

Growing up Asian in Australia *Q&A with Alice Pung*

1. *What made you want to edit a collection of stories and essays about growing up Asian in Australia?*

My editors at Black Inc and I got together one day and brainstormed this idea, because although Asian-Australians had been in Australia since around 1810, there was such a dearth of stories about their experiences and contributions to this country.

2. *How did you go about selecting which pieces to include?*

I concentrated on the period of 'growing up' – because that's the period when most of life's 'firsts' happen – and I also wanted the definition of Asian-Australian to be as diverse and inclusive as possible. I selected pieces that reflected a broad range of Asian-Australian experience, so we have stories ranging from Jenny Kee's adolescent awakening, to Tony Ayres' account of blowing a kiss to a racist skinhead, from Tanveer Ahmed's hilarious meditation on the exotic rissole to Shalini Akhil's attempts to be the first ethnically-enhanced Wonder Woman, from Khoa Do's mentoring of young disadvantaged Australians, to the experiences of the first Asian presenter of Play School – and everything in between.

We have writers like Kylie Kwong and Ken Chau whose ancestors came from the gold rush days in the 1860s and lived through the White Australia Policy, and more recent arrivals who grew up during the era of multiculturalism. We have writers who are Eurasian, adopted, and migrants. I wanted this anthology to encompass as much diverse insight as possible, so our authors come from every walk of life.

3. *Were you surprised by the amount of interest you received in the project after calling for submissions?*

I was very happy about the incredible amount of interest received after calling for submissions. Our younger contributors have a wonderful freshness of voice, but we were also especially honoured to receive stories from Asian-Australians from older generations, because they could reflect back on their growing-up years with the wisdom of experience. We also have quite a few stories about how different generations dealt with their parents, and I only wish I had this amount of insight when I was growing up! I also wish there was more room in the anthology to include many more of the stories we received. It was such an honour to read them all.



4. *Are there common themes running through the collection? Do the contributors share a common experience of growing up?*

The pieces in this anthology – like Asian-Australians – are so diverse, and the beauty of this book is that it shatters all stereotypes people may have had about Asian-Australians – we have eminent Asian-Australians like Lord Mayor So revealing that he came to Australia to follow in the footsteps of Chinese-American Nobel Physics Prize-winners, stories about Asian-Australians surviving different types of racist bullying throughout the decades and stories of Asian-Australians 'coming out' to their parents. What moved me was the resilience of our writers, their creativity, humour, quirk and insight – sometimes against severe racism, personal illness, familial pressure and pressure from society to conform.

5. *Given that this book is all about growing up Asian, would you recommend it to a non-Asian reader?*

Although this collection is titled *Growing up Asian in Australia*, I wanted to bring out the common humanity of our authors, so that any reader could pick up the book and be amused, amazed, moved and heartened. There is often the stereotype of Asian-Australians as the 'model minority' (and before that, we were considered the Yellow Peril). What this anthology aims to do is dismantle all these stereotypes and show the incredible diversity of experience of our lives, the humour and insight, the struggles and achievements – these stories should be very much part of the Australian narrative, because they are also very Australian stories.

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Hop Dac

Pigs from Home

Pigs in real life, I'm told, are meant to be charming, but no pig has ever endeared itself to me. George Clooney may have mourned the death of his companion of fifteen years, a Vietnamese potbellied pig called Max, but the only name I've ever given to an incarnation of the porcine genus was 'breakfast.' Of all the animals one can keep, pigs are by far the worst smelling. Pig shit is the most repulsive smelling of all shits. No pig has ever been a friend of mine.

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I was brought up in the belief that any good Vietnamese family was a self-sustaining one. We kept animals for meat and maintained an abundant herb and vegetable garden. My mother's herbs were sought after; her friends would come over and take away armfuls of the aromatic plants for their own kitchens. Throughout my childhood in Geraldton, Western Australia, a basket of herbs was a permanent fixture on the dining table. Each plant had a health benefit. For example, my mother ate a pennywort leaf a day: 'Good for arthritis,' she'd say. She has a flair for natural medicine, which is handy, as she comes from a long line of hypochondriacs. We always kept poultry, including chickens, ducks, geese and bush pigeons (the pigeons were killed by holding their legs while whacking their heads against the cast-iron stove) – all for the table. Sometimes we had other animals. For a while there were goats and because we didn't ever trim them, their hooves would grow long and curl around upon themselves like elves' shoes. But this story isn't about herbal medicine or any of the animals mentioned so far, although they play a part; it involves that miraculous, repugnant beast: The Pig.

Our nameless pigs lived with the chickens, ducks and geese in their corrugated-iron houses in the animal enclosure. We kept no more than four at any one time, and they were greedy, bullying animals that pushed the poultry away from the troughs until they had eaten their fill. Each day after school, it was the job of my brother Tam and I to feed the animals, a thankless task that was handed down to each brother as the older ones left home. We had a wheelbarrow that we'd load up with half-rotten tomatoes and we'd have to take a run-up to get it up the slope to the animal enclosure nestled in amongst the Banksia trees. We'd negotiate carefully through the minefield of droppings to the centre of the yard and up-end the contents of the wheelbarrow into a mound. Then we'd pour the slops bucket from the kitchen into the trough. The ducks would

come waggling up, yakking away, and gleefully bury their heads in the rotten matter like they were blowing raspberries on the bellies of babies. The chickens pecked amidst the kitchen scraps, flinging up bits of lettuce, noodle and eggshell. The pigs would lumber over, grunting noisily, and shoulder their way into prime position. I have never trusted pigs: something about them always made me nervous, and I would hurry out of the enclosure while the feeding frenzy took place.

Now, on one occasion when I went out to feed the animals, I saw something truly extraordinary. It was a Saturday and I was feeding them around lunchtime. We mustn't have given them enough food the night before because the birds came running up hungrily as soon as they saw me approaching with the wheelbarrow. The ducks, always the noisiest of the bunch, were off their heads with excitement. In the corner of my eye I saw a large sow coming across the yard, but she wasn't after the pile of tomatoes. She crept up behind a duck that was oblivious to anything other than gorging itself and before the duck knew what was happening, the pig had bitten its arse off. The duck stood up straight, looking around wildly like it had heard an explosion. It started to waddle off, its guts trailing behind it. I didn't know what was going to happen next. I'd always thought pigs were vegetarians, but this confirmed my suspicions. A pig is like the ocean: don't ever turn your back on it. Perhaps she didn't like the taste of the duck: the sow was already neck-deep in tomatoes.

I went inside to wash my hands and told my grandmother about the incident.

Her eyes lit up. 'Where's the duck now?' she asked. 'Still walking around, I guess,' I said.

My grandmother's hypochondria meant that the only reason she'd leave the house was to sun herself by standing in the driveway and turning herself slowly like a rotisserie chicken. She'd complain about her phlegm rising, which to Vietnamese people is symptomatic of oncoming sickness, but hers was always rising. She had a plastic bag hanging from a bedknob; she'd hawk up and spit the phlegm into it between decades of the rosary. Upon hearing this news of the duck, my grandmother grabbed a pot from the kitchen and bolted out the door, up towards the animal enclosure. I went outside and saw her banging what was left of the poor creature on the ground, finishing it off once and for all. Then she de-feathered it and made congee out of it.

'Do you want some?' she asked.

'No thanks, Grandma.'

Right there was the divide between the old world and the new.

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Amy Choi

The Relative Advantages of Learning My Language

I was never particularly kind to my grandfather. He was my mother's father, and he lived with us when I was a teenager. I remember him coming into the lounge room one night, and when he went to sit down, I said to my brother, 'I hope he doesn't sit down.' I didn't think my grandfather understood much English, but he understood enough, and as I watched, he straightened up again, and without a word, returned to his room. I was twelve years old.

My grandfather wrote poetry on great rolls of thin white paper with a paintbrush. He offered to read and explain his poems to me several times over the years, but I only let him do it once. I'd let my Chinese go by then, which made listening to him too much of an effort. Though I was raised speaking Chinese, it wasn't long before I lost my language skills. I spoke English all day at school, listened to English all night on TV. I didn't see the point of speaking Chinese. We lived in Australia.

Monday to Friday, Grandad went to the city, dressed in a suit with a waistcoat, a hat, and carrying his walking stick. He would take the bus to the station, the train to the city, the tram to Little Bourke Street. On Mondays, he'd be sitting at a large round table at Dragon Boat Restaurant with other old Chinese men. Tuesdays to Fridays, he was at a small square table by himself with a pot of tea and the Chinese newspaper. I watched him leave in the morning and come back in the afternoon, as punctual and as purposeful as any school kid or office worker, for years.

One afternoon, he didn't come home until well after dark. We assumed he'd got off the bus at the wrong stop or had turned into the wrong street at some point, forcing him to wander around for a bit before finding his way home.

A month after that, he tried to let himself into a stranger's house. It looked just like our house. The yellow rose bush, the painted timber mailbox, even the Ford Falcon parked out the front were the same. But it was the home of a gentle Pakistani couple who let him use the phone to call us.

Two months after that, he fell and hit his head on something. When he didn't come home, Mum and I drove around looking for him. We finally found him stumbling along in the dark, two kilometres from the house. There was a trickle of blood down the side of his face.

From that day forward, Grandad was only allowed to go to the city if someone accompanied him. Once or twice during the school holidays that task fell to me.

After rinsing out his milk glass, Grandad would pick up his walking stick and head out into the street. I'd fol-

low, a few steps behind. He wasn't aware of me. He wasn't aware of the milk on his lip, the upside-down watch on his wrist, the scrape of branches against his coat. He had a blank, goofy, content expression on his face, and turned instinctively into platform five when he was at the train station and into Dragon Boat Restaurant when he was on Little Bourke Street.

When he was about to board the wrong tram or turn round the wrong corner, I'd step forward to take him by the elbow and steer him back on course. He'd smile innocently and seem glad to see me. 'Hello there, Amy. Finished school already?' Then he'd look away and forget I was ever there.

He'd been diagnosed with a brain tumour and, three months later, he died.

At the funeral, my sadness was overshadowed by a sense of regret. I'd denied my grandfather the commonest of kindnesses. I was sixteen years old.

I am now twenty-six. A few weeks ago, during a family dinner at a Chinese restaurant, the waiter complimented my mum on the fact that I was speaking to her in Chinese. The waiter told Mum with a sigh that his own kids could barely string a sentence together in Chinese. Mum told the waiter I had stopped speaking Chinese a few years into primary school, but that I had suddenly started up again in my late teens.

I have often wondered how aware my mum is of the connection between Grandad's death and my ever-improving Chinese. Whenever I am stuck for a word, I ask her. Whenever I am with her, or relatives, or a waiter at a Chinese restaurant, or a sales assistant at a Chinese department store, I practise. I am constantly adding new words to my Chinese vocabulary, and memorising phrases I can throw into a conversation at will. It is an organic way of relearning a language. Textbooks and teachers are not necessary, since I am only interested in mastering the spoken word. I am not interested in the written word or in the many elements of Chinese culture of which I am ignorant. I am not trying to 'discover my roots.' I am simply trying to ensure that the next time an elderly relative wants me to listen to them, I am not only willing, I am able.

Shalini Akhil

Destiny

I was very young when my obsession started; sparked by the cartoon version, it intensified with the television series. Every weekend I'd be rendered speechless from the first bars of the intro to the closing credits as I watched in awe, stretched out flat on my belly on the lounge-room

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floor. Every year, I'd get the show bag from the Royal Easter Show, and when we got home I'd sneak up onto the garage roof and fight off make-believe villains whose faces always ended up resembling those of my brothers. They were no match for me: my reflexes were lightning fast, my aim was true and my hair flowed like streamers, dark and glossy in the sunlight. It felt right, being her. A perfect fit. It was destiny.

When I grew up, I would be Wonder Woman.

Then one day, my grandmother came to stay with us. She stayed for a while, and she watched *Wonder Woman* with me. After a few sittings, I thought she was ready to hear my secret. I told her about my destiny. Though she commended me for thinking about the future, it seemed she wasn't as sure about my choice as I was. As we discussed my plans, my grandmother reminded me that I was Indian. It was then I began to realise I could never grow up to be exactly like Wonder Woman.

My skin was the wrong colour, my eyes were the wrong colour, and my legs just weren't long enough. Not that it would have made a difference if they were, because my grandmother didn't like the way Wonder Woman dressed. I tried to explain to her that what Wonder Woman wore was a costume, a special costume to fight crime in. But my grandmother kept saying she thought it looked like she'd left the house in her underwear – like she'd forgotten to put her skirt on. You can fight all the crime in the world, she said, but if you leave the house without putting your skirt on, no one will take you seriously.

So we started to think about what an Indian-girl crime-fighter might wear. Truth be told, I wasn't too impressed with Wonder Woman's choice of outfit either; in the cartoons her pants had looked okay, but in the TV series they looked a lot like those plastic protector-pants they put over babies' nappies. Initially, I had tried to make up reasons why she'd wear them – maybe she needed the extra padding just in case she ever fell over, or maybe the seat in her invisible jet wasn't very comfortable. But no matter how I tried to explain it to myself, I couldn't really see why they thought putting Wonder Woman in a pair of sparkly nappies would make her better at fighting crime.

My grandmother suggested that Indian Wonder Woman could wear a lungi. That way she could run and kick and squat and jump, and still keep her honour. I wasn't so sure about that, so my grandmother made me a deal. She said that Indian Wonder Woman could wear a lungi over her sparkly pants, and that way if she ever needed seven yards of fabric in an emergency, she could just unwind it from around her waist. She could use the fabric to wrap the bad guys up in and then tie them up

with her rope. I thought that sounded like a good idea. We sketched a lungi over Wonder Woman's legs.

My grandmother didn't really like Wonder Woman's top, either. She said that super heroes should have functional clothing, and that a strapless top just wasn't practical for a lady as active as Indian Wonder Woman would be. She liked the colours, though, so we kept the basic design and added some shoulder straps. I wanted them to cross over on the back, and my grandmother said she could sew me a top like that, so we drew it into the plan. Finally we moved on to her accessories. My grandmother thought that all of her accessories should be made of 24-carat gold, and that her earrings should be more than just two red studs. Maybe they could be crafted from rubies instead; that way they'd still be red, but better than before. I didn't really mind about the accessories; all I wanted was a red Wonder Woman top with criss-cross straps at the back.

At lunchtime, my grandmother mentioned that rolling rotis was like a magic power. I didn't really believe her. But then I watched her as she rolled them one after the other, and they all turned out perfectly round. I don't know how she did it, because when I tried, they looked more like blobs or squares. When my grandmother rolled her rotis, they spun slowly around and around underneath her rolling pin, and she didn't have to pick them up and stretch them out with her hands like I did. I was a little disappointed, but she said that it had taken her a while to learn, and that she'd train me. My grandmother said that the magic rotis were very good with super-hero eggs, so I asked her if she would make some for me.

My grandmother chopped up some onions and some chillies to add to the eggs. She said they would make me run faster and help me to see better in the dark. She fried them in a little oil and we both coughed; she said that was a good sign that the power in them was very strong. She beat some eggs and poured them into the frying pan and stirred them around till they were done. She sprinkled some salt over the eggs and divided them between two plates. My grandmother said I could pick the chillies out into her plate if they were too hot for me, but I managed to eat some of them. The eggs tasted good with the magic rotis.

I felt sorry for the old Wonder Woman. I imagined her eating her peanut-butter and jelly sandwiches alone, without a magical grandmother to suggest wearing a lungi over her embarrassing sparkly nappies. That day, I decided to change my destiny.

When I grew up, I was going to be Indian Wonder Woman.

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