

# A JUMBLE OF WORDS: STUDYING THE LITERATURES OF SOUTH-EAST ASIA

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This paper is very much an essay, in the Jerome K. Jerome sense, and I'm going to engage in a number of generalisations about South-east Asia and about its literatures. The great English Romantic poet William Blake said, "To Generalise is To Be an Idiot" (451), but I'm comforted by the fact that Blake's statement is itself a generalisation. Being both a creative writer and a critic, I normally reserve the life elements for creative writing, and try to maintain a dispassionate, third person stance when writing criticism. My shift here is not occasioned by a change to a postmodern philosophical belief in the impossibility of objective truth and the need to break down generic differences in order to demonstrate it. I remain a believer in the value of literary genres and in the value of distinguishing between creative and critical works. Rilke thought that there was no God but that was no reason for not trying to find him/her. It may well be that in cultural matters there is no definite truth, but, similarly, it seems to me that's no reason for not trying to find it. I'm Australian, which means that I come from a fairly reticent culture, a culture of understatement on the whole, and I don't readily go around parading my personal experiences. Australians of my generation have more of England in them than of America.

Rather, I am driven to the autobiographical turn out of necessity, by the absence of comparators in a preceding body of work. In 1995 or thereabouts, a colleague, Ron Shapiro, and I conceived the idea of compiling an anthology of contemporary writing from South-east Asia. This seemed a simple enough idea. We were driven by a few motivations: we both worked on Australian literature and to some extent on Asian literature, and weren't much drawn to the theorising which then dominated postcolonial literary study, and seemed to us to homogenise vastly different literatures; we were interested in finding out more about South-east Asian literature, partly because of the symposium series

in which we are today participating; there was no existing anthology, which seemed a striking absence; and we wanted to make a claim, still provocative but even more so twelve years ago, for Australian literature to be seen as a South-east Asian literature. Beyond all these factors, we were driven by ignorance: we both knew a lot about literature and a fair bit about Asia, but we realised that although we had knowledge of, say, Singaporean and Malaysian literature, and a little about Indonesian literature, we knew nothing about the literature of Laos, or Brunei, or even of Vietnam. What amazed us was to find that the, say, Singaporean and Malaysian scholars and writers we contacted didn't know any more about the literature of Laos or Brunei or Vietnam than we did. Even neighbours knew little or nothing about each other's literature—the Thais about Burmese or Cambodian literature, for example. It was a pleasure to find that our ignorance was shared across the region; it might have been the only thing we had in common.

Twelve years, as even a casual listener will notice, is a long time to spend on a "simple enough idea." Alas, to think that the idea was simple was by far the strongest example of our ignorance, and it's just as well we were ignorant or we might never have started on the project. But we did start. We might never finish, but we did start. Ron has finished because, during the course of this project, he retired from the university, moved house, and then later moved state, back to South Australia from which he and his wife had come many years before. I took on various senior administrative jobs at the university, and the project lapsed for some time before Megan McKinlay joined me in 2001. We've been working on it, making occasional contacts with Ron, ever since. Why should preparing an anthology of South-east Asian writing prove so damnably difficult? This, of course, is the real subject of my paper: the experience points to the context and the problems we face as scholars, writers, and critics working in the area covered by this symposium series. I must stress that it's true that the project is still going on, and that we're determined to finish it! An inventory—and we've done a lot on this over the years—at present reveals that we have all the literature to be included except that we are still trying to wring some poems out of Laos, and are still working on translations of material from Thailand; we are waiting for introductions for the literatures of Brunei, Indonesia, East Timor, and Singapore. We have yet to write the introduction to the whole anthology, because that depends on having all the individual introductions; and we have a welter of administrative issues to deal with, which will undoubtedly prove the biggest headache of all.

One of our problems, ever since the beginning, has been to think of a good title for the anthology. We have always known the subtitle, which is descriptive: “An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry and Fiction from South-east Asia.” As with most subtitles, this is functional and descriptive, and much more useful than any title. Holding to the generic concepts of “Poetry” and “Fiction”—we have diverged only once, in including an excerpt from Luis Cardoso’s *The Crossing*, because it is superbly written and there is almost no fiction written in Timor L’Este—the problematic term here is “South-east Asia.” Is there such a thing? The problem with a title is the need to find something which applies across the whole region. Cultural diversity is, of course, a familiar concept to literary and cultural scholars, especially to contemporary scholars, because even individual nations nowadays encompass such diversity. This is the reason for the widespread acceptance of Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined community” as a definition of a nation; it is usefully vague, as diversity by its nature makes analysis more difficult, even if more interesting. Analysis of national literatures is probably the most widely accepted paradigm of literary analysis; I mentioned at the beginning that Ron and I had long worked on Australian literature. Cultural diversity is there covered by focus: by giving attention specifically to Nyoongar literature, or the larger grouping of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature; Greek literature, or the larger grouping of migrant literature; women’s writing, cyber writing et cetera until you get to the overall concept of Australian literature, made up of many different facets, some of them operating independently and some of them interacting. They still constitute one “imagined community.”

However, South-east Asia is not a nation. Given the levels of unawareness of each other’s literature that we uncovered, could we call it an “imagined community”? It is, of course, a group of nations, but given its diversity we might think it a jumble of nations, and its literature therefore just an arbitrary jumble of writings. Although we might be reluctant to admit it, literary scholarship and analysis follows history and politics, even if we are writing about the literature of one period and not pursuing especially political criticism. History and politics provide the reality from which the literature to be analysed emerges, and most of the intellectual work done on South-east Asia has been in history, politics, and anthropology, and thus in the social sciences much more than in humanities. This work recognises some of the difficulties occasioned by diversity. The Indonesianist Donald K. Emmerson wrote in 1984 that “South-east Asia” is one of those names “that simultaneously

describe and invent reality” (1). Somewhat ironically, Emmerson’s statement was made in a journal that uses the name, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. The term is geographically a misnomer, since the region is south-east only of northern Burma, and so suggests a reference to European colonialism since it is certainly south-east of France, Portugal, Spain, The Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, who were all powers in different parts of the region for hundreds of years. During that long period many of the South-east Asian nations did not exist as nations, and the imperial powers used terms such as “the East Indies” and “Indochina” rather than “South-east Asia.” So the term derives from outside the region and is actually a very recent one. Although the concept of the region as any kind of unity had been around vaguely since the 1930s, strength in the concept derives not from European powers, but from an Asian power: Japan. A succinct history is provided by C. M. Turnbull in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, where he writes:

The concept of Southeast Asia as a political entity emerged almost by accident from World War II when, at the Quebec Conference in August 1943, the Western Allies decided to establish a separate South East Asia Command [SEAC], embracing Burma, Malaya, Sumatra and Thailand. The Potsdam Conference in July 1945 extended SEAC’s responsibility to cover the rest of the Netherlands East Indies and Indochina south of the sixteenth parallel, excluding only northern Vietnam, the Philippines and Laos.

This military expedient provided a cohesive framework for a region which had never previously been seen as a distinct geopolitical area. (258; ch. 5)

The concept of the countries forming a defined region is thus the result of one set of outside powers (the USA and Europe) reacting to another (Japan) which was itself partly reacting to former imperialism (from the USA and Europe). The number of countries included was very limited, and the concept was a convenient fiction. In one way, it was not a difficult fiction to construct, for there was no common nationalist push against imperialism from these countries or from other excluded countries which we now consider part of South-east Asia. This was because the countries were themselves in various stages of development of any kind of national, let alone regional, identity.

Another key organization formed by western powers with the co-operation of some South-east Asian countries as a result of the War was SEATO. Formed

in 1954 in Manila, the South-east Asian Treaty Organisation was a defence organization, just like SEAC and like NATO today, formed by what now looks an odd collective: Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, the UK, and the USA. It must be remembered that at this time the sun had not quite set on the power of the British Empire and the Vietnamese and Lao were fighting wars against the French. None of this seems very auspicious for the creation of a regional identity, but within the next decade significant moves were made from the countries in the region themselves. A journal naming the region, the *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, was founded in Singapore in 1960, and a research institute, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, followed in Singapore in 1968. Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaya combined to form an economic co-operative, the Association of Southeast Asia, in 1961, indicating their acceptance of the name of the region. It is now seen as the forerunner of ASEAN, the Association of South-east Asian Nations, formed in 1967. In some ways a thriving organisation, ASEAN includes ten countries—all those in the anthology except for Australia and Timor L'Este—with a population of 500 million people, more than that of the European Union, and a GDP of US\$700 billion. It has three declared “pillars”: security, economic co-operation, and “Socio-cultural Community.” Despite this apparent consolidation of regional identity, ASEAN maintains an insistence on the concept of nation and non-interference in each other's affairs, leading, for example, to a reluctance to criticise Burma's repressive generals.

This points to the fact that political and socio-cultural diversity remains a hallmark of ASEAN. Politically the societies range from the dictatorship of Burma's military rulers to the democracy of the Philippines; in between there are such situations as the nominal democracy of Singapore and the sultanate of Brunei. The members include anti-communist governments in Indonesia and Malaysia and communist-leaning governments in Laos and Vietnam. The region includes every major religion, including different versions of Buddhism, Catholicism in East Timor and the Philippines, and varieties of Islam in countries such as Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Indonesia, far the largest of the nations in population, itself includes all the major religions. Indonesia is a large archipelago; some of the countries are islands but many are mainland neighbours. They are at different stages of economic development, from the third world poverty of Burma to the first world affluence of Singapore. All this is without including, as our volume does, Australia, with its dominantly European cultural background. Australia has English as its dominant language,

but the use of English is now common throughout much of the region. There are relationships between some of the region's languages—Malay and Indonesian, Thai and Lao for example—but they are different from each other, and linguistic diversity prevails on the whole. It is clear that the most prominent features of South-east Asia are geographical proximity and socio-cultural heterogeneity. Is geography enough to create regional identity?

The (unsatisfactory) answer has to be “perhaps.” Geography certainly contributed to the experience of European imperialism over a broad part of the region, and this is a unifying link to some extent, even if the powers and the languages they bequeathed differed. The later imposition of Japanese imperialism was also widespread, and these experiences of colonisation plus a weak sense of even national identity may lie behind the willingness of people in the region to forego genuine democracy and individual freedoms in favour of economic improvement. Thus, Nicholas Tarling claims that “pragmatic utilitarianism may be the most powerful missionary force in Southeast Asia of the late twentieth century” (Introduction 4: xx). Pragmatic utilitarianism is not a characteristic source of inspiration for writers, and while these socio-political features do affect the literature of the region, one reason for compiling an anthology is simply to see how much commonality and how much diversity exists. The argument for the concept and the term “South-east Asia” is frankly a pragmatic one, but it is no more artificial than the concept of the Mediterranean or the Americas. Politics, history, and anthropology have made it easier for literary studies by being more intellectually advanced in treating the region but pragmatism is implicit in Emerson's idea that the phrase partly describes and partly invents. The key factor is that the nations within the region have seen value in this pragmatism themselves. Of course, that value has been seen in political and economic terms, with literary activity largely confined to the SEA Write Awards and bilateral rather than multilateral activities. Nicholas Tarling reports that one reason for publishing *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia* was “to diminish the ‘obscurity’ of Southeast Asia” (Preface to the Paperback 1: xix) and he cites Anthony Reid's claim that “treating Southeast Asia as a whole makes it possible to describe a number of areas of life which would otherwise remain in the shadows” (qtd. in Preface 1: xvii).

The truth is that any community might be imagined, not just Anderson's nation. We can imagine a community of two, right up to the whole of humanity, as is necessary for the environmentalist movement or the United Nations. The

danger of this collectivising is homogenisation. In an anthology prepared by editors from an economically developed western nation like Australia that danger is especially acute, and we have taken definite steps to avoid it. We can hear the ghost of Edward Said knocking on the door. Australia would be considered an outsider by many South-east Asians: it has not been allowed to join ASEAN, and so has given its economic and political attention to an even larger, more amorphous grouping, APEC, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum. Australia's exclusion, we would argue, has to do with political factors, and one enormous virtue of literary and other cultural study is that it can form a bridge over political divides. If the imagination of community is a fairly open process, geography would make Australia's inclusion viable without making the term "South-east Asia" so open as to be meaningless. This would not be true if South-east Asia without Australia did not have such ethnic, religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity already. We would argue that there are great potential benefits for the rest of South-east Asia and Australia in Australia's inclusion. Australia has increasing numbers and an increasing proportion of Asian migrants; they follow a long tradition, for the original inhabitants of Australia, the Aborigines, came from South-east Asia. Australia has a strong contemporary literature, and adds to the depth and diversity of writing included in the anthology, while the growing awareness of South-east Asian realities in Australia generally is a sign of the country's geography meeting its history.

Tarling quotes, with some sense of lament, Emerson's statement of his goal in writing on South-east Asia, and I give it here fully because it provides the summary rationale for preparing the anthology:

"My aim," Emerson wrote, "is ... to help indigenous scholars increase understanding and reduce mistrust by getting out from under the imprint of the nation-state—for example, through collaborative research on Southeast Asian topics that are non-political, crosscultural, and sub- or supra-national." The question, he added, was "not whether regional unity is a fiction. The question is how to make the fiction useful enough to become true." Apparently it did not become true enough to be useful. (Preface 1: xviii)

"South-east Asia" is less of a fiction than when Emerson wrote and that is partly because of the institution of ASEAN and partly because we are simply more used to the term. The anthology is an attempt to continue that

process. It has the advantage of literature that all its statements are in a sense hypothetical or provisional. At the same time it has literature's capacity for deeper psychological exploration than is available to the social sciences, just because it is *not* a science. Literature's meaning is embodied in rhythms, sound patterns, and imagery, so that its meaning depends on the relationship between reader and text. By definition, there will be a variety of readers, so how does an editor avoid helping to determine meanings based on his or her own culture? Preparing an anthology such as this involves both intellectual and practical questions, and the two are very much interrelated.

First of all, we listed all the countries to be included: there were eleven, the ten members of ASEAN plus Australia. In the anthology there are now twelve: East Timor became an independent nation during the course of work on the anthology. Originally we planned two volumes, but the target market to interest a publisher and make the book commercially viable was universities and international schools in the region. This quickly cut the intended publication in half—from two volumes to one. Language was, of course, an issue, but from the beginning we planned to publish only in English, as it is the most widely used language across the region. We plan to introduce each section with one page showing the dominant local language and script. One section was allocated to each country's literature, and would comprise an Introduction and a selection of poetry and fiction. We excluded scriptwriting and non-fiction, on practical, not ideological, grounds. We classified each country as A, B, or C, according to an educated guess about the strength of its literature. Category A countries were allocated approximately 40 pages, Category B approximately 30 pages, and Category C approximately 20 pages. No doubt these allocations could be controversial, but it seemed more practical to use a categorisation process than to allocate different numbers of pages for each country on some sort of sliding scale. Strength of the literature is a judgement, based more on perceived output than anything else; this is a function of population size and publishing opportunities, the latter based on level of economic development. Thus Australia and Indonesia receive notionally the same number of pages; even though Indonesia's population is ten times that of Australia, its literary output is not. We have not been rigid about the numbers of pages but these were the target numbers set.

Clearly, the use of specialist editors was crucial to the project, and a key means of discouraging Edward Said from rising out of his grave and beating us



over the head with an Orientalism club. No individual can possibly know the languages and the literatures and the cultures of all the countries in South-east Asia. From the beginning we decided to use specialist editors for each country. This was an easy decision in principle; finding the editors was another matter. We had a number of contacts, and we could do Australia ourselves. Each editor's job was to select an appropriate amount of poetry and fiction, where necessary translate it or find an English translation, and write an Introduction to the country's section in the anthology. "An appropriate amount" was a few pages more than would be included. This was because we two editors would be the final arbiters, working with advice from the regional editors. Although this might seem Orientalist, it had two advantages: firstly, only we had an overview of the whole volume and could see how a possible poem or story might fit; and secondly, the regional editors, who might know many local writers, could blame us if a local writer's work was not included. Translation, of course, poses difficulties—Robert Frost famously said about the translation of poetry that the poetry is the bit you can't translate. He was right, of course, and not all our editors are creative writers, so we have sometimes entered into long negotiations as the editor sent fairly literal translations which we then tried to make work as poems and stories in English, then sent these versions back to check that we had not strayed too far from the original meaning. Across distance this back and forth rewriting can take a long time. Email has made it easier. When we began, many countries in the region did not have email, telephoning was expensive and sometimes dysfunctional, while faxes sometimes went through and sometimes didn't, apparently at the whim of the airwaves or radio waves or whatever faxes travel on. These are the normal problems of translation and of communication; as I mentioned, the translation of the Thai material is still being finalised.

But I am running ahead of myself: first of all we had to get the editors. As I said, we had some contacts with expertise, and it was a case of finding someone who would have time to do the job. Elsewhere we knew no-one. When I look at the eleven countries we began with, before East Timor was created, I realise that the number of editors we began with who have remained editors is two: Kirpal Singh in Singapore and Kee Thuan Chye in Malaysia: 2/11. Forget 9/11, it's 2/11 that haunts me. I might say three or three and a half, because for Brunei and Indonesia the selections of poetry and fiction have long been made but we have no Introduction and can get no contact from the regional

editors. Two of our editors have died, showing what a tough job it is; sadly, one of those was Doreen Fernandez from the Philippines. Her role was taken over by two younger scholars who had been helping her—Jonathan Chua on the poetry and Danilo Reyes on the fiction. Thankfully, they're still alive! In Thailand we got an editor who did nothing, so we had to get someone else, and then someone else again, and now we are working on the translations with someone else again. Even in Australia there's been a change, with Megan replacing Ron.

Where we didn't know anyone suitable we started researching. Ron and I won two small research grants which enabled us to travel to the then eleven countries we were to work with. We have never been to East Timor. In those days bullets still occasionally flew around the streets in Cambodia. In Vietnam Ron and his wife, using her very good French, made contact with four different writers' groups, each of them saying that they were the real writers' group and the others weren't worth talking to. We ended up with a Vietnamese editor, Tuan Ngoc Nguyen, who lives in Melbourne. We knew no-one in Laos; even getting a visa could be interesting in those days. I contacted Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and they put me onto David Henry in Australia's embassy in Vientiane. He had met some writers and arranged for me to meet them at his home one Saturday afternoon. I was quite excited flying over the Mekong and looking at the division between Thailand on one side of the river and Laos on the other, as we came in to land in Vientiane's broken bricked airport. This was the river that had become almost mythical to my generation during the Vietnam War—or as the Vietnamese say, the American War. David Henry and I waited at his house after the appointed hour, him saying it's often like this and he still hoped they would come. Amazingly, some time after the appointed hour Outhine Bounyavong and his wife Douangdeuane knocked on the door. I was just grateful that it wasn't Edward Said. They were charming, and spoke excellent English, and explained how the only way to publish anything was through funds from NGO's, and so there were few writers. Sad to say, Outhine, who was Laos's leading writer, died during the project, and repeated attempts to contact Douangdeuane brought no response. It's a small world story that we discovered that she had relatives living in New South Wales, in eastern Australia, and over a period of years we had contact with a niece who tried to get information from her father and had contact with Douang who... In the end, the Introduction for Laos has been written by an American scholar, Peter Koret, and we're still trying to see if he can find one

or two more Laotian poems. (All the signs are that he can't.) In Brunei I knew someone from Malaysia who worked at the University, Palaniappan Perianan. He's someone I met through not meeting. One year he came to a conference in this series in Perth, and I volunteered to go to the airport to meet him. Holding a sign on which I'd written his absurdly alliterative name, I scanned the faces coming off the different flights. No-one came up to meet me, so I started accosting people who were wandering around the airport, looking lost, like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner trying to espy a ship, or an albatross, or someone who might be there to meet him. I eventually found one such person who identified himself as Palaniappan Perianan. He said some odd things as I carried his suitcase to the car, which is not so unusual for scholars in Postcolonial Literature, but his English was not that good. I started to have doubts and when we got to the car I asked him for the fourth time if he was Palaniappan. No he wasn't, of course, but I told him to leave his suitcase in the car and I'd drive him anyway. We went back into the airport and started accosting people together, I in English and he in whatever language he was talking. We never did find Palaniappan but I did drive two strangers to their separate conferences in Fremantle.

These are just some of our quasi-Conradian adventures into literary South-east Asia, and such adventures probably await all who venture there. The literatures are themselves very diverse. I will comment quickly in alphabetical order, which is the order we have adopted for the book; it is neutral except that our alphabet is the English one, using "East Timor" rather than "Timor L'Este," and defiantly using "Burma" rather than the generals' "Myanmar." Unfortunately it means "Australia" comes first. Australia's literature is sophisticated, voluminous, and diverse; we decided to restrict material to writing that concerns Asia in some way, except for one piece of Aboriginal writing. The authors include some migrants from Asia. Bruneian literature, by contrast, is very much by Bruneians; it is a fairly enclosed society. It might surprise some readers that their literature is more spiritual than directly Islamic. Deeply concerned with nature, much of the writing is in fact folkloric, concerned to engender respect for all aspects of creation. Politically, Burma remains the most troubled country in the region, and the only one not to have progressed socially and economically since the anthology project began. Sometimes philosophical, sometimes playful, their literature is often social and political, some subjects endorsed by the military junta 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—I don't care if these phrases are clichés—that no dictatorship can suppress.

Cambodia knows about this kind of history too, and allusions to the Khmer Rouge appear, sometimes obliquely, in their 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 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 can share with its neighbours' literature a philosophical use of nature, but the literature 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.

Laos, in contrast to Cambodia and East Timor, is much richer in fiction than in verse. Some of this writing refers to the American War, in which Laos became the most bombed country in history. Environmentalism is another issue and realism is the most common mode. In this it shows the recent politics of the country and distinguishes itself from traditional Lao formalist, Buddhist writing.

Our selection of Malay literature includes one poem in Malchin, by Salleh Ben Joned—"we true Malaysians, you no, / we pree people, you no: pree / to make English ... / ... our very own..."—a sign of a satiric streak that is not common in the anthology. Most of Malaysian literature is, of course, written in Malay; it can be socio-political, depict nature—including that of the coast—and reflect multiculturalism. Much of it depicts social custom, the complexity of relationships, and the limits of useful propriety. The literature of Singapore is very strong, out of all proportion to the size of the population or the place, but that is true of almost every aspect of Singapore. In my view, their poetry is stronger than their fiction, but their literature is genuinely multicultural, especially from the Chinese, Indians, and Eurasians. Their writing is intensely located, very much aware of place and of how concentrated their place, the LionCity, is.

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. Language itself and the effect of different languages is a frequent subject of poetry in The Philippines, 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 Filipinos' 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" (Gamalinda 72). The Catholic church, ethnic and social complexity, and the power of history also figure strongly in Philippine fiction. Vietnam is a fast changing society and their 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.

Of course, this is just a potted summary of the literatures, and anyone familiar with any one of the literatures will be aware of a summary's limitations. The literatures have more in common than I might have implied, and in writing about love, death, time, and the possibilities for meaning, they share elements with literature worldwide. One of the purposes of my summary is to show the limitations of *any* anthology: the purpose of such a book is to provide tastes and impressions—entrees that might encourage the reader to a main course. South-east Asian literatures, I would argue, tend to have some themes—and for simplicity's sake I have concentrated my discussion on content and theme—that distinguish the region, since they are given greater attention than in literature worldwide: a concern with the relationship between literature and political or social authority; individual actions set against communal norms, and consequently an orientation towards social issues; a more immediate concern with the relationship between the past and the present, and the processes of modernisation. The literature of the region provides a reminder that not all the world has suddenly been globalised, and the multiplicity of changes together with a lessening of traditional beliefs has provoked the major underlying theme of identity, individual and national. "We Asians Polite" is the title of

one poem by the Malaysian writer Shanmughalingam; it is a title full of irony, including in its truncated English. Beneath that politeness is a dynamic mass of questions; this is a lively, transitional time in South-east Asia. I cannot pretend that many writers engage with a strong sense of South-east Asian identity—our working title is “Islands of Words.” Ours may be a globalised world, to varying degrees, generally in accordance with the level of development of the economy, but the nation is still the key unit of administration and therefore of broader community identity. There is no conflict between national identity and regional, South-east Asian identity, and to foster the latter is, of course, one purpose of our anthology; the building of contacts across the region through the anthology is one means of fostering that sense of identity. Despite the enormous barriers—of language, of ignorance, of political circumstance, of funding, of limited communication mechanisms, of legal issues, and of administration—research into South-east Asia is immensely worthwhile and is still in its childhood in literary studies, one reason why anthologies, conferences and books on the subject are so important.

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