hospital.

However, this fact may never surface in my novel. The novel's purpose is to be a good story, not to be a piece of propaganda or a piece of writing overburdened by facts that do that not have any real relevance to the main story.

It does become a bit tricky when fiction incorporates real historical figures. Instead of creating all your characters you have to try to give as accurate a portrayal of real life figures as possible. What you write may not be pleasing to descendants of those historical figures or it may not fit with the opinions of other interested parties. And yet these figures may be so prominent during the period of the novel that you either have to refer to them or create other characters similar to them. I have chosen to include real historical figures as minor characters rather than create imaginary ones. When the real characters are so interesting, what is the point in creating a fictional Truby King or Lionel Terry anyway? I've become interested in the genuine article. It may be a novel but it's good to learn something about real people and events as well.

Every writer writes differently. Some write first and then do the research and go back and change anything they got wrong. Some write and research side-by-side, and others need to do a substantial amount of research up front and then do further research while they write. I think the approach you take depends on how much you know to begin with. If you can't assume anything because what you're writing about is so new, then you'll need to research more upfront and then continue with the research as and when required. That's what I've had to do.

Sometimes you can get stuck in the writing because you need to do more research. To be able to write you need a lot of confidence, a lot of self-belief, and knowing your material can help you with some of that. Also, the wonderful and surprising nuggets you find during research often end up becoming part of the story, sometimes taking the story to places you'd never dreamed of.

In the end you've just got to write. You've got to write something that works as a story, choose some interpretation of history that works as a story and works with your own psyche and obsessions.

I talked earlier of the ethics and problems of disclosure. Disclosure is not necessarily just about individuals. It can be about how a society or culture sees itself or how it wants to be seen. It can be about not airing the dirty laundry for the outsider to see. The racism that the Chinese have faced in NZ has made them particularly sensitive to criticism. They are proud of their heritage but they don't want to stand out, not unless it is in a favourable light, and even this can be problematic. If they are too successful or too visible, then they may be worried about a backlash. It doesn't matter how many generations the Chinese have lived in NZ, unlike their Dalmation or Polish or Danish counterparts, they stand out because they look different. And so there can be a tendency to not want to stand out, and in particular, to downplay any negative aspects of their society or culture or the less favourable actions of some of their members. But of course, isn't this what literature is

made up of? A host of individuals who are flawed and both lovely and unlovely.

Lin Yutang, in his book, *With Love and Irony*, writes: "I should never question the intelligence of the European race. But the sad part of it is that, after all, intelligence has very little to do with the course of human events, which are mostly dictated by our animal passions. Human history is not the product of the wise direction of human reason, but is shaped by the forces of emotion - our dreams, our pride, our greed, our fears, and our desire for revenge." I think this can say a lot about what novels are about, whatever people you are talking about, Chinese, European, Maori, Pacific island, Indian, whatever. There are real differences between cultures but we're all human with all our frailties.

I seem to have attracted quite a bit of publicity for receiving the Robert Burns Fellowship at the University of Otago. It has raised my profile and that of the novel I am certain responsibility because we are only at the beginning of what I hope will be a wave of NZ Chinese writers. Perhaps some people expect me to be some kind of spokesperson for the NZ Chinese. I can only say that I am a writer because that is who I am. It is my life, my passion, my reason for being. It is not because I am different from anyone else or because I necessarily have anything better to say than anyone else. It's just that I have no other choice.

When pakeha writers publish novels, they are not expected to write the definitive NZ European novel. They have their individual voice and they are one among many. The danger for the NZ Chinese writer, or writer from any other ethnic minority in NZ, is if what they write is held up to be a definitive work, instead of just one voice and story among what will hopefully become many.

Brian Moloughney, when answering a question from the floor in the opening seminar in this series, said that he thought that literature changed people, certainly more effectively than politicians or academics. I think that good literature should make the reader think and feel. But I do not think it is the role of the novelist to consciously set out to educate or to change the reader. Too often the result will not ring true. It will read like propaganda or polemic. The role of the novelist is to write a good novel, and in doing that the writer will invariably address themes and issues that arise out of the subconscious, out of the psyche and personal obsessions of the writer. James K. Baxter said, "I would like to change the emotional climate of this country, make it one per cent warmer before I die." His mother, Millicent Baxter, in her memoirs, quoted her son and added, "I think perhaps this is what we all must strive for, and first to have a change of heart in ourselves." Each of us needs to take personal responsibility for ourselves, for the way we interact with others, and for this society and nation and world. Writers and literature are only one part of the complex organism which is multicultural NZ. We each have a role to play.

To those who might have difficulty with my story or my interpretation of history or of culture, I can only quote the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2000, Gao Xingjian, the first Chinese to win the prize, who said in his Nobel lecture that "literature can only be the voice of the individual and this has always been so. Once literature is contrived as the hymn of the nation, the flag of the race, the mouthpiece of a political party or the voice of a class or group, it can be employed as a mighty and all-engulfing tool of propaganda. However, such literature loses what is inherent in literature, ceases to be literature and becomes a substitute for power and profit."

I am not writing this novel for anyone else. I am writing it because I have to. If I had to write this novel for anyone, it would be for my father who never lived to see it come to fruition, and for my mother, and for the generations who came before.

As a writer all you can do is have something to write about that you believe in passionately enough to finish it and then let it be born into the world. That's when your baby might be praised or savaged by critics and the public, but there's nothing you can do about that, except to try not to let that stop you writing the next project. And that's a different story.