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Seeing Eye to I The Power of Asian Literatures

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Announcing the Prime Minister's literary awards on 8 November, Julia Gillard quoted the English playwright Tom Stoppard: 'Words are sacred... If you get the right ones in the right order you can nudge the world a little'.¹ Stoppard and the Prime Minister are right, and if we are to nudge Australia and Asia towards each other we need to pay close attention to the words with which we do so. Language is the strongest feature of that strangely phrased (but sensible) concept, 'soft power'. This is perhaps fairly well-recognised but few of those involved take the next logical step and think about where language is used most richly, most resourcefully, most powerfully: in literature. If we are to understand Asian cultures and if we are to have Asians understand Australian culture in any depth we must attend to their literature and ours.

1. Hon. Julia Gillard, Speech in announcing the 2010 Prime Minister's Literary Awards, <http://www.pm.gov.au/node/7003>

In an Asialink essay of December 2009 Alison Carroll argued cogently for the importance of the arts in developing relations between Australia and Asia.² The arts, she said, make us ‘wiser, richer of imagination, more subtle, more tolerant, more interesting’. This argument needs repeated declaration in a materialistic, sporting, religiously skeptical, sardonic and earthy culture such as Australia’s. The arts are the means of reaching to the depths of the whole fabric of activities in a society, crystallising the values and beliefs that the society holds dear. In Australia this would include, for example, a degree of unpretentiousness (not always present in the arts of Europe or the USA), a refusal to take oneself too seriously, and an informality that would seem shocking in many Asian cultures. The Australian poet Les A Murray once wrote that ‘At birth, each Australian / receives a stout bullshit gauge / made of mulga’. Murray insightfully went on, ‘we are a colloquial nation / most colonial when serious’.³ The rolling, long, outwardly casual lines of Murray’s poems reflect a wide brown landscape, yet a laid back approach to it. They contrast sharply with the more ceremonial lines of, say, the Thai poet Khomthuan Khanthanu:

*Ten fingers i humbly join
head i humbly bow
down on the ground
at passing feet i bow
O spare me a coin*⁴

Khanthanu is of the same generation as Murray, and this is the ‘Song of a Titled Beggar’ but the use of the word ‘bullshit’ would be unimaginable to this beggar. Khanthanu’s gentle formality reflects the tone of a Buddhist culture, one in which begging has noble connotations.

The Nature and Power of Literature

The arts can provide the deepest and most durable expression of a culture because the artist draws on his or her unconscious and conscious minds together, combines imagination and analytical intelligence, and places the present in relation to past values. The Pakistani poet Alamgir Hashmi once asserted:

*The past is a house leased us for good,
so that we can pray together for our eviction
at least five times a day.*⁵

These characteristics of the arts, I want to argue, are especially true of literature. The Prime Minister observed, ‘in many ways it is literature which anchors and inspires the arts’. Literature is the only one of the arts whose medium – language – intrinsically involves precision of meaning. The other arts work in terms of broad meanings – fast movement in music or dance or even in lines on a canvas suggest excitement and sprightliness, slow movement worry or sorrow. The other arts have a purity that can inject emotions directly into the vein. However, if you want to consider or discuss their effect you have to turn to language. Literature is the most impure of the arts because its medium is used extensively in our everyday activities, but for the same reason it is the most comprehensive of the arts. Much of literature’s power comes from its active negotiations between the surfaces of our lives and their depths – between ‘culture’ and ‘culture’ as it were. Of course, literature doesn’t simply use language in the way we do when conducting our everyday transactions. It does use language in that way but it also seeks to explore the deepest reaches of language. Language is fundamentally abstract (unlike movement, colour and line) but literature uses the rhythms, sound patterns and textures of language to overcome that abstractness and capture something of the sensory qualities of experience. Through features such as

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2. Alison Carroll, ‘Ignorance is Not Bliss: Art and its place in Australia-Asia relations’, Asialink Essay number 10, <http://www.asialink.unimelb.edu.au/>

3. Les A Murray, ‘Cycling in the Lake Country’, *Collected Poems* (Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 2002), p.106.

4. Khomthuan Khanthanu, ‘Song of a Titled Beggar’, trans. Chancham Bunnag, *Treasury of Thai Literature: The Modern Period* (Bangkok: National Identity Board, Office of Prime Minister, 1988), p.206; ‘Khomthuan Khanthanu’ is the pen name of Prasartphorn Bhususilphorn.

5. Alamgir Hashmi, ‘E.F.L. (Evading the Futility of Language)’, *‘Westerly’ Looks to Asia: A Selection from ‘Westerly’ 1956-1992*, ed. Bruce Bennett et al (Perth: Indian Ocean Centre for Peace Studies & Centre for Studies in Australian Literature, 1993), p.236.

imagery it attempts to speak to the reader's or listener's whole being. This is why it can be difficult and need some professional training to fully appreciate, but it is also why it is valuable. Literature frequently embodies its meanings rather than provides explanatory meaning. Literature can link the earthly and the metaphysical, and try to express meanings just beyond the reach of language (as so much classical Chinese poetry does). It is a way of taking a culture's temperature, and of possessing the world we live in most fully. 'Great literature', said the Confucianist Ezra Pound, 'is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree'.⁶ Pound marvellously also said, 'Literature is news that STAYS news'.⁷

The Ignoring of Literature

Yet few politicians, businessmen or women, or even scholars of Asian Studies in Australia take any notice of literature. Figures such as the Indonesianist Paul Tickell and the Sinologist Mabel Lee are exceptions rather than the norm. Australian Asian Studies departments are dominated by anthropologists, historians and political scientists, and their news is the day to day events of a society rather than the underlying values of a culture. However, many of the literatures of Asia have enormous richness and draw on traditions older than those in English. English literature has a tradition of about 1000 years, as does Javanese literature, but Chinese writers have 4000 years behind them, and Indian writers 5000 years! Many countries in Asia can draw on these traditions to varying degrees in their contemporary literature. Henry James decided that 'It takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature' but Asia has both history and literature in abundance.⁸

Asian Literatures

Of course, to speak of Asian literatures is to speak of a very diverse range of writing, partly because it includes an enormous number of languages. The textures and rhythms of languages – and so the intrinsic qualities available to writers – vary greatly. Literature always has a social context, even when concerned with metaphysical issues, and Asian societies' experiences and circumstances also vary greatly. In some countries, for example, Burma, China and Laos, literature is subject to strong censorship – this is one proof of literature's power; in some, such as India and Malaysia, the language in which the writer works has political import; in some, such as India and Japan, writers are largely free to pursue their own interests.

Aesthetic thought is always linked to educational, moral, political, and religious thought. The origins of literature in Asia, as in the Western world, are linked to religion. Many of the earliest writings – for example, in Cambodia, China and Laos – are on bamboo or palm leaves and show the influence of the Ramayana or of Buddhism. Literate Buddhist monks played a similar role to monks in Britain who wrote, transcribed and preserved much early literature in English. These origins are not entirely lost in some of the countries' contemporary literature, much as Western writers can still draw on classical Greek mythology. Countries which have experienced Communist revolutions have tried to steer, or forced, writers away from religious to social concerns, so that Socialist Realism is still officially encouraged in China, Laos and Vietnam, and in Fascist Burma. Consequently, Laos, where publication is difficult, is much richer in fiction than in verse. Some of this writing still refers to 'the American War', in which Laos became the most bombed country in history.

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6. Ezra Pound, *How to Read* (London: Desmond Harmsworth, 1931), p.21.

7. Ezra Pound, *The ABC of Reading* (London: Routledge, 1934), p.13.

8. Henry James, *Hawthorne* (1879; London: Macmillan, 1967), p.23.

Environmentalism is another important theme and realism is the most common mode. The Thai and Lao people have much in common, and Thai writing shares with Lao a concern for the effects of industrialisation and commercialism as traditional rural values are lost. A coming to terms with modernisation and with the sense of purpose and identity it requires looms large in the writing, although there is a contrast between poems and stories set in the city and those in the country. Shifts in traditions, loneliness, family relations, and sexual love are prominent in Thai literature.

There is little of the last-mentioned in the literature of Brunei, which is very much by Bruneians; it is a small, largely unnoticed and fairly contained society. Bruneian literature is less directly Islamic – and more spiritual – than you might expect. Deeply concerned with nature, much of the writing is in fact folkloric, concerned to engender respect for all aspects of creation. Burma remains the most politically troubled country in the region, and the only one not to have progressed socially and economically over the last two decades. Sometimes philosophical, sometimes playful, Burmese literature is often social and political, some subjects endorsed by the military government and some not, either written by authors in exile or the work disguised as allegory. In Burma's circumstances, literature plays an especially important role, keeping alive a sense of the inner life and human spirit – it hardly matters if these phrases are clichés – that no dictatorship can suppress.

Cambodia knows about troubled history too, and allusions to the Khmer Rouge appear, sometimes obliquely, in Cambodian poems and stories. Much of their literature concerns social problems and victims, such as crippled soldiers and country girls forced to work in city brothels. East Timor society, being newer, is aware of the country's fragility, and its literature is often explicitly patriotic. Fiction has hardly begun to be written there but Luis Cardoso's *The Crossing* is an extraordinarily powerful autobiography. Their poets include the political leader Xanana Gusmao. East Timorese poetry is characteristically brief, imagistic, and often mythological. A related culture is that of Indonesia, whose literature is large, rich and diverse, especially in poetry. Its literature, like its neighbours', can make philosophical use of nature, but it can also be regional, historical, feminist, overtly political, or concerned with the relationship between dreams and waking reality, or between the events in this life and a metaphysical or religious realm.

Language itself, and the effect of different languages is a frequent subject of Filipinos' poetry, aware of their history of conquest and of the current influence of American English. Philippine writing as a whole has a strong international sense, fed by the Filipino experience of travel and periods of expatriation, with an eventual longing for 'the odour / of fish sauce' and 'the privilege of cursing / in their own tongue'.⁹ The Catholic Church, ethnic and social complexity, and the power of history also figure strongly in Philippine fiction. Korean literature has strongly reflected the vicissitudes of the country's history, so social and political issues are prominent. Early Korean literature was heavily influenced by Chinese philosophies and writing but it received Western influences from the late-nineteenth century. These were curtailed during Japan's annexation of the country from 1910–1945. The loss of the nation

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9. Eric Gamalinda, 'Enough', *Zero Gravity* (Farmington, Maine: Alice James Books, 1999), p.72.

was then a strong theme, in both poetry and prose, and the subsequent division of the country has ensured that this theme has not been lost in contemporary Korean literature. Interestingly enough, current Korean writing shares many concerns with Japan's, including industrial exploitation and the differing perspectives of city and country life. Vietnam is a fast changing society and Vietnamese literature shows the effort to come to terms with that change, sometimes revealing a huge gulf between the outlooks and philosophies of different generations. The shift from socialist realism has given rein to some elements of surrealism, which can be startling alongside stark depictions of poverty.

The Major Asian Literatures

The three major literatures in Asia are those of China, India and Japan. Not coincidentally, they are the three major economies, each with its own long literary tradition. Their literatures have received recognition in the West; they are the only Asian nations to produce Nobel Prize winning authors: Rabindranath Tagore (India, 1913), Yasunari Kawabata (Japan, 1968), Kenzaburo Oe (Japan, 1994), and belatedly Gao Xingjian (China, 2000); some might also want to include the ethnically Indian V S Naipaul (2001). Indian writers have done particularly well in recent years in the Booker Prize and the Commonwealth Prize, and writers such as Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy and Vikram Seth are all internationally known. It has to be said that recognition of the first three has not been hurt by their being expatriates, living in the USA, and for all of them by their writing in English. They and other Indians, such as poets Kamala Das, Keki Daruwalla and Nissim Ezekiel, make a strong case for seeing India's as the strongest of all national literatures

in modern times. The forcefulness and sophistication of their works can be evidenced by the closing lines of a Das poem which concern the complex relationship between self and society which is such a large contemporary theme in the West:

*... Anywhere and
Everywhere, I see the one who calls himself
I; in this world, he is tightly packed like the
Sword in its sheath. It is I who drink lonely
Drinks at twelve, midnight, in hotels of
strange towns,
It is I who laugh, it is I who make love
And then, feel shame, it is I who lie dying
With a rattle in my throat. I am sinner,
I am saint. I am the beloved and the
Betrayed. I have no joys which are not yours, no
Aches which are not yours. I too call myself I.¹⁰*

India's is, in some respects, also a regional literature, for it is written in many different languages and India is a large, diverse society. Bengali can claim to have a strong literature on its own account – it was Tagore's language – with three hundred million prospective readers. The year 2010 marks the 150th anniversary of Tagore's birth, and India has not forgotten it, even if the West has. Hindi has an even larger number of speakers, and a very active literature, including in translation. In October 2010 I attended an international seminar organised by the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters. It was meant to be a celebration of Commonwealth literature, held in association with the Commonwealth Games. In Australia you could be forgiven for forgetting that the Commonwealth of Nations exists, but the Indians are very aware of it and keen on the idea of 'Commonwealth Literature'. Yet the unplanned theme - brought up repeatedly at the seminar, and often heatedly – was that of the English language. Many Asian societies have a love-hate relationship with former colonial masters: the archetypal Filipino

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10. Kamala Das, 'An Introduction', 'Westerly' Looks to Asia, p.214.

joke is of the protestor who carries a sign saying ‘Yanqui go home’, with, in smaller print underneath, ‘and take me with you!’ Asian writers can have a similar relationship with the colonists’ language – usually English or French – but some writers see the language as the best legacy of the colonial experience. The Sahitya Akademi’s literary journal, *Indian Literature*, is published in English: no other language would be viable, precisely because it does have a commonality but does not belong to any particular Indian group. ‘The sun has long set on the British Empire,’ writes the Singaporean poet Edwin Thumboo, ‘but continues to shine daily on English’.¹¹ While successive governments in neighbouring Malaysia have ensured a turbulent circumstance for English there, Thumboo has had no doubt that individual literatures can be made through adapting the colonial language:

*We now have new Englishes in virtually every ex-colony, with their own literatures which are each concurrently national – i.e. Indian, Nigerian, Australian – and international by virtue of the language. While it goes about being useful, the place, and therefore the function, of English continues to beget passionate discussion. That is hardly surprising: language is identity. The ex-colonial one indigenizes to acquire a local habitation and a name.*¹²

Thumboo has been one of those to refuse the title ‘postcolonial’ to describe Singaporean and other literatures of the region, on the grounds that the experience of independence has gone on for decades now, and the colonial experience should not be seen as the defining one for the respective cultures.

China and Japan have literatures as complex as their histories, and China in the 20th Century surely had the most turbulent history of any nation in the world. Its literature has been directly affected by politics, very often in reaction. China’s contemporary literature includes many ‘pirate’ books never approved by the government censor. China’s rich literary heritage can draw on both the social concerns of Confucianism and the nature philosophy of Taoism, the former exemplified by Du Fu and the latter by Li Bai, poets who knew each other in the High Tang period of the 8th Century. Such oppositions, and others, for example between cultivated, literary language and more common speech, between elaborate and simple style, and between artistic writing and commercial writing, seem wildly at play in Chinese writing of the last two or three decades. Chinese literature is large enough to encompass such diversity. Undoubtedly the best-known figure internationally is Gao Xingjian because of his Nobel Prize for the autobiographical novel *Soul Mountain* (translated into English by Mabel Lee). He has lived in France since 1987 and his works are banned in China.

Japanese literature dates back to the 8th Century and was initially strongly influenced by Chinese culture. Contemporary Japan is, of course, a very different society to China, as tensions between the two nations frequently demonstrate, but Japan’s literature has a similar diversity. Prominent themes include the lack of connection with the past, feminist issues, and the bewildering complexity of the modern world, with a wild surrealism sometimes being employed and the popularity of manga unignorable. The American-influenced postmodernism of Haruki Murakami and the French-influenced high seriousness of Kenzaburo Oe might be seen as the two poles between which modern Japanese literature oscillates.

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11. Edwin Thumboo, *Cultures in ASEAN & the 21st Century*, ed. Edwin Thumboo (Singapore: Unipress, 1996), p.xxi.

12. Thumboo, p.xxi. Thumboo’s last phrase cleverly alludes to Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Australian Literature and Asia

In her landmark study, *The Yellow Lady*, Alison Broinowski showed that Australian literary concerns with Asia were fragmentary but longstanding.¹³ Many works of the nationalist, foundation period of our literature – the two decades from 1890 – were outlandishly racist, warning of invasion by the Chow or Jap. Australian literary engagement with Asia has matured significantly since then, and the last thirty years have seen a steady growth in Asian interest of all kinds and across all literary genres. They include intellectual engagements by writers such as the poet Robert Gray, the playwright John Romeril, the short story writer Joan London, and the novelist Alex Miller, as well as experiential work by Janette Turner Hospital, Christopher Koch, John Masteer, the young adult writer Kirsty Murray and many others. Australian authors now include many migrants born in Asia, such as Brian Castro, Adib Khan, Chandani Lokuge, and Ernest MacIntyre; plus the children of Asian migrants, including Christopher Cyrill, Suneeta Peres da Costa, and Alice Pung. The level of engagement now seems deep and enduring. The Indonesian writer Goenawan Mohamad once wrote, only half-jokingly, that ‘Australians are just a more wealthy version of the Javanese’.¹⁴ That literary engagement has been aided by Asialink and Australia Council-funded residencies, the Commonwealth Prize (which includes an award for the South East Asia and Pacific Region), the foundation of the Asian Australian Studies Research Network, and literary journals such as the Melbourne-based *Peril* and the longstanding *Westerly*.

In Conclusion

The Malaysian scholar Mohammad Quayum last year drew attention to a student editorial from 1949-1950 at the University of Malaya. The editorial approvingly noted a professor’s comment that ‘Self-government implies a self to do the governing, and it is our responsibility to bring that self into existence’.¹⁵ Quayum’s point is that literature can have a key role in doing so. Asian selves are now more established than in 1950 but both individual and national identities are continually being remade. The often cited aspiration, ‘an Asia-literate Australia’, in its very wording points to literature as well as literacy. The proposed National English curriculum looks to improve the current lack of understanding of Asia among many students, and sensibly ‘places an emphasis on understanding the cultures of Asia’. It seeks to have students ‘engage imaginatively with literature’, so the planned curriculum will include both Australian texts and ‘texts from the Asian region’.¹⁶

The realisation of these aims is crucial for the education of future Australians, including our future leaders. We think and articulate imagination principally in language. Literature, because of its richness of language, depth of thought, and development of empathy has great value in shaping consciousness and identity, yet it is at present largely ignored by business, by government and by social scientists, including those encouraging engagement with Asia. Unlike business and politics, but like the other arts, it is relatively free of constraints; at its heart literature has nothing to do with competitiveness – a vastly over-rated human attribute in Western society – and it encourages empathy. A reading of Asian literatures is a deep, and deeply pleasurable way to help understand Asian societies. It will assist Australian literature and Australian society to be seen as part of that imagined community.

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13. Alison Broinowski, *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia* (Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1992).

14. Goenawan Mohamad, *Sidelines: Writings from ‘Tempo’*, trans. Jennifer Lindsay (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1994), p.215.

15. Mohammad Quayum, *Sharing Borders: Studies in Contemporary Singaporean-Malaysian Literature*, Vol I, ed. Mohammad Quayum & Wong Phui Nam (Singapore: National Library Board & National Arts Council, 2009) p.11; quoting *The New Cauldron*, journal of the Raffles Society of the University of Malaya.

16. National English Curriculum, Draft Consultation version 1.1.0, www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/Documents/English%20curriculum.pdf, pp.1-2.

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