

Preface

This is the story of the Tan family and their journey over five generations and 170 years from China to Indonesia and eventually to Australia. It is told through the memory of the oldest surviving descendent, Tan Sian Nio, who is now 95 years old and has been known as An Sudibjo for the past sixty years.

When An was approaching her 90th birthday, her children decided to celebrate this milestone with a big birthday party. This called for some kind of testimonial. Her children knew a good deal about their mother's life through oral and anecdotal history but nothing had been recorded. As the son-in-law, I was drawn into researching the salient points of her life and that of her husband Eddie. Through a brief conversation I discovered that these two apparently ordinary people had lived extraordinary lives spanning Dutch colonial rule, the Great Depression, World War II and the Japanese Occupation, Revolution and two decades of political instability before they moved in the late 1960s to join their children and live in Australia.

The short document prepared in haste for the birthday party was, as I later discovered, full of inaccuracies, but it suggested that an even richer story was there to be told if I was willing to pursue it. Having time on my hands, I approached other relatives and friends and also sought the professional opinion of a retired academic, Dr Rudy de Jongh, who is a specialist in Indonesian history. I took his advice to use an interview process structured according to the main political events of Indonesia's twentieth-century history.

The detailed interviews with An and Eddie became a fascinating process lasting more than two years. For each session I would ask a series of prepared questions about a certain phase of their lives. These interviews were recorded on Dictaphone and then painstakingly transcribed. The text was then given back to An and Eddie, which allowed them to elaborate, clarify and sometimes contradict the emerging story.

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All material was eventually edited into a plain English style likely to be the most appealing to the general reader. The narrative is in the first person and I have been careful to keep the text as close as possible to what the interviewees said. English is not, however, An or Eddie's first language. An prefers to converse in a mix of Dutch and Indonesian, which gave rise to all sorts of linguistic challenges as I tried to interpret her original statements. For example, her frequent use of the word *dinges* (Dutch for "thing"), was mostly edited out as being too awkward. Where editorial comment has been necessary, this has been provided in the form of footnotes, which are entirely my responsibility.

Before the reader ventures forth into the extraordinary lives of An and Eddie Sudibjo, a note of caution is in order. This memoir is not presented as fact, but as an attempt to explore fact. No history, let alone personal history, is ever entirely factual. It is influenced by the opinions and perceptions of those who lived it, as well as those that record it. Just like individuals, families too have their myths but even those myths can be understood differently by each member of the family. The accounts of relatives, friends and even family members are not always consistent and these inconsistencies remain in the text for readers to interpret.

In her early life An was a teacher, well read in Dutch and Indonesian history and she continued to read widely into old age. She therefore relates her own story to a more formal history, without being in any way beholden to it. Again, the reader must at times decide how to relate An's own memory and experience to the received version. I myself am not a trained historian, so I have tried to leave the text as clean of comment and interpretation as possible.

I have been informed that historical accounts of ordinary Indonesians are rare, and for ordinary Chinese Indonesians rarer still. As far as I am aware, this memoir is one of the first personal histories of a non-elite Chinese Indonesian and perhaps the first to be written in English.

A recurring theme in An's interviews was the issue of nationality and how uncertain An was with her various allegiances. Nationality is about belonging. Like many other Chinese Indonesians, An had little sense of belonging to any nation. She never signified any tangible connection with her ancestral homeland of China. Yet despite being raised in the then Netherlands Indies, she did not feel welcomed or wanted in her place of birth either. The feeling of alienation deepened during the Revolution and after the independence of modern Indonesia. When growing insecurity and anti-Chinese discrimination finally drove them to seek Dutch citizenship

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in the late 1960s, it was too late. However, that feeling of insecurity began to dissipate after they joined their children to live in Australia. They fell in love with the place and eventually succeeded in becoming Australian citizens. In An's own words: "In my entire life, it was the first place where I felt safe and comfortable." Now, almost forty years after they first came to Australia, they have become so thoroughly Australian that they no longer acknowledge their Indonesian past or their Asian heritage. For them it is simply enough for the family to be known as Australians. An's story and that of her Tan ancestors is also an account of the wider Chinese Diaspora.

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