

**Challenges and New Directions of Literature Education in Asia:
A Book Review of *Literature Education in the Asia-Pacific:
Policies, Practices, and Perspectives in Global Times*
(Routledge, 2018)**

Edited by Chin Ee Loh, Suzanne S. Choo, and Catherine Beavis

Jacquelyn Chappel

Literature Education in the Asia-Pacific provides an overview of literature education in Asia. It investigates the role of English language acquisition, government policies, colonial histories, and resistance to colonial histories in teaching students literature. The book includes snapshots of language arts curriculum in India, Australia, Singapore, the Philippines, China, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, and Vietnam. A veritable anthology of literature education policy in Asia, the book offers background information on the educational histories, policies, curriculum, reading lists, colonial contexts, and future directions for literature education across Asia. The book is relevant to anyone interested in education curriculum in Asia and would be relevant to scholars of comparative international education or of literature studies in general. According to the authors of the anthology, literature education is shaped by a number of factors, including specific national histories and cultures, colonial contexts, and global trends.

In many countries, English literature education has long been used as means of English language acquisition. In China, while Chinese literature study is valued as a means to understanding the “essence” of Chinese culture and identity, English literature study is a matter of utility. Similarly, in the Philippines, literature has been bound up in English language learning. In India and Malaysia, English literature study has served an economic end, a means to being globally competitive. In Hong Kong, English literature was considered an elite subject, a part of the “success narrative,” also a means to get ahead economically.

As in the U.S., the value of literature education in Asia has been questioned. In the Philippines, some considered literature education a waste of public resources. In Malaysia, English literature education declined in popularity until it became compulsory in 2000. These and other Asian countries have questioned the pedagogical purpose of English literature education. This questioning is perhaps valid, the authors suggest,

because English literature, for many Asian countries, is a vestige of British and/or American colonial rule.

The authors share how various colonial contexts helped shape the study of English literature. In Singapore, Suzanne Choo maintains that literature education was used to create “a class of natives who were English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” As in Hong Kong, literature education in Singapore was equated with elite education. In Indonesia, the legacy of colonialism there resulted in the elevation of western culture over indigenous literature, a colonial attitude which many students remain unaware of. Meanwhile in India, the study of English literature, Chattarji tells us, was caught up in “complicity with an ubiquitous social order.” In these and other countries, British colonial rule cast a long shadow on the study of English literature.

In the last two decades, many of these Asian countries have witnessed a broadening of literature curriculum to include more indigenous and minority voices. In the Philippines, the curriculum has moved away from its emphasis on Anglo texts to include a variety of Filipino authors. This shift has been part of a conscious nation-building effort. Meanwhile, in Australia, the push to include more diverse literature selections, such as Asian authors from inside and outside Australia, has met with resistance and remains a continuing challenge.

Even as literature curriculum broadens, however, colonial histories continue to impact which country’s texts are perceived as central. In Vietnam, curriculum developers use Kachru’s three concentric circle model to describe the distribution and nature of English throughout the world. The “inner circle” refers to countries such as Britain, the US, and Australia where English is spoken as a native language. The “outer circle” refers to former British colonies, such as Singapore and India, where English has been institutionalized. The “expanding circle” refers to countries, such as Vietnam, which were never British colonies but may have been subject to colonial influence. As a result, in these

countries, English language study fulfills a practical purpose, providing students a means to international communication. While reifying the centrality of British and American texts, Kachru's model recognizes the reality of a broadening English literature curriculum and the various purposes of English language study around the world.

The effort to broaden curriculum has coincided with efforts to include more multimodal genres such as film. Three articles in the book point out the pedagogical utility of analyzing film in the classroom. Short films provide a vehicle to view and discuss a text within the confines of a single class period. Meanwhile, the many high quality Asian films available provide another kind of text open to student interpretation. These initiatives have opened up traditional definitions of literature to include texts, not just for their perceived aesthetic greatness but for pedagogical reasons related to understanding a multitude of various kinds of texts.

The most recent policies supporting literature education—in either English or Asian languages—maintains that studying literature, particularly from other places, serves a humanistic and pedagogical purpose. Hall and Yang point out that reading literature can help students re-imagine the self and the world. Lim suggests that it can contribute to student personal growth. It can lead to “self reflexivity” and “empathy.” By equipping students with multiple affinities and networks, Choo argues that reading texts from other places can counter trends toward nativism and global injustice. Hall and Yang maintain that it can even encourage students to embrace uncertainty and mindfulness. Lim argues that in Malaysia literature education can help students develop understanding, awareness, and acceptance of others, essential attributes in a globalized world. These arguments for literature education in Asia echo many of the rationales for reading global literature in the U.S. and point to a growing awareness of the need to read across national boundaries.

This renewed rationale for English literature education cannot be uncoupled from pedagogy. And several authors in the collection point out the importance of reader response theory and of student

personal response as a means to abet this “self reflexivity.” Nowhere is this more apparent than in Vietnam where the legacy of Soviet communist rule led to a teacher-centered pedagogy in which literature education was defined by lectures during which students wrote down the instructor's interpretations only to recall them later in examinations. In response to such top-down curriculum, Loh and Nguyen point out the importance of reader response theory and of students talking back to texts.

Overall, the collection re-centers discussion on English literature pedagogy and places Asia and the Pacific firmly in the center. The descriptions of each country's unique challenges illuminate the ways in which colonial contexts and histories collide to create differing circumstances for each nation. For many of these countries, the future of literature education will involve looking both inward and outward. That is, while language study continues to fuel some English literature education, the definition of literature education has broadened significantly to include different kinds of texts and authors, from both within and without the nation.

Although each of the selections from this voluminous edited collection have to do with literature education in Asia, it can be argued there is no clear thematic focus beyond this broad umbrella. Rather the themes—of the role of English language acquisition and of the long shadow of colonial histories—emerge in reading the individual chapters. The book nevertheless provides an English-language opening to better understand literature education in Asia.

With literature education arguably on the decline, having been supplanted in the United States by the Common Core's emphasis on non-fiction, it might also be argued that literature education is no longer as relevant as it once was. While the reading of informational texts serves an important pedagogical purpose, *Literature Education in the Asia-Pacific* adds to the debate on the relevance of literature in schools. According to this volume, literature education serves several multifarious purposes relevant in the 21st-century—including language acquisition, nation building, and global understanding.
