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Introduction: Asian Literary Voices

Philip F. Williams

Gathering together some of the most original contemporary research on Asian literature and culture, this volume presents a wide range of formerly marginalized Asian voices from all three of the primary cultures of northeast Asia – China, Japan, and Korea – along with the Indian subcontinent to the south and west. The topics covered extend from Sanskrit poetesses of over a millennia ago to Chinese women novelists and bloggers of the twenty-first century. Originally presented at biennial conferences of the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS), each chapter has undergone a competitive selection process and then been carefully revised – both to enhance its value to the academic specialist and to make it accessible to the general reader.

The transnational orientation of the book emerges clearly from the first chapter, in which Susan Lee compares Chosŏn period Korean (1392-1910) and Edo period Japanese (1600-1868) genre paintings about everyday life in which elite male scholar-officials are frequently paired with well-educated, talented courtesans. Lee reveals how a somewhat idealized image of the “talented woman” in northeast Asia was in part constructed on the basis of such portraiture in genre paintings, thereby taking issue with the over-literalizing interpretations of this type of art by many Japanese and Korean folk historians. This chapter’s inclusion of prints of exemplary genre paintings adeptly complements Lee’s analysis in the text itself.

The focus shifts from painting to fiction in northeast Asia in Daniel J. Sullivan’s analysis of a seminal nineteenth-century work of historical fiction, entitled “Musashino”, by the Japanese novelist Yamada Bimyō. At first glance, merely one among innumerable historical narratives about military conflagrations and decimated samurai families of centuries past, “Musashino” turns out to be every bit as groundbreaking in its style as local critics had long acclaimed it to be. Many well-translated excerpts from the text of “Musashino” vividly demonstrate Sullivan’s conclusions about Yamada’s stylistic innovations in that writer’s handling of colloquialisms, regional and pseudo-classical dialects, and dialogue reminiscent of theatrical variants.

Shifting westward to China, my chapter on rural-to-urban migrants in twentieth-century Chinese narrative underscores a development from

atomized portrayals of relatively isolated Chinese migrants in the first half of that century to portrayals of them as being highly networked by the latter decades of that century. Since the middle of the twentieth century, the household registration system in the People's Republic of China (PRC) has placed rural migrants in such a disadvantageous socio-economic position compared with their urban compatriots that diligent networking has been more of a necessity than a luxury for sojourning Chinese villagers. Such rural Chinese sojourners already exceeded a hundred million in number by the dawn of the twenty-first century, so it is little wonder that imaginative portrayals of their strivings and travails have turned a new page in contemporary Chinese narrative literature.

Another prominent motif in contemporary Chinese literature has been love and eroticism, and when the risqué and self-reflexive aspects of this motif have been accentuated by relatively youthful PRC women writers, the latter have often been dubbed "bad-girl" writers. Shelley W. Chan extends her purview of bad-girl writers to include particularly famous or notorious on-line bloggers and photo-essayists as well as their more traditional counterparts who work mostly in print, publishing novels or short-story collections. Arguing that bad-girl writing stems in large part from the explosive growth of a consumerist mentality in the PRC, Chan points out that this type of writing's gradual shift away from print and toward the internet has also served to somewhat reduce government control over its dissemination.

Extending her purview back to the first half of the twentieth century in China, Mao Chen adopts a contemporary perspective in re-examining the major female short story writer and essayist Bing Xin. Chen draws on various contemporary critics to discuss the effectiveness of Bing Xin's liberal use of male narrators in her stories, as well as the type of feminism that she exemplified. Bing Xin emerges as a writer and thinker who draws as heavily upon humanistic strands of pre-modern Chinese thought as she does from Western-influenced currents of modern Chinese literature and philosophy.

Instead of emphasizing the impact of Western culture on one or more northeast Asian cultures, Georg Lehner looks westward to trace the development of Chinese studies or sinology in Europe from its marginal beginnings in the eighteenth century to the point of emerging as a reasonably coherent field of study by around the middle of the nineteenth century. Drawing both up on leading contemporary scholarship in this area as well as oft-neglected but fascinating nineteenth-century European source material in three languages, Lehner probes the stumbling block of paralyzing misconceptions about the Chinese language that European scholars had to toil their way past before making enough headway in studying Chinese culture to found sinology as a serious field of academic inquiry in the West. Lehner's mastery of a wide range

of sources pertaining specifically to the formative stages of Asian studies in Europe makes it entirely unnecessary to bring in ideologically alluring but conceptually bankrupt American notions such as the bugbear of “orientalism” as the supposed origin and motivation behind all academic Asian studies in the West.

Among the late twentieth-century PRC performing arts that were most strongly influenced by their Western counterparts was experimental theater. Izabella Łabędzka’s chapter embarks upon an in-depth exploration of both representative examples of PRC experimental plays as well as the body of theoretical and critical commentary that supported such plays and thrived in their midst. Through such innovations as refigured stage and seating arrangements and the placement of some actors amongst the audience, Chinese experimental playwrights and directors have catalyzed the audience’s active involvement and even participation in theatrical activity to an extent that would have been unimaginable in more traditional theatrical contexts.

Turning from the experimental theatre Western-influenced artistic and literary perspectives within a Chinese setting, we encounter a Western literary sensibility’s attempt to fit within a Chinese setting in André Malraux’s famous novel *La Condition humaine*, the title of which is usually translated as *Man’s Fate*. William D. Melaney’s chapter explores a number of interesting ironies about this novel, such as the way it presents a Eurocentric vision of China’s communist revolution that is dominated by European and other non-Chinese revolutionaries who crowd the cast of protagonists – when in fact history indicates that indigenous Chinese revolutionaries were actually in control of their own revolution, notwithstanding a combination of support and interference from the former Soviet Union’s Comintern. By revealing how the mentality and aesthetics of Malraux’s revolutionary protagonists such as Gisors were at odds with the May Fourth New Culture Movement’s anti-traditionalism, Melaney demonstrates the importance of giving this novel a critical or “double” reading that recovers or at least acknowledges representative Chinese voices who have remained silent or marginalized within this novel.

Just as indigenous Asian voices with much to communicate may be unwittingly marginalized by a largely sympathetic non-Asian writer such as André Malraux, the dynamism of a pre-modern female Asian readership can be underestimated by a largely male group of scholars. This is the situation that Sohyeon Park investigates with respect to the reception of Chinese vernacular fiction by a largely female readership in late Chosŏn Korea. Going back as far as the fifteenth-century invention of the phonetically-based and highly efficient *han’gŭl* Korean script to replace the orthographically ponderous Chinese characters that had previously been used to write the Korean language, Park deftly brings

together multiple strands of the complex story of how women became the dominant readership of Korean translations of Chinese vernacular fiction – as well as what this meant to their patterns of social networking and its role in the development of indigenous Korean literary forms such as *kasa* poetry.

The volume's chapters turn south to India to conclude with an investigation of women poets in Sanskrit, most of whom flourished at least several centuries ago, and sometimes more than a millennium in the past. Individual women poets and their poems in Sanskrit have previously been anthologized and discussed by various commentators, but have not been brought together and compared in the fashion that Supriya Banik Pal has achieved in her chapter. Pal's discerning selection and translation of excerpts from this group of women poets in Sanskrit reveal a range of remarkable poetic sensibilities and evocative imagery.

The numerous international awards won over recent decades by cinematic directors from all four of the Asian nations featured by this book – Japan, India, China, and Korea – not to mention the vibrant popular culture that each of these countries sustains – suggest that the marginalization of Asian literary and artistic voices will continue to shrink in the twenty-first century, and perhaps even become a footnote in history eventually. The contributors to this volume have each done their part to articulate and uncover the literary and artistic dynamism that northeast and south Asia have embodied over the past several centuries and up to the present day.