

Final Research Report

The Unfolding, in Three Acts: act i: ancestry/lineage as method - migratory afterlives; act ii: inherited forgetting/remembrance in the absence/presence of archives; act iii: fragments of memory - tradition, mysticism/superstition, and collective life

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Introduction: Following the Fragments

I traveled to southern Fujian in July 2026 with a question that was at once genealogical, historical, and political: *how might fragmented family histories illuminate broader relationships among migration, belonging, belief, and collective life across Indonesia and China?* Beginning with the partially remembered history of my Chinese Indonesian grandmother, Giok Lan, later known as Lanny Utami, the research traced connections between familial memory and the longer histories of maritime exchange, migration, and political transformation that have shaped communities across the South China Sea.

Rather than treating ancestry as an end in itself, the project approached lineage as an entry point into questions of historical knowledge: what can be known when family archives are incomplete, inaccessible, or dispersed? How are memories preserved, transmitted, or silenced across generations and political borders? What forms of belonging and obligation persist beyond formal genealogical records?

Initially, the research was organized around three interconnected questions. First, how does lineage operate as a form of knowledge when archival documentation is fragmented or absent? Second, how do belief, ritual, and practices sometimes categorized as superstition organize moral obligations and collective relationships? Third, how might forms of everyday cooperation across southern Fujian complicate understandings of *gotong royong*, the Indonesian concept and practice of collective cooperation that has been variously enacted, institutionalized, and mobilized across political periods?

Fieldwork in Xiamen, Quanzhou, Fuzhou, and Fuqing complicated these questions. Although the search did not produce a continuous family genealogy, it revealed a proliferation of material and immaterial traces connecting Fujian and Indonesia. These appeared in museums, ancestral spaces, photographs, inscriptions, everyday conversations, food, and encounters with people whose lives had unfolded across both places.



The central argument emerging from this research is that migratory histories cannot be understood exclusively through the recovery of ancestral origins or formal archival documentation. They are also constituted through dispersed traces, everyday practices, institutional acts of preservation, and the unequal political conditions under which particular memories become legible as history. The question therefore shifted from whether an ancestral lineage could be recovered to how fragments acquire historical meaning and authority - and what remains obscured in that process.

Act I: Lineage, Migration, and the Limits of Recovery

The project's point of departure was the fragmented history of my grandmother's family, whose Hokkien-speaking background and connections to East Java suggested longer histories of movement between southern Fujian and the Indonesian archipelago. Family names, including Oei and Kwee, provided provisional points of orientation, although neither surname could establish a definitive ancestral origin.

This investigation was situated within the broader historical geography of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia. Fujian's maritime networks have long connected coastal settlements to ports, commercial communities, and migrant households across the region. These movements were shaped not only by trade and family strategies but also by colonial governance, racial classification, political upheaval, and changing regimes of citizenship and national belonging.



Lineage was more difficult to recover than I had imagined / Ancestral hall visits along an unresolved search

The search for genealogical connections took me to museums, ancestral and lineage sites, and places associated with overseas Chinese histories. Yet the attempt to locate a continuous familial trajectory encountered significant methodological limits. Shared surnames did not necessarily indicate shared ancestry; genealogical records were not always accessible; and the relationships among oral histories, official documentation, and family recollections could not be conclusively established.

These difficulties were not simply obstacles to an otherwise recoverable history. They raised questions about the expectation that genealogical research should culminate in a coherent narrative of origins. Such an expectation risks treating lineage as a stable inheritance awaiting discovery, rather than a historically contingent form of knowledge mediated through migration, language, documentation, and political circumstances.



Echoes of 印尼 surfaced through memory, plaques, objects, and histories of return.

The absence of a conclusive genealogical record also did not mean an absence of historical evidence. Across Fujian, Indonesia repeatedly surfaced through plaques, archival displays,

objects, photographs, and references to overseas Chinese communities. The contrast was striking: while one family's lineage remained difficult to establish, the wider history of migration between Fujian and Indonesia appeared in considerable institutional and material abundance.

This disjuncture prompted a reconsideration of archival absence itself. Absence is not necessarily a condition of having no surviving traces. It may instead describe the uneven relationship between the histories institutions preserve, the questions their collections make possible, and the experiences that remain difficult to reconstruct from those materials.

Act II: Migratory Afterlives, Memory, and Archival Authority

The second dimension of the research emerged from encounters with people whose experiences complicated the conventional separation between migration, return, and settlement.

Among the most significant were conversations with three elderly women who had returned to China from Indonesia decades earlier. Their recollections connected migration to everyday forms of livelihood, family responsibility, language, and food. These encounters did not provide exhaustive historical accounts, nor could they be treated as representative of the diverse trajectories of Chinese Indonesians who relocated to China. They nevertheless illuminated dimensions of migratory experience that were less visible within formal heritage narratives.



Restaurants and shops operated as social infrastructures of memory and encounter.

In restaurants and other ordinary settings, histories of displacement, adaptation, and return emerged through recipes, family photographs, remembered words, and stories of work. Food was particularly significant, not simply as a marker of cultural identity but as a

practical medium through which relationships and memories had been sustained across changing political and geographic circumstances.

These encounters suggested that migration does not necessarily conclude upon arrival or return. Its afterlives continue through languages retained or forgotten, habits of care, intergenerational obligations, and attachments to places that may no longer be physically accessible.

They also complicated the category of return. For people who had established lives in Indonesia before relocating to China, the designation of an ancestral homeland did not necessarily correspond to the place where their memories, livelihoods, and social attachments had been formed. Return could therefore involve another experience of dislocation rather than the restoration of an uncomplicated sense of belonging.

This question cannot be detached from political history. Chinese Indonesian experiences of migration, citizenship, and belonging have been shaped by successive colonial and postcolonial regimes, anti-Chinese discrimination, and periods of political violence. Yet these historical contexts should not be imposed retrospectively as explanations for individual trajectories without sufficient evidence. The fieldwork instead opened questions about how larger political transformations entered family histories, shaped decisions to move, and influenced what could subsequently be remembered or narrated.

Museums and heritage institutions offered another perspective. Their collections demonstrated the extensive historical connections between Fujian and Southeast Asia, while also raising questions about selection and representation. Which migrants become visible in public narratives? What roles do commercial success, philanthropy, ancestral loyalty, and national identification play in determining whose histories are commemorated? Where do experiences of political vulnerability, displacement, or ambiguous belonging appear within these accounts?

Rather than opposing institutional archives to personal memories, the research began examining the different conditions through which each becomes authoritative. A photograph, a museum inscription, an oral recollection, and a family document do not possess equivalent evidentiary functions. Their significance depends upon how they were produced, preserved, interpreted, and situated within particular historical and political contexts.

The project's emerging concern is therefore not merely the recovery of overlooked memories, but the processes through which dispersed fragments are made to speak as history.

Act III: Belief, Collective Care, and the Limits of Comparison

The original research proposal also sought to examine belief, ritual, and collective practices across Indonesia and southern Fujian. These concerns emerged from my broader doctoral research on disaster governance, environmental change, and *gotong royong*, particularly the ways collective cooperation may operate simultaneously as an everyday practice of care and as a political vocabulary mobilized by institutions and governing authorities.

The Fujian research offered an opportunity to approach these questions beyond the Indonesian context. However, the fieldwork did not establish a systematic comparison between *gotong royong* and any singular equivalent in southern Fujian. Nor did the available observations permit broad conclusions about the roles of religious belief, ritual, or moral cosmology in organizing collective obligation.

This distinction requires closer consideration. Treating acts of hospitality or interpersonal generosity as evidence of an equivalent cultural tradition risks flattening historically distinct practices into a generalized understanding of collective care. It could also obscure differences in political institutions, social hierarchies, religious traditions, and the conditions under which care is expected or performed.



Collective care took form through gifts, shared meals, introductions, things lent, things given, and conversations that opened into other encounters

Nevertheless, collective care became visible in ways that had not been fully anticipated. People offered directions, shared food, facilitated introductions, extended trust, and made time to recount experiences. These gestures were not necessarily extraordinary, but they shaped the possibilities of conducting research and encountering otherwise inaccessible histories.

One encounter, in which a restaurant owner's son helped facilitate a conversation with an older family member, illustrates how historical knowledge can circulate through relationships rather than established research institutions alone. Such interactions revealed the practical and relational conditions under which stories become available.

Yet they also raised methodological and ethical questions. Hospitality should not be romanticized as evidence of an inherently cohesive community. Nor should the generosity of interlocutors be converted uncritically into an extractive research resource. The ability to gain access through care creates corresponding obligations concerning representation, reciprocity, interpretation, and the limits of what one may claim to know.

These observations brought the project closer to my broader inquiry into collective care while also sharpening an important distinction: cooperation should be investigated as a situated social and political practice, rather than assumed to arise from a stable cultural disposition.

The comparative contribution of the research consequently lies less in identifying direct equivalences between Indonesia and Fujian than in developing questions about how everyday obligations emerge, how they are transmitted across migration, and under what circumstances they become recognizable as collective values or institutionalized forms of solidarity.

Methodological Approach and Contributions

The research employed a qualitative, exploratory approach combining site-based observation, informal conversations, archival and semi-archival tracing, and visual and material documentation. Fieldwork across Xiamen, Quanzhou, Fuzhou, and Fuqing included visits to museums, ancestral spaces, heritage sites, restaurants, and other everyday settings connected to migration histories.

Methodologically, the project moved between different scales of inquiry: from individual family recollections to institutional representations of overseas Chinese history, and from material objects to broader political geographies of migration and belonging.

Its theoretical orientation draws on critical approaches to archives and historical knowledge, diaspora and transnational memory, and the politics of care. Rather than treating archival materials as transparent representations of the past, it attends to the institutional and political processes governing preservation, classification, visibility, and omission. Similarly, memory is approached not as an unmediated repository of experience but as a practice shaped by relationships, temporal distance, and changing conditions of belonging.

The research makes three *preliminary* contributions. First, it treats genealogical incompleteness as analytically productive, opening questions about the unequal conditions through which family and migration histories become knowable. Second, it brings institutional heritage representations into conversation with everyday practices of remembrance, without presuming either to be more authentic or historically authoritative. Third, it offers a basis for rethinking collective care across transnational contexts without collapsing distinct social practices into cultural equivalence.

These contributions remain provisional. The relatively short duration of fieldwork, uneven access to genealogical sources, limited number of extended interlocutor encounters, and linguistic constraints restrict the conclusions that can be drawn. The project cannot claim to reconstruct a family genealogy, represent Chinese Indonesian return migration comprehensively, or establish systematic comparisons of collective cooperation. Its strength instead lies in identifying conceptual and methodological tensions that warrant further investigation.

When the Field Challenges the Questions/ Reflections on the ICI Fellowship

The India China Institute Fellowship made it possible to conduct independent fieldwork in southern Fujian and pursue questions that could not have been adequately addressed through desk-based research alone. The opportunity to move between cities, archives, heritage institutions, and everyday encounters fundamentally altered the direction of the project.

Most importantly, the fellowship supported a research process in which unexpected findings were permitted to challenge the original questions. I had anticipated difficulties in reconstructing a family lineage, but had not expected the extent to which Indonesia would repeatedly appear throughout Fujian's public and everyday landscapes. Conversely, the abundance of historical traces did not resolve the uncertainties surrounding my own family history.

This tension became one of the project's most significant findings.

The fieldwork also reinforced the importance of methodological humility. Not every encounter should be interpreted as evidence of a wider social pattern, and not every fragment can or should be assembled into a continuous historical account. What could not be established was as important to the research's intellectual development as what became visible.

The project therefore addressed its original questions unevenly but productively. It substantially advanced the inquiry into lineage, fragmented archives, and migratory

memory. It opened preliminary lines of investigation into collective care and obligation, while leaving the proposed comparative analysis of belief and ritual for further research.

Ultimately, *The Unfolding, in Three Acts* is not a completed account of ancestral recovery. It is an inquiry into the conditions under which histories of movement, displacement, and belonging are remembered, preserved, and rendered authoritative.

What began as a search for lineage became an investigation of the relationships among fragments: those retained within institutional collections, those circulating through food and language, those carried within families, and those that remain difficult to retrieve. The task ahead is not simply to assemble these fragments into a coherent narrative, but to examine how coherence itself is produced: whose histories it privileges, what uncertainties it conceals, and what forms of collective life remain possible beyond its boundaries.