

4.0 About the project

Project title

Yellow pages: Short fiction on Asian pop culture

Brief project description

This project is a collection of short-short fiction (short stories under 1200 words) concerning modern Asian popular culture.

The project will have a contemporary, youth-oriented focus on such diverse topics as: karaoke, Godzilla, mail-order brides, MSG, giant pandas, Hello Kitty, martial arts stars, Imelda Marcos, eating dogs, etc. Content specific to Australia and Asian-Australian identity will also be explored. To a lesser extent, the collection will also provide a more contemporary view on historical events such as the Cultural Revolution and the bombing of Hiroshima.

Aims

1. To explore the diversity of modern Asian culture
2. To subvert Asian stereotypes
3. To offer mainstream publishers a manuscript that departs from popular perceptions of Asian fiction
4. To further develop my skills in writing a themed collection of short-short fiction.

Innovative characteristics of the project

Two key topics are discussed below: **1)** 'hyphenated' Asian fiction (eg fiction by writers who are Korean-American, Chinese-Australian, etc.); and **2)** short-short fiction.

'Hyphenated' Asian fiction

Popular perceptions of 'hyphenated' Asian fiction tend to focus on autobiographical works by Chinese-American writers that concern growing up in China prior to the 1970s. Due to the harsh political climate in China during that period, such works often concern issues of abuse and oppression. The ties to the past that such books have might be symbolised by the older-style 'orientalism' of their titles (eg *Wild swans*, *Red azalea*, etc.).

While there is much value in publishing such works, 'hyphenated' Asian fiction would also benefit from greater diversification. In particular, among the list of 'hyphenated' Asian writers who have had work published by mainstream publishers, writers under 35 years of age are inadequately represented.

This latter situation is due to a variety of factors. In general, writers under 35 are not adequately represented in terms of published fiction. The situation is likely to be exacerbated in 'hyphenated' Asian fiction, in which young Asian writers are 'a minority within a minority'. It is likely, as with most emerging canons of writing, that successive generations of writers will enable greater diversification.

A further factor relates back to the dominance of autobiographical books by Asian writers that focus on historical events. Cheung (1997)¹ suggests that such expectations of Asian fiction are held by both mainstream publishers and Asian writers themselves. This would certainly affect 'what types of Asians' are writing fiction in the first instance and 'what types of Asian writing' are subsequently being published.

The dominance of historically-based writing might then be linked to the under-representation of Asian writers under 35. It may be more likely that, rather than writing memoirs situated during periods such as the Cultural Revolution, Asian writers under 35 might instead wish to focus on more contemporary subject matter. Such subject matter may not even be concerned with the status of the Asian as a migrant.

In fact, such contemporary writing by younger Asian writers does exist and is becoming more prominent (although it is still more likely to have been published by independently). For example, in the last decade, Asian-American zines such as *Giant Robot*, *Hi-Yaa!*, and *Yellow Kitty* have published non-fiction articles on topics such as martial arts superstars, Vietnamese trading cards, and Asian punk rock, as well as reviews of Asian frozen desserts, instant ramen noodles and marinated bugs. These publications have also examined less contemporary topics, such as foot-binding and Chinese medicine – but from a subversive, modern perspective. These sharp, fresh pieces of writing examine both modern Asian popular culture and traditional Asian culture, often with a youth focus. In addition, such writing subverts Asian stereotypes, and in doing so, reclaims aspects of Asian identity.

The project discussed in this application, influenced by such contemporary writing, will address similar topics and be characterised by a similarly fresh, subversive edge. The term *manga* refers to Japanese comic book stories that typically contain depictions of violence and sex. *Manga* is usually translated as 'irresponsible pictures'. In a sense, the current project will also have a sentiment of 'irresponsibility'; this project will be characterised by a sense of subversion, of using humour, of radically departing from perceived notions of Asian fiction. In short, the project will present fresh ways of examining Asian identity.

A book that focuses on Asian popular culture in the sense described above has yet to be published by a mainstream publisher. Its publication would signal a progression in terms of how Asians and fiction by Asian writers is perceived.

Short-short fiction

As well as being innovative in content, this project is innovative in terms of form. A variety of writers, both past and present, have written short-short fiction. Such writers include: Margaret Atwood, Italo Calvino, Peter Carey, Nadine Gordimer, Franz Kafka, Gabriel García Márquez, Yukio Mishima, Leo Tolstoy, and Jeanette Winterson. This form is clearly international in its reach, with short-short fiction being particularly popular in various parts of Asia (eg China, Korea, Taiwan). In the last decade, numerous anthologies have been dedicated to this form and an increasing number of journals are specifically devoting space to short-short fiction. In addition, short-short fiction has had an increasing presence on the Internet, with mailing lists and e-journals devoted to the form.

¹ Cheung, K. (1997). Reviewing Asian American literary studies. In King-Kok Cheung (Ed.), *An interethnic companion to Asian American literature* (pp. 1-27). New York: Cambridge University Press

The publication of a book that specifically contains short-short fiction will contribute significantly to this emerging form in Australia. This project has been conceived in a time when more economic forms of writing, including much of the writing that can be found on the Internet, are becoming increasingly popular (Franzen, 1996).²

Progress to date

I am currently working full-time as a freelance technical writer. The project I am working on is estimated to finish in late July this year. Due to this and other commitments (eg judging non-fiction for the *Victorian Premier's Literary Awards*), work on the project will not commence until August this year.

However, to date, some preliminary work has been done on the project, including the writing of two pieces for the project (these pieces – *Dog-eaters* and *Life enhancer (621)* – are included in the support material for this application). In general, however, the work undertaken to date has mainly concerned development of the concept. For example, I have conducted some preliminary research on Asian popular culture and developed topics for over 25 future stories. I have also examined in greater detail some of the Asian-American zines that have influenced this project.

As indicated by the project timeline (see *Timing* section below), by the time the proposed funded period would commence, work on the project will be more advanced. I would then be in a position to more significantly benefit from Australia Council funding.

Timing

The project time-line, from the time of writing this application to project completion, is as follows:

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| April 2001 – July 2001 | (Working full-time as a freelance technical writer) |
| Aug. 2001 – Nov. 2001 | Conducting research and writing manuscript on a full-time basis Preparing for <i>Dinny O'Hearn Fellowship</i> |
| Nov. 2001 – Jan. 2002 | <u>Dinny O'Hearn Fellowship</u> Conducting research and writing manuscript on a full-time basis as a writer-in-residence at the <i>Australia Centre, University of Melbourne</i> |
| Jan. 2002 – Jan. 2003 | <u>Proposed Australia Council funded period</u> Conducting research and writing manuscript on a full-time basis |
| Feb. 2003 – April 2003 | Distributing manuscript to a number of professional writers for critique Re-drafting book, as required |
| May 2003 | Submission of book to publisher |

Conclusion

I have recently completed a first collection of short-short fiction. This collection was funded by *Australia Council* and *Arts Victoria* grants. At the time of writing, my agent is attempting to place this manuscript with a publisher (the collection has attracted interest from *Allen and Unwin* and *Penguin Books Australia*). My work on this collection demonstrates that I am capable of: 1) producing a body of short works that are thematically linked, and 2) working productively with the assistance of arts funding support.

Having developed my skills in writing short-short fiction, I now wish to use these skills to explore subject matter that significantly departs from my previous work. In particular, I have rarely written work that refers explicitly to 'time' and 'place'. Writing a collection that explores Asian identity through a contemporary perspective will clearly develop my skills in this respect.

This project is innovative in terms of form and content. Such a collection has yet to be published by a mainstream publisher. However, a number of factors (e.g. the 'main-streaming' of Asian popular culture) have created a climate in which the writing of such a book would be timely. This project has received a letter of support from *Allen and Unwin* (included in this application).

In addition, the project offers plenty of scope for development. The theme is sufficiently broad that it can be sustained across a collection of short work. Furthermore, as numerous writers and critics have noted,³ the short-short story is a flexible form that can be adapted to a variety of purposes. There is much scope for developing new techniques in this form.

My proven ability to produce a themed collection of short-short fiction, the ample room for development within the project, as well as the project's innovative nature, all demonstrate that the project is a strong concept that is fully capable of being realised.

² Franzen, J. (1996). I'll be doing more of the same (The future of fiction: A forum). *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 16 (1), 34-38

³ For example: Baxter, C. (1989). Introduction. In Robert Shapard and James Thomas (Eds.), *Sudden fiction international*. New York: WW Norton

Evenson, B. (1997). Introduction: The short-short story. *Cimarron Review*, No. 119, 8-9