Another Kind of Paradise

Short Stories from the New Asia-Pacific

Edited with an Introduction by Trevor Carolan

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For Ivan and Evalina Kats, in memory
And for Robert Aitken, Roshi

The self and the things of the world are just as they are…
Dogen Zenji

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Aloha,

Trevor Carolan
University of the Fraser Valley
British Columbia, Canada

Foreword

Nearly twenty years have passed since Trevor Carolan edited one of the first anthologies of new literature from Asia, *The Colors of Heaven*. Much has happened in the world, and in the world of books. What hasn't changed is the need—as important and urgent as ever—for books like *The Colors of Heaven* and *Another Kind of Paradise*.

In our work at *Mānoa Journal*, we have seen the results of literature's power to transform readers and societies. We have also seen its power to reach out to us, though appearing at first strange, exotic, or not relevant—bringing us all at once heart to heart and face to face with neighbors we had not recognized as our own kin.

Nevertheless, English language readers have yet to be given access to the rest of the world through the kinds of literary translating in *Another Kind of Paradise*—particularly from Asia, which we have neglected for too long, declining to join in the conversations taking place among four billion souls outside our linguistically gated communities, with all of whom we must learn to share this paradise or lose everything.

At a recent conference in Southeast Asia, American writer Barry Lopez noted the importance of what he called good conversations, especially conversations with people from other cultures and traditions. "Conversations are efforts toward good relations," he said. "They are an elementary form of reciprocity. They are the exercise of our love for each other, they are the enemies of our loneliness, our doubt, our anxiety, our tendencies to abdicate. To continue to be in good conversation over our emotions and terrifying problems is to be calling out to each other in the night. If we attend with imagination and devotion to our conversations, we will find what we need."

Like Lopez, the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah finds the word "conversation" a convenient term for the kind of reciprocity that can mark the beginning of understanding:

> Often enough, as Faust said, in the beginning is the deed: practices and not principles are what enable us to live together in peace. Conversations across boundaries of identity—whether

> national, religious, or something else—begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from some place other than your own. So I'm using the word "conversation" not only for literal talk but also as a metaphor for engagement with the experiences and ideas of others. And I stress the role of the imagination here because encounters, properly conducted, are valuable in themselves. Conversation doesn't have to lead to consensus about anything, especially not values; it's enough that it helps people get used to one another.

Such simple acts as getting used to each other may foster the kind of tolerance and acceptance that obviate the causes of communal conflicts: alienation and distrust. Conversations about stories, about narratives are a way of aligning our responses to the world with the responses of others, says Appiah. Because stories are often the repository of a society's values, good conversations about them may guide us toward an understanding of difficult community issues. Likewise, they may guide us to the reasoning behind the responses of strangers that otherwise would seem enigmatic to us.

What appears to be a simple story by a Vietnamese writer can be a staggering lesson in the clash between personal ethics and social mores. Reading such a story, we feel gratitude to the author for bringing us to the cliff's edge of morality and to the translator for enabling this moment of revelation. Through such stories, we are offered the chance to re-experience life, to exist among a different people without harm to them or their world. This is surely what we mean by world literature: writing that enables us to stay at home while traveling across temporal, cultural, and geographic boundaries. Reading this literature counters the ideas that the West is at the center of the universe and that its narratives of reality prevail over others. Reading world literature helps turns one into a world citizen.

And one further note about the importance of this book: over the past twenty years, we can be heartened that many more people in the West —including educators and publishers—have become aware that "world literature" has value; its definition has even come to include China, Japan, India, perhaps Korea, perhaps Vietnam, and one to two other countries; the best known of these nations have made efforts on their own to seek translators and publishers abroad. They are, however, but a few of the

Asian countries whose contemporary literary riches should be better known in the West. We at *Mānoa Journal*, who have been humble workers in the same vegetable patch of translation, salute Trevor Carolan for not only bringing many Asian authors together in this paradise of a book, but also—thanks to his intrepid travels, ravenous reading habits, and boundlessly inclusive soul (in league with the fine publishing house of Cheng & Tsui)—for managing in *Another Kind of Paradise* to present literature from nations seldom translated, such Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Singapore, and Bangladesh. Truly these are keys to a mansion with many rooms.

An American poet once opined that poetry is what is lost in translation. But it might also be said that poetry is what is not lost in translation—that through the genius of particular writers and the skill of their translators, what is fundamental to our natures and transcendent of our limitations is saved. And this, of course, is as true of stories as it is of poetry.

The effort to write well, to be understood, to innovate, to celebrate, to comfort, and to protest—all are contained in this rich and transforming collection of voices from Asia. To read *Another Kind of Paradise* is—as Tu Fu said of being dazzled by the visual world and the world of literature—like living twice, though this is even better, because in these pages are many worlds within worlds, and we are each somewhere inside them pulling radishes.

Pat Matsueda
Frank Stewart
Editors, *Mānoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing*
http://mānoajournal.hawaii.edu

Introduction

Throughout long history, the Asia-Pacific world has produced a rich harvest of distinguished authors and literary traditions rivaling the canons from Western, Middle Eastern, or South Asian civilizations. Indeed, as the work of Thoreau, Pound, and Jack Kerouac, or the poetry of Anne Waldman and Allen Ginsberg reveals, the aesthetics of East and Southeast Asia's principal literary, humanist, and religious streams—Buddhist and Taoist especially—has been, and continues to be, a key influence upon North American arts and letters. Through such contemporary thinkers as Wendell Berry, Gary Snyder, Joanna Macy, and Fritjof Capra, this influence extends to our most critical environmental inquiries as well.

The diverse cultures of the Asia-Pacific are no longer unfamiliar to us. Through booming trans-Pacific migration, flourishing tourism, or media attention to East Asia's spectacular economic successes (and periodic implosions), most of us have heard at least some mention of the Confucian dimensions of Chinese, Korean, or Japanese society. Perhaps inevitably, the moral and ethical dilemmas that can arise from these Confucian underpinnings—which a generation ago might have seemed distant and exotic—are now comfortably recognized in the popular works of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. Need we even point to the new significance of Islam within the societies of Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and among key population groups in southern Thailand, the southern Philippines, western China, or the Pacific hub city of Sydney?

For all these reasons, the Asia-Pacific increasingly commands our attention: In the twenty-first century, we need to know more about it. In compiling a first major book of short stories in the 1990s from what North Americans commonly referred to as "the Pacific Rim," I noted that our very notion of "the West" arose as a symbol of differentiation from the cultures of Asia, and that the term *Asia* itself derives from a root meaning "alien." Times are changing.

With Asia's financial meltdown of the 1990s, the much heralded Pacific epoch seemed short-lived, giving way to the larger economic realities of globalization. The community of "Pacific Rim" nations now includes, among others, Peru, Chile, Mexico, Russia, Central America, Papua New

Guinea, Fiji, and a flurry of small Poly-, Micro-, and Melanesian nations in the South Pacific once heralded as Oceania and now often known amongst themselves as *Pasifika*. Understandably, a new term for the nations of East and Southeast Asia has also arisen, one that seems destined to stick: the *Asia-Pacific*.

As the stories you are about to encounter in *Another Kind of Paradise* confirm, things change quickly there. Few, though, could ever have predicted how swiftly the economic, social, and political recastings would tumble forth. From an educational perspective, we need new literary representations; hence this anthology.

As the stories in this collection reveal, social transformations are rarely wholesale. For reasons of stability and community accord, most often they appear as a kind of piecemeal shape-shifting. For example, the social roles of women progress and expand, but at different rates between city and country and among different generations and economic classes. Similarly, notions of marriage, divorce, and sexuality itself can vary in surprising degrees, even within what might ordinarily be regarded as conservative or authoritarian societies. And as the stories from Southeast Asia reveal, new economic opportunities afforded to rural dwellers may bring improved degrees of material comfort, permissiveness of speech, freedom of the person, and even rule of law, but not necessarily enhanced security or stability. Yet ideas of progress and modernity are still avidly pursued, even if the resulting conditions are seldom perfect. More often than not, however, and in a degree not previously witnessed in writing from the Asia-Pacific region, new social opportunities oblige authors to reflect upon the ties that bind the individual citizen to his or her family, community, and larger state.

Stories are perennial forms of entertainment and learning. In the Asia-Pacific they evolve out of village storytelling traditions; from professional tea-shop raconteurs, traveling actors, all-night puppet masques and shadow-plays; from native operas, epics, and myths; and from grandmother tongues. Still found widely in Asian newspapers, the short story has evolved as a variety of social commentary, one that thrives even under the omnipresent influence of imported consumer pop culture.

Well-crafted stories possess the ability to show us a country and its people up close, offering a poignant glimpse into the lives of characters at this time, and perhaps in an incalculable way for all time, in say, *uber*-urban Tokyo, sweltering Java, or somewhere in modernizing, hectic China. Good stories can shape a neighborhood or a moment in the life of a character

who may appear uncannily like oneself. We can come to care about a character—about her or his fate—even within a society unlike our own. For as the strains of the Asia-Pacific's mature religious and wisdom paths profess, at the bottom of all collective individual experiences lies a deeper human interrelatedness, a basic existential interdependence that Vietnam's Buddhist variant calls *interbeing*. These stories reflect both everyday life and the changes taking place within it throughout the vast Asia-Pacific region. They are human stories we can give a damn about.

Perhaps the strongest element of this anthology is its reflection of how convincingly women writers have emerged throughout the Asia-Pacific. Traditionally, powerful women's writing excelled most notably during periods of Buddhist social and political influence, which women there still frequently regard as their golden ages, and names such as Lady Murasaki Shikibu of *The Tale of Genji* fame, Sei Shonagon of the celebrated *Pillow Book*, Sung dynasty poet Li Ching Chao, or early nineteenth century Vietnamese poet Ho Xuan Huong are of the highest distinction. Conditions for women of the Asia-Pacific world have varied enormously during local dynastic epochs, however. Since modern European contact with the Far East was established chiefly during climates of neo-Confucian sexual repression, Western images concerning the roles of Asian women have customarily, and not always correctly, tended to focus upon themes of subjugation. The educational and employment opportunities now available to urban women, along with national and international social mobility, has helped foster a generation of women authors who are determined to add to the body of international literature even as they work at refining the moral character and conscience of their own societies.

Given East Asia's remarkable economic successes of the past fifty years and the increased social expectations they have created, some of the material which follows may seem political, although this is not part of any overt editorial intent. Rather, these stories are an attempt to bring readers as accurate and engaging a portrayal of contemporary East, Southeast, and ancillary regional Asian life as can be deduced from a broad reading of many of its most gifted writers.

Readers will observe some notable differences in the literary approach of writers from the Asia-Pacific's different geographic areas. The rise and fall of writers and of literary trends throughout the Asia-Pacific reflects their national cultural sagas. Economics, education, politics, and an increased modern social engagement that is rooted in all three all play a role in this.

In nations where political struggle has been intense, national and artistic energies focus on the moral and ethical issues involved in cultural transition. In China, where writers have long been obliged to play safe politically and where the astounding pace of economic redevelopment is transforming the nature of urban society at breakneck speed, writers have begun to mirror these changes. As the selection by Hong Ying demonstrates, women authors in particular have been unabashed in rankling institutional political interests by following the lead of Japanese writers such as Amy Yamada and Banana Yoshimoto in addressing provocative issues of sexuality and gender roles. Other writers such as Yu Hua, whose work *To Live* has been transferred to the cinema screen by famed director Zhang Yimou, investigate questions of social mobility and the intoxication of China's young urban elites with western culture.

By contrast, writers in Korea have emerged from decades of bitterly concussive political turmoil and now feel secure in holding old injuries up for examination. For example, however tentative it may appear to western readers, Mi-na Choi's "Third Meeting" still strikes a disturbing note in Korean society. In helping to break down walls within the traditional Confucian concept of marriage that historically compelled women to live a kind of internal exile, its suggestion that a mother's emotional life can be more than that of subservient wife and child-bearer offers a soul-strengthening vision integral to feminist self-healing and genuine nation-building. Ironically, when material and social comfort is increasingly taken for granted by a generation spared the worst nightmares of previous military conflict, edgier psychological angles begin percolating into literary consciousness. Younger in flavor and inspired by novelists like Young-Ha Kim, for example, is a new kind of "bobo," or bourgeois-bohemian surrealism that floats beyond the political obsessions of earlier generations of writers. Yun Dae Nyeong's "The Silver Trout Fishing Network" is typical of this recent trend.

Japanese writers prosper through a healthy, well-established book industry, high national literacy, and literary craft traditions. But as critics there have often noted, the magnificent lineage of Sei Shonagon, Lady Murasaki, Basho, Issa, Kawabata, and Japan's other celebrated poets, diarists, and novelists has been cut off through the hybridization of a national literature that is periodically lamented as being no longer "purely Japanese." Perhaps the current renaissance of poetry in Japan has attracted many of the present generation's strongest writers, and there is evidence to

support this, or other narrative techniques and voices have yet to evolve in Japan. Often interwoven from both indigenous and foreign influences, much recent fiction from Japan is self-consciously trendy and marked by a disingenuous pop cupidity, as if intentionally written for a presumed North American audience—a development that appears to be metastasizing among other younger Asian writers as well. Readers need not fear this from Seiko Tanabe's discomfiting portrait of relations between unmarried urban office workers in an uncertain economic climate. Similarly, in a breakout counter-movement to Japan's current literary cosmopolitanism, Shogo Oketani looks at Japan's recent past in searching for a coherent social grounding, one rooted in compassion for the "outsider" elements in society.

Whether through luck or sheer obduracy, writers from the Philippines have produced capable literary work for generations. Regrettably, as elsewhere throughout Southeast Asia, literature is still as much a commodity as an art form. Publishing remains a costly endeavor with a premium placed on producing saleable entertainment, thereby making it difficult for less commercial material to compete with imported mass market paperbacks. With the historic "writer as social conscience" beacon of late nineteenth century Filipino literary martyr José Rizal, though, Filipino literature continues to produce works of burning creativity in abundance, as the selections by Gilda Cordero-Fernando and Marianne Villanueva reveal here. With one of Asia's most avid cohorts of younger literary talent, the works of many others such as Lakambini Sitoy are equally deserving of attention.

In Indo-China and rural Southeast Asia, sketchy literacy conditions contribute to a publishing environment that is only now beginning to establish itself. Many governments throughout the region have routinely harassed authors of works deemed politically troublesome. Pressure has been exerted through direct threat or such indirect means as depriving controversial authors of state employment, notably in school teaching. As a consequence, for decades Southeast Asia suffered a chronic dearth of well-developed homegrown literature, but as the material that follows illustrates, this state of affairs is changing with encouraging effect.

What follows is a garland of discovery. Whether it be in the lack of posturing or the unconcern of these stories with fashionable pontification, what can be said of them is that as literature they are emblematic above all of writing from the heart.

"The Innocent" and "Storm Clouds over the Island of Paradise" address dilemmas of marriage and romantic entanglement. "Confinement" presents an uncommon view of family relations within Malaysia's Muslim society. "The Snuff Bottle" and "Pillow" are indicative of Asia's coming out of gay and lesbian writing, whereas "Bushouse" is a traumatic Filipino coming-of-age parable. In "Lizard" and "Nine Down Makes Ten," exacting portraits of feminist awakening emerge unexpectedly from Manila and Hanoi.

The phenomenon of recent large-scale Asian immigration to North America is examined through a single, awkward case in "Third Meeting," while "Arriving" emerges as an acute lens into colonial-era migration between India and Malaya. "The Python" by Nyi Pu Lay, an imprisoned writer from Burma, depicts new migration patterns—in this case the unspoken spread of criminal enterprise from a booming China into smaller, vulnerable client neighbors. In the late Thai activist author Samruan Singh's "The Necklace," a slice of life from Asia's indigenous hill peoples serves as a metaphor for the retreat of traditional ways throughout the Asia-Pacific world.

If perhaps one example is worth noting for exploring issues of raw *otherness*, surely it is Niaz Zaman's hauntingly beautiful "The Dance." Depicting an extraordinary and archaic fertility custom practiced when all else fails within Muslim society in Bangladesh, it reminds us that like neighboring India and Sri Lanka, this region normally visualized as "South Asia" increasingly commands our attention too, with an intriguing new geopolitical designation to embrace it—"the Indo-Pacific."

Throughout all these stories are illustrations of the joys and hardships visited upon daily Asian life as it adapts to new globalizing, cross-cultural influences. What is unmistakable are the elements of nativism that blow like spring winds through these works. This is the Asia-Pacific seen from the ineluctable perspective of its authors, inspired by life's small magic and injustices, by the breath of heaven, and simply put, by the music of what happens. The divisions, as they have been historically laid out, are between the Confucian cultures of Northeast Asia—Japan, Korea, China, Taiwan—and the warmer Buddhist and Malay cultures of the Southeast. Stories from the former are typically more psychologically complex, probing, and structured upon family conflicts and love relationships. From Southeast Asia runs another current, easily mistaken for sentimentalism, but that more accurately is rooted in the region's historic spiritual concern with compassion for the hardships of peasant and lower working class life.

Within this anthology are also seeds of what the future may bring to writing in Asia. A new politically charged metaphoric style emerges in Xu Xi's "Until The Next Century," as the sensitive subject of Hong Kong's arm's-length relationship with China's administrative patriarchy hovers over the story. Other observers incorporate overlays from imported television, cinema, and pop videos. But whether looking forward or harkening back to colonial-era experiences, at the root of this anthology is the simple tradition of storytelling, the fundamental organizing ritual at the core of communal, agricultural life. It is in this that the writers of the Asia-Pacific plainly excel, and that elevates their works from quotidian documentary to meaningful discourse addressing both the individual's and their societies' moral and ethical dilemmas within the ongoing global crisis of spirit and meaning. As readers will discover, there is enlightenment here for the having.