

Editorial

This is the first special issue of *Asiatic*, and given the journal's "home" in Malaysia it is undoubtedly appropriate to have the first special issue on Southeast Asian Literature. We have published several articles expressly on Malaysian-Singaporean literature in the last five years of the journal's existence, but this is the first time we have concentrated a full issue on the literature of the region. We sent out an announcement in May 2011, and within the short period of about six months we received numerous responses from both writers and scholars in the field, and after the peer-review process, which requires every submission to be vetted blind by two specialist readers, we have put together seven articles, one interview, one review article, ten book reviews and fifteen poems. These contributions have come from various parts of the Pacific Rim – Australia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, the UK and the USA – and collectively they embody a broad representation of the state of literature and literary discourses in several of these countries.

Of the seven articles, three are on the literature of the Philippines, two on Malaysian literature and one each on the literature of Singapore and Thailand. The articles on Philippine literature are by J. Neil C. Garcia, Isabela Banzon and Shirley O. Lua. Neil's article makes a plea for translating the revolutionary novels of the national hero, Jose Rizal, into various regional languages of the country to accord recognition to their "evocative power" as well as to realise Rizal's inclusivist vision for the nation. The articles by Isabela Banzon and Shirley Lua pay tribute to the works of two of the best known contemporary poets in the Philippines, Ricardo de Ungria and Marjorie Evasco. However, while Isabela Banzon's primary focus is on de Ungria's growth as a poet, from being purely experimental in the early years of his career to becoming increasingly involved in the socio-political milieu of his country, Shirley Lua delves into the theme of evanescence in Evasco's poetry, focusing predominantly on Evasco's recent volume, *Skin of Water* (2009).

The two articles on Malaysian literature are by Muhammad Haji Salleh and Ungku Maimunah Mohd. Tahir, both of whom are well recognised scholars of Malay literature. In the first article, Muhammad, a poet and one of Malaysia's ten National Laureates, examines the theme of love in early Malay literature, especially in the pantuns and the hikayats – a theme which, he argues, unlike in Western and Indian literature, has never been studied before. The article also demonstrates Muhammad's own skills in translation, as many of the poems and passages in the article have been translated from Malay into English by the author himself. Ungku Maimunah's article, on the other hand, applies the analytical framework of *Persuratan Baru* advanced by a local writer and critic,

Mohd Affandi Hassan, on Azizi Haji Abdullah's Malay novel *Bila Hujan Malam* (When it Rains at Night), first published in 1976. She argues that Azizi's novel is written more for the purpose of storytelling than to educate the readers. In it, the author uses women deliberately as sex objects for narrative gain. Therefore, contrary to the many claims of its literary merit, *Bila Hujan Malam* should not be considered as more than an erotic novel.

In the article on Singaporean literature, the co-authors Joel Gwynne and Angus Whitehead examine how the collection of short stories, *Love and Lust in Singapore*, published in 2010 and written mostly by expatriate writers, emblematises the cultural and sexual politics of the nation-state and serves to either affirm or disavow both national state rhetoric and popular ideologies of nationhood. Thanapol Limapichart, on the other hand, investigates how the movement of "literature for life" (*wannakham phuea chimvit*) developed in Thailand in the 1950s as a result of a dynamic contestation and exchange among writers, journalists, social critics and literary scholars of various political and ideological inclinations, i.e. the conservative, the "liberal" and the communist, as each attempted to assert its cultural legitimacy and even supremacy over the other.

In her interview with Dayang Hajah Norsiah Abdul Gapar, Nor Faridah Abdul Manaf, who has co-edited the issue with me, introduces a little known Bruneian writer who won the SEA Write Award in 2009. Although it is relatively a short interview, it is still important because not much is known about Brunei literature even in Malaysia, although the country is surrounded on all sides by the Malaysian state of Sarawak. In the review article, Ishtiaq Hossain discusses two recent books by Tom Plate based on his conversations with two of the most significant contemporary political figures in the region, Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's Prime Minister from 1959 to 1990, and Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia's Prime Minister from 1981 to 2003. Hossain explains that although the two books do not provide a scientific or analytical study of these two Asian leaders, they are nevertheless significant because they highlight many important traits, aspects and issues of their political leadership and careers.

The book reviews also cover a wide ground as they introduce several recent publications, ranging from poetry, fiction, memoir to drama, by well-known as well as new writers from Malaysia and Singapore. In addition, we have poems by some of the leading poets in the region, including Ricardo de Ungria and Marjorie Evasco, whose works are discussed in two of the articles in the issue, and Kim Cheng Boey, who won the National University of Singapore Poetry Competition in 1978 and received the Singapore National Arts Council's Young Artist Award in 1996. We also have poems by Ioana Petrescu, a Romanian-born poet who now lives and works in Adelaide, Australia; Tammy Ho Lai-Ming, a Hong Kong-born academic and writer who co-founded the online journal, *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*; and Free Hearty, an Indonesian poet.

With such a wealth of creative and critical works, we believe the issue will be appealing and exciting to readers interested in Southeast Asian literature.

Last but not least, I would like to thank our anonymous referees, who by meticulously vetting the submissions have helped us to maintain the journal's high standard.

Mohammad A. Quayum
Editor-in-Chief, *Asiatic*