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Is It Too Late?

**Exploring Self-Actualisation of a Self-Proclaimed Artist
in a Restrictive Chinese-Indonesian Family**

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ABSTRACT

Self-actualisation is an interesting topic to be talked about in Indonesia, as Indonesian families still uphold filial piety very highly. Thus, the concept of putting forwards one's dreams and wishes for one's own future and brushing aside one's parents' wants and plans is mostly unheard of. I made this creative work, in form of a novel, to highlight this highly-relevant phenomena and initiate the talk between parents and their descendants. This story is written from the perspective of the son of a family who wants to be an artist, but faces hurdles in the form of his chasing tiger mother and how that affected him and his decision-making in relation of becoming the best version of himself.

Keywords: Artistry, Chinese-Indonesian, Filial piety, Poetry, Realistic fiction, Self-actualisation.

INTRODUCTION

Self-actualisation is defined as “the realization or fulfilment of one's abilities and potentialities, especially considered as a drive or need present in everyone,” and it represents the “wholesome human development, leaving his (her) biological nature, which is the norm for all species, regardless of place and time” (Nishi & Moakumla, 2018, p. 1). It also refers to “the need for personal growth and development that... exists throughout one's life” (Nishi & Moakumla, 2018, p. 1). This is a part of Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory, consisting of five needs: physiological, security, social, esteem, and, the highest, self-actualisation.

I found it fascinating that Maslow stressed the importance of self-actualising so much that, first of all, he put it on the very top of the needs, and, second of all, he urged everyone to develop themselves to reach that level (Cherry, 2017), suggesting that if a person does not self-actualise, said person would fall to stagnation and lead an eventless, unhappy life. This is because, for the last 22 years of my life (except in the past 4 years), I had never known the concept of having the ability to take control of my own life, dreaming and planning of who I want to be. I had been severely hindered by the beliefs my family held: that I should follow what they had planned instead of my own.

This is where Bedford and Yeh's Dual Filial Piety comes into play. They defined filial piety as a set of “moral norms that encompass material and emotional aspects of the parent–child relationship” (Bedford and Yeh, 2019, p. 1). The Chinese character for filial piety symbolises that “the child supports and succeeds the parent” (p. 1), and the ‘support’ here is specifically in form of physical, emotional, and financial help. They then devised the aptly named Dual Filial Piety model:

1. Reciprocal Filial Piety (RFP) stems from genuine affection and rooted in intimacy and highly positive parent-child relationship. Child would care for the parents out of authentic gratitude. This type of filial piety fulfils the need of

interpersonal relation and is more common in families with higher education and socio-economic status.

2. Authoritarian Filial Piety (AFP) stems from obedience to role obligations based upon family hierarchy. Child would be required to suppress their wishes to fulfil what their parent wants. This type of filial piety fulfils the need of collective identity and is more common in families with lower education and socio-economic status.

Both of the aforementioned filial pieties exist within a child's psyche, and the child can have different modes of talking and relating to their parents, all in accordance to how the child's parents raised them. Higher authoritative tendencies, such as parenting in a know-all, "I know the best for you" style, will result in the children seeing filial piety as a burden. This is important, since, according to my research, most Asian parenting is of this style, thus forever affecting a child's psyche. Asian parents have a set of expectations from their child, for example, being successful with a lot of achievements or being the best among their peers (Setiawan, 2013, p. 66), which puts a lot of pressure on the child in question. The child is not given any personal space to grow and to develop by themselves.

This theory forms the basis of how I represented the parents in the story and how the said values they hold becomes the obstacle for my main character. In addition of that, I also used the concept of "tiger mother" as written by Amy Chua (as cited in Irawan, 2019, p. 33) to further deepen the parents' characterisations.

With the recent rise of Asian texts and media which defies Orientalism (such as *Crazy Rich Asians*, both the novel and the movie, which presents Asians and owns the presentation they gave), I was inspired to voice this part of Asian culture. Filial piety and becoming one's truest self are a topic that is prevalent all over Asia, with stories of how a parent's restrictiveness inhibits one's full experience of life (Chong, 2019, para. 42; Mao, 2018) being shared loud and wide in the world wide web. Such a universal story warrants a proper presentation, thus, I chose to write my story in the form of a realistic fiction, to be bound to the laws of the real world while still having the artistic choice to be unconventional and creative in some parts. Realistic fiction is a story that could happen to real people in a realistic setting. It emphasises on "upon the particular... circumstantial view of life, and its full and authentic reporting of experience (Watt, as cited in Paris, 1968, p. 141). This definition has become the basis of every modern definition of realistic fiction: a McQuade Library Guide on realistic fiction ("Realistic fiction," 2019) defined it similarly, making this definition timeless and accurate through the years. Paris (1968, p. 141-143) also elaborated that realistic fiction is mimetic, in that it representatively imitates life.

The form that the realistic fiction will take is a novel. As Encyclopaedia Britannica (Burgess, 2019, para. 1) detailed, it is an "invented prose narrative of considerable length and a certain complexity that deals imaginatively with human experience, usually through a connected sequence of events involving a group of persons in a specific setting." There are a few "most important" genres of a novel, including none other than historical and realist (Burgess, 2019, para. 1). Burgess elaborated that, theoretically, a novel cannot be too long, but if it is too short, it will not be called a novel. In addition, in novels, the writer's aim is to represent a larger scope of context, such as a society (Burgess, 2019, para. 22). This is exactly what I need for my creative thesis, since I will need to explain my main character in-depth, but also the family and larger society he lived and played a role in. The length of the novel provides ample space for me to develop his complex story. In addition to being a realistic fiction novel, I will add a mix of poetry into it to form a cohesive narration which my readers will hopefully be able to appreciate and enjoy.

The story itself talks about a self-taught and self-proclaimed artist named Richard, who were stuck in an overly-controlling family who disagrees with him on his dream of becoming a painter and poet. Instead, they pushed him to pursue science, because they thought that it will ensure his prosperous future. Fed up with being pushed here and there, he finally decided to escape their clutches to Singapore, where he will start his life anew.

There are two inspirations for this creative thesis, other than my life's story: on a smaller scale, *Crazy Rich Asians*, the movie which talked about inherently Asian issues such as filial piety, trust, and, of course, success and richness; on a larger scale, an Indonesian historical fiction titled *Bumi Manusia*, or, as it is more well known in English, *This Earth of Mankind*, by Pramoedya Ananta Toer. It retells the story of Minke, a royal descendant of a Javanese sultanate who was educated in the western way and went through clashing cultural identities and crises. This cultural clashes and identity crisis are what inspired me the most and it formed the very basis of my own story.

OUTLINE OF CREATIVE WORK

2.2.1. Theme

With this creative work, I want to show that believing in what one is fighting for will lead oneself to a happier, more fulfilled future. Even though there are hardships on the way, it is going to be worth it. In the end, Richard is a prosperous, famous artist, living a comfortable life in Singapore. To reach that, in the beginning, he had to defy his parent's will and break free from their clutches, risking his everything in return for a small chance of living a better life.

Another smaller theme that I also want to bring up is: forgive the past and move on to embrace the future; one should never let it hold oneself back. This is shown nearing the end, where he finally was reunited with his mother. Because his mother had never supported him, Richard no longer wanted anything to do with her, but she insisted and reopened the two-way communication, especially because she had seen with her own eyes that Richard can become what he wants to be.

2.2.2. Plot

➤ Chapter 1: Runaway

▪ Prologue: *The escape*. (2003, 18 yrs)

Richard is sitting in a plane just beside the window. Before the plane took off, he opened his phone and saw lots of missed calls from his mom. He remembered his past experience sitting in a plane, also going to Singapore, as a kid...

On the other side, Maria, Richard's mother, was frantic. Hendra, his father, had just gotten a heart attack after knowing Richard is no longer home. He was so mad that he destroyed his room but collapsed soon after. Maria wants Richard to return, but at the same time, she was helpless.

▪ Sub-chapter 1: *The Merlion City, once upon a time*. (1998, 13 yrs)

Richard remembers that when he was 13 years old, his family had to temporarily move to Singapore because of the 1998 riots, but only after a short disagreement between Maria and Hendra. The next day, without Hendra, they escaped to Singapore and lived there for a few years. There, Richard was introduced to cultures from all around Asia. One, in particular,

piqued his interest: drawing mandalas. After another bickering between Maria and her mother, Mrs. Lie Nyoo Teng, Richard was allowed to learn that only if he can get straight As.

On the other side, Maria was sitting in front of the emergency room. She was trying to nail down where Richard could possibly go— his friends and teachers did not offer too much help. She decided to go home and clean up the mess Hendra caused. When she entered Richard's room, she found a blue folder titled "Pride".

- Sub-chapter 2: *There had always been only noes.* (1995, 10 yrs)
Richard reminisces even further to his childhood. He had always been piqued with poignancy and rhymes. This resulted in a clash, one day, when he asked to be bought a book about basic introduction to the art of poetry. That time, Maria forbade him. Richard did not listen and bought the book with his own pocket money that he saved up. He hid the book for years. He also then remembered the cause of this whole escape: his parents had planned a future he does not want to be in. In the months leading to his graduation from Senior High, he meticulously planned his escape to Singapore.

On the other side, when Maria was going through Richard's blue folder and the papers scattered around it, she found the poetry introduction book and Richard's mandalas. She connected the dots and assumed that Richard had escaped to somewhere where he could fulfil his dream to be an artist, most probably Singapore.

- Chapter 2: Starfall

- Sub-chapter 3: *The leaking ship had sailed.* (2003, 18 yrs)
Richard had just landed in Changi Airport. The next day, he began his university years, when he struggled to make ends meet even though he had applied for scholarships, worked part time jobs, and almost devoted no time at all to improve his arts even though he is required to do so by his campus. Here is also when he got acquainted with how hard it is to promote his artworks. Richard did not know that Peter Vuong has been sabotaging him.

On the other side, Maria is mulling over her fate. Hendra had been stuck in a coma for more than a few months since Richard escaped and Maria, bitter and distraught, blamed Richard. She vows to find Richard and drag him home to atone for his sins.

- Interlude: *Black diamond.*
Maria remembers her youth; how she was a young girl with dreams of becoming a ballet dancer despite what his father wants. Finally, she made a bet with her father— she was going to pull a successful performance in a national stage. If she fails, she would follow what he wanted. Unfortunately, the show failed: it started late, the musician forgot to bring the music sheet, and she herself slipped and fell on stage, as people were watching. Ashamed and distraught, she bitterly accepted the proposal of the first man her father brought home— Hendra. Since then, she stopped dreaming.

- Sub-chapter 4: *Sinking.* (2010, 25 yrs)
Richard's final few months in college. He had reached a small level of fame for his original artistry style, yet outside his campus, he was still a nobody. He had been trying to get into art showcase events, but almost every time, he got rejected. When he graduated, his fame faded and, to continue supporting his life, he had to apply to a proper 9 to 5 job. He struggled hard in the years to come to even introduce his partners to his artworks. This is his lowest point: he regrets his decisions and thinks that maybe, he should just go home and return to his mother.

On the other side, Maria and Mrs. Lie, now on a wheelchair, had just arrived in Changi. They are moving back to their apartment in Singapore, half a year after Hendra's funeral. Maria told

her that she wants to spend the rest of her life taking care of her mother, which is a half-lie: she made her agree to return to Singapore because of her hunch that Richard is actually there. Thus, as soon as the next day, Maria's search for Richard began in earnest.

➤ Chapter 3: Getaway

▪ Sub-chapter 5: *The slow rise*. (2015, 30 yrs)

After five years of relentless self-promoting, Richard got a chance to enter an art showcase, which was held by one of his lecturers. Unfortunately, Peter had submitted his artworks there, causing Richard's to get rejected. After researching and arriving at that conclusion, Richard was furious and decided to settle that once and for all: he enlisted Josh's help to extract some information out of Peter's mouth while he himself contacted his lecturers for help. Then, finally, Richard sued Peter, who then begged him to drop the case. Richard was not willing to drop the case, unless Peter aired a public apology.

On the other side, Maria, now living in her apartment, saw Thomas's face, shown during Peter's public apology. Maria decided to do some sleuthing and found out that this Thomas is showcasing his arts in Marina Bay Sands. Sure enough, when she was there, his artwork style reminded Maria strongly of Richard. Richard, who saw her there, tried his best to hide himself by mingling with other artists. Ever since then, he had to purposely choose which art showcase invitations he is going to accept, to minimise the risk of facing her face-to face.

▪ Sub-chapter 6: *The starry constellations, align*. (2020, 35 yrs)

One day, Richard woke up to knocks on his apartment door. Two men who looked like bodyguards approached him and gave him a letter. In it, the owner of Changi Airport offered him some rooms for him to hold his own art showcase, which he accepted.

On the day of the art showcase, just two weeks later, he returned to Changi to officially open his art showcase to the public. There, amidst the excited people, she saw two familiar faces: his mother and his grandmother. They approached each other. Richard was stiff, but Maria initiated the hug. Richard then brought them to a café, where they finally exchanged stories— Maria told him how his father passed away, and Richard told her his rocky road to this top of the mountain.

▪ Epilogue: *It's never too late*.

Richard is sitting in the front porch of his villa. He walked to the back garden, where there were two tombstones: his mother's and his grandmother's. He took a basket of blue tulips with him and scattered them over the graves.

2.2.3. Characters

▪ Main Characters

a. **Richard Pangestu Susanto (39 years old) – Protagonist**

A famous all-around artist currently living in Singapore, he came from a middle-upper Chinese-Indonesian family from Surabaya, Indonesia. Born in 1985, he grew in that abusive family, where he was demanded to give his all, forsaking his freedom of speech and, later, his freedom to choose his own future. His childhood was filled with stressors such as his bickering parents and their demands to him to do well academically, so he developed a liking in drawing (especially mandalas) and writing as an escapism. He is a trilingual: native-like in English, fluent in Javanese & Indonesian. His favourite pastime includes playing piano, violin, and drawing mandala. He is very sensitive and can also be very persistent in fighting for what he wants. Has almost no fashion sense, as his only clothes are plain t-shirts in gradient of blue, which complements his almost shapeless, medium-built tall body. Has brown hair and

complexion, brown eyes with blue contact lenses, and an almost boxy face. Changed name to Thomas when in Singapore.

b. Maria Haryanti Susanto (60 years old) – Antagonist 1

A 68-years-old woman, wife of Mr. Hendra Agung Susanto. A frugal, hardworking mother who feeds the whole family by herself. Very thin and tall and has a pale complexion. Her voice is soft in the right time and place, but ear-numbingly sharp when Mr. Hendra angers her or when Richard is fussy. A tiger mother, in that she wants the best for Richard but in her own terms and not in Richard's terms; can be pushy at times. She does not support Richard on his artistic endeavour. Has a bad case of scoliosis.

c. Peter Vương (25 years old) – Antagonist 2

A Vietnamese who went to Lasalle to learn about Fine Arts. He wants to be famous and adored for his artworks, but he is a lazy person who is not inventive. He envies Richard and decides to copy what he's doing. Peter comes from a similarly restrictive family, but taken up a notch: his parents are abusive, in that they like to physically hit and whip him for no particular reason at all, and they neglected him for much of his childhood, resulting in him having a thirst for affection and validation. He introduced himself as a modern royal descendant of the Nguyễn Dynasty and was able to get special treatments from Lasalle. This was later on proven to be a forgery.

▪ **Supporting Characters**

a. Mrs. Lie Nyoo Teng (85 years old)

Mother of Mrs. Maria. Forgetful yet is also still agile. She dislikes Mr. Hendra, even though she was the one matchmaking Mrs. Maria with him, she later regrets that choice after knowing how abusive he truly is.

b. Hendra Agung Susanto (65 years old)

Father of Richard and husband of Mrs. Maria Haryanti Susanto. Short, bald, fat and talks in a thundery, commanding voice. He believes strongly in the hierarchy of a family: that his wife must do everything for him, including taking care of Richard all by herself, and when she fails to do so, he will get angry and hit her. This causes their marriage and his family to fall apart.

2.2.4. Setting

This realistic fiction novel is set in various locations, such as the city of Surabaya in prior and in the middle of 1998 riots. However, the story mainly takes place in Singapore, especially Little India, Marina Bay Sands, and Lasalle College of the Arts. There will be some made-up settings, such as Richard's house in Surabaya, inspired by Darmo Hill, and Richard's apartment in Singapore, which is not a real place.

2.2.5. Conflict

There are three types of dominant conflicts in my creative work:

1. Character vs. character, in which a character's wants clashes with another character's ("What is conflict in literature?", 2019). This is the main type of conflict in my story, as Richard's wants and wishes has always been conflicting with his parents' ever since he was still a kid. For example, when he wants to buy an Introduction to Poetry book, his parents flat out rejected for seemingly no reason. This conflict will be pivotal to show Richard's struggles in self-actualising and how filial piety held him back for too long.

2. Character vs. self, in which a character struggle internally with himself ("What is conflict in literature?", 2019). This will happen far more rarely, because Richard is mostly *not* insecure in himself. However, when he does, he falls down hard. An example of this is present in the latter part of the story, when Richard was struggling to make ends meet and lost faith in his idealistic view of doing artistic works. He will doubt whether he would ever reach the fame he wanted, which will cause him to question things he had sacrificed just to be "free".

3. Character vs. society, in which the character opposes the society ("What is conflict in literature?", 2019). This will overtake the first type of conflict, character vs. character, in the latter part of my story, after Richard moved to Singapore, where the people there will not immediately support him and will initially make it harder for him to gain a footing there.

CONCLUSION

By writing this story, I wanted to say to my readers that they should never stop believing in their dreams. Even though there might be hardships, challenges, and setbacks, if they persist through and keep on fighting, they would be able to reach whatever it is they are dreaming about. Richard's whole journey, from Prologue to Chapter 3's Finale, shows his ups and downs, his dark past, and how his will to self-actualise is so strong, it made him do stark, great things. Even though Richard went through a lot of hardships, particularly artistic and economical ones, reaching his lowest point in Chapter 2 Act 2 (when he doubted every choices he had made and was about to give up), he did not give up and persisted through to see the light of the day.

Another smaller point that I wanted to make to my readers is that, as dark and as messed up their pasts are, they should forgive them, if not for the people who had wronged them, then at least for themselves, to free themselves from the burden of carrying the heave of their past with them to the future. I retold Richard's past in detail in Chapter 1, and what that past turned Richard into in Chapter 2. Richard *was* fuelled by his rage and his sorrow of his past, but he knew that when an era is over, it is over, as can be seen in the Finale.

I intended this work to bring up the topics of self-actualisation and to talk about the restrictive filial piety that is inherent and ever present even in modern Indonesian families. In regards to the former, the whole story is, in essence, a winding tale of an unheard person's attempts to rise up and break through the limitations of his environment, realising his truest self. In regards to the latter, there are two cases where filial piety become the roadblock to the character's wants: there is the story of Maria's failed dream of becoming a nationally-renowned ballet dancer, and then, again, Richard's tale of his struggles to become an artist, some of those were direct results of his parents not supporting him and, instead, silencing him, never listening to him, and planning for his future, all of them he sees as oppression. Lastly, the poems that is written by Richard had hopefully provided some insights at his mood and feelings on the certain chapter, augmenting the events that had or was to come.

I sincerely hope that my story speaks to the reader and it would hopefully encourage them to never give up their dreams, even if there are a lot of hurdles, including their parents' outmoded ways. I also hope that, any parents who are reading this story will be able to see a different perspective from theirs, and possibly, accept it.

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