

## Teaching Asian English Literature

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### *Abstract*

Asian English literature has particular reference and appeal to students of English in Asia, including Laos. Because of the limited background of students' reading skills, short stories are easier to read and allows for more variety of selections. These stories capture the issues in the lives of ordinary people in neighboring Asian countries. Settings range from the sophistication of Singapore to the poverty of India. The culture is recklessly contemporary and agelessly traditional, influenced by Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Catholicism. Yet the themes are applicable to the Lao university reader in a way that Euro-centric literature cannot capture--coming of age, the effects of poverty and pride, what to do with aging grandparents, arranged marriage, superstitious belief in the gods, etc.

### **Themes: Questions, searching, pain; local/universal**

In his Introduction to *Skoob Pacifica Anthology No. 1: S.E. Asia Writes Back!* (Loh & Ong, 2000), Professor John McRae identifies the themes that consistently run through these works:

*There would be no literature without questions, without searching, without pain....  
Humanity goes well beyond national boundaries, and identity is individual as well  
as universal. Local and universal, national and international must go hand in  
hand (pg. 8).*

After reading these short stories by Asian writers, it is always useful to have students identify the questions, searching and pain described. Many of the Singapore stories used demonstrate the pressure of multi-generational life. Stories from Thailand show a more biting social pain. And the stories from India describe the various trials involved in the role of women.

The second theme of local/national/universal is also a good stimulus for discussion. After each story I ask the question, "*If we change the names and places, could this be a local story? Are the struggles the same, the experiences close enough for students to see a clear cultural translation?*"

The following is a chart of a year's worth of Asian short stories:

## Sample Syllabus

Title	Author	Country	No. of Pages	Summary
Home for Grandma	Goh Sin Tub	Singapore	13	Family must face the painful decision of sending Grandma to a Home.
Singapore Story	Shirley Lim	Singapore	12	The patriarch of the family moves in with his eldest son but can't get used to the modern bathroom.
Or Else, the Lightning God	Catharine Lim	Singapore	21	Professional woman is cursed by her traditional mother-in-law and begins to believe in the power of the gods.
Seven Days	Pira Sudham	Thailand	7	Poor family is given seven days to pay their electricity bill or else it will be cut off.
Title Deed and the Glory	Pira Sudham	Thailand	13	Old man fights off land developers and teaches young boy the value of honesty.
Ronggeng-Ronggeng	Lee Kok Liang	Malaysia	8	Dreams and survival among an amusement park dance troupe.
Night Train at Deoli	Ruskin Bond	India	6	University boy meets basket selling girl during train stop.
The Library Girl	Vishwapriya Iyengar	India	7	Muslim girl gets her first burqa and loses her identity.
The Meeting	Shama Futehally	India	7	Indian arranged marriage: unattractive 29-year old has an arranged meeting.
The Tamarind Tree	Mulk Raj Anand	India	8	New wife feels the desires and frustrations of pregnancy.
Point of Contact	Chandani Lokuge	Sri Lanka	9	New wife feels the desires and frustrations of not being pregnant.
Carapace	Romesh Guneskera	Sri Lanka	6	Girl must choose between a local boy or suitor in Australia

In describing three successfully used short stories, I have tried to show how these themes unite the various stories, and how they might relate to a Lao college student. They are probably relevant to most Asian countries.

### *Home For Grandma* by Goh Sin Tub (1992) (Singapore)

In the opening scene, from their apartment balcony, the teenage narrator and his family watch a neighbor take their grandmother away to a Home. A younger sibling declares this act, "Unfilial! No sense of Asian values!" (123). This sets up the confrontation in their own family, when their grandmother must come live with them.

Grandma is not a particularly sweet old lady. The text uses words and phrases like "quite strong-willed" (123), "unreasonable" (127), "grumpy" (128), "old-fashioned" (128), "imperious" (131), "irascible" (132), and "demanding" (132).

When Uncle Charles is transferred to Tokyo and Grandma must live with the narrator's family, we watch the transformation of each family member. Mum becomes worn down, Dad develops ulcers and a short temper, and all the children are enlisted to perform the endless tasks that Grandma demands. After three years of stress and exasperation, Mum must accept the fact that they can no longer care for Grandma and that she must go into a Home. The decision is painful and heart wrenching.

Of course, Grandma does not agree and begins a long, savage protest with scolds and curses, climaxing with: "*Grandma sorry for the day Grandma born you! Better Grandma die now. Give Grandma sleeping pills. Grandma swallow whole bottle and die now!*" (134). This ultimatum sets up the confrontation scene, which is both riveting and moving:

*Mum's face turned white. She reached out, picked up the bottle of sleeping pills at Grandma's bedside table and without a word handed it over to her mother. The scene froze. No one moved. Grandma could not believe what she was seeing . . .*

*Then Grandma dropped the bottle on to the floor. It broke to bits and the shock broke the spell. Grandma broke down. She wept from her heart (134).*

The denouement shows Mum, Grandma, and even Dad hugging and crying, while the young narrator remarks, "*This was my unforgettable lesson in love. And the stress of love*" (135).

Can you see the questioning, pain, searching? Certainly! Besides these themes that students can identify with, this story has good characterizations, especially of Grandma, Mum and Meng. Students can usually identify the setting as taking place in Singapore. And, because the narrator is a teenager, he uses short, simple colloquial sentences, often incomplete.

*Seven Days* by Pira Sudham (1991) (Thailand)

This is a short short story by one of Thailand's most famous writers. The story is told by the oldest son of a slum-dwelling family, whose electricity will be turned off in seven days unless they can pay the bill. The family lives in a shack constructed of cardboard and corrugated iron. The father is away in Saudi Arabia working but has not sent any money back yet. By day the mother sells food by the roadside, and by day and night the eldest son sells newspapers on the streets. Here we see the underside of city life:

*At the closing hours for bars, nightclubs, massage parlors and brothels, I'd see*

*another kind of crowd: pimps with their cash earners on the motor-cycles, drunks, gays, male prostitutes, ageing whores, and bartenders going home. Then there would be those adulterers off to motels . . . (53)*

Although the boy struggles to sell papers well into the night, as the deadline gets closer they still don't have enough money. In desperation, the mother goes to a gambling den to play cards but loses. As she returns home and fingers her wedding ring, contemplating pawning it, the boy goes out once more braving the police, to sell papers. Finally, with uncharacteristic punctuality by the authorities, the electricity is cut off. Acknowledging defeat Mother prepares for the evening's darkness:

"Buy me a few candles," Mother asked me. "Don't go to the shop in front of the lane where they know you. Go farther." Even though we had lived in poverty all our lives, she still cared very much about losing face. For having to resort to candles would tell tales. (56)

Although most students have never experienced this kind of poverty, perhaps it is not so removed from their family's history. And the boy's positive attitude about life outside the slum keeps the situation from becoming too depressing. But what is relevant to university students is the question of saving face, something that everyone can relate to.

The desperation to get money leads to an interesting moral question. The follow-up question I ask is, "*If you needed money for some absolute deadline, what would you be willing to do to get it?*" Would you be willing to sell your most valuable possession, like your wedding ring? Would you be willing to brave the police to sell something on the street? Would you be willing to go gambling (pachinko, mahjong, cards, lottery, racing) to make quick money? Or, more relevant still, would you be willing to take part in dating or sex to get quick money?

*Night Train at Deoli* by Ruskin Bond (1990) (India)

The university student narrator tells of his train ride every summer to visit his grandmother. In the early pre-dawn hours, the train stops at Deoli where "*nothing ever happens.*" This sets up the encounter between the boy and the young girl selling baskets. She is poor, barefoot, thinly clothed, but "*then those eyes, searching and eloquent, met mine.*" (2) He jumps off the train to get closer and buys a basket. The train whistle brings him back. On his return trip to Delhi, he sees her at the station again, and this time, he meets her and talks to her briefly.

The third time he vows to be bolder in expressing his feelings, but she is not there and no one at the station can tell him where she is. His true feelings come out:

*What could I do about finding a girl I had seen only twice, who had hardly spoken to me, and about whom I knew nothing-absolutely nothing-but for whom I felt a tenderness and responsibility that I had never felt before? (5)*

The student fantasizes stopping at Deoli, getting off the train and looking for her, but he never does. The final paragraph is written years later, in retrospect, "*I never break my journey to Deoli, but I pass through as often as I can*" (6).

This story of first love is something every student has experienced. Especially college students can identify with the class difference between the narrator and the basket girl. Even girl students can imagine falling in love with a street vendor. And everyone can savor the bitter sweetness of that feeling that has no expression.

### **Conclusion**

Teaching Asian English literature has several impelling advantages. First, it is fresh and modern. Most of the new national literatures were written within the past 20-30 years and most writers are still active. Second, the stories have an exotic flavor different from the Euro-centric literature students are used to. There are local sights, sounds, smells, scenes and situations, specific to that Asian country. Third, there is a similarity of cultures with its familiar value system. As we have seen, the issues of filial responsibility to grandparents, poverty and pride and first love are all issues readily accessible to the Lao college student. Fourth, stories set in a developing neighboring country forms a counterpart to the students' own experiences. Whereas British and American literature have a familiarity of First World development, Asian literature is often set among poverty and the poor. Fifth, the issues dealt with tend to be large. How the characters react, adapt, reconcile to their challenges makes for good literary tension.

Teaching Asian literature has been a successful departure for my students. It opens the door to a new literature, new cultures and new vocabularies, while at the same time, making literature more accessible to their understanding and appreciation

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