

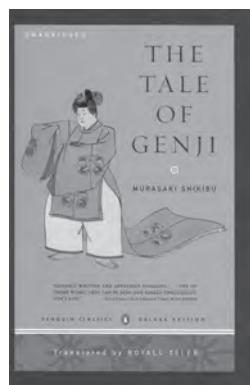
FICTION

A Passport to the Asian Past

By Kristin Stapleton

Twenty-five years ago, preparing to teach my first undergraduate survey of early East Asian history, I panicked. A Japanese auto company had recently built a plant in the area, and I knew that student interest in Japan was strong, but my training in that field was spotty at best. I called on friends for advice: assign *Tale of Genji*, I was told. Somewhat skeptically, I put several chapters of the Seidensticker translation of *Genji* on my syllabus and was amazed by the positive response from the class.¹

One student told me he wept while reading the opening pages about the death of Genji's mother and the sorrow of the emperor, his father. Clearly, in some respects, the assignment was a success.



But *Genji* mystified me. What to make of it beyond its obvious ability to induce emotional catharsis? Fortunately, friends also recommended I read Ivan Morris's *The World of the Shining Prince* (Knopf, 1972), a wonderful scholarly study that contextualizes *Genji* while drawing on it and other literature to describe life in Heian Japan. By familiarizing myself with eleventh- and twelfth-century Japanese history through Morris's book, I was able to address many of the students' questions about such matters as promiscuity within the Heian court and the cultural divide between court and countryside. And if they didn't raise such questions, I could ask them to formulate hypotheses on these topics based on the evidence about Heian life they could find in the novel.

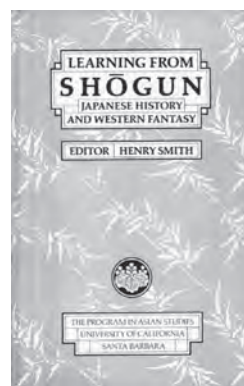


The World of the Shining Prince makes use of literature to illuminate history, while using history to offer insight into great literature. It inspired me to attempt something similar in my own primary area of research: urban China in the early twentieth century. Among the great novels of twentieth-century China, Ba Jin's *Family*, set during the turbulent May Fourth period around 1919, was wildly popular when it was published in the 1930s. It chronicles the gradual disintegration of an oppressive patriarchal family amid the resistance and sacrifice of members of the younger generation. American college students generally find the story absorbing, and that makes it a splendid vehicle for introducing historical context. Among the themes the novel raises that make for good classroom conversations are the popularity of anarchism in China (and around the world) in the 1910s, the reality and symbolism of bound feet, the effects of political fragmentation on the Chinese economy, and many others. Given the richness of the scholarship on twentieth-century China, the book I published will probably never serve as the sort of lifesaver that *The World of the Shining Prince* was for me at



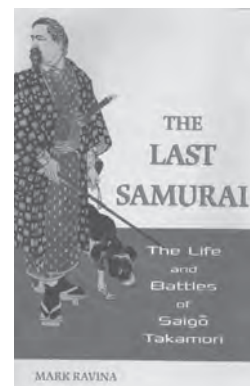
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the beginning of my career, but it does offer one pathway to bringing Chinese history to life in the classroom.²



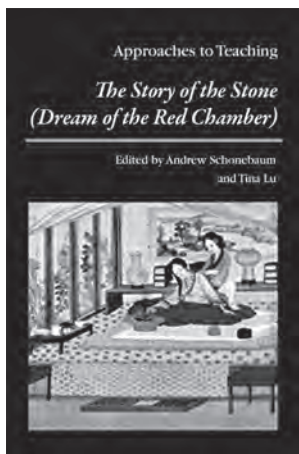
An approach I find useful, particularly for Asian history survey courses offered to students with little background in the subject, is to assign lively material produced in Asia to stimulate student interest and then contextualize the material in lecture and discussion. Fiction is by no means the only such material that can be used in this way. Another early inspiration for my approach was a volume called *Learning from Shogun*, which shows how teachers could make use of students' exposure to the blockbuster television miniseries (itself based on a novel) to deepen their understanding of early

Tokugawa history.³ More recently, Mark Ravina published a book on the Satsuma rebellion of 1877 (also known outside Japan as the Saigō rebellion, after its reluctant leader Saigō Takamori). Ravina's book, titled *The Last Samurai*, offers teachers the background they need to make use of and challenge interpretations of history in the 2003 Tom Cruise film *Last Samurai*, an imaginative retelling of the 1877 war.⁴



But there are strong arguments to be made for introducing students to literature created in Asia in the past. Most importantly, the power of great fiction to immerse its audience in an unfamiliar social order and stimulate the imagination is our best ally in the effort to share the pleasure of reading itself and of learning about the world through reading. Analytical scholarly writing certainly can be enjoyable reading . . . but perhaps mainly to those who are already committed scholars. A novel or short story with a strong plot and some literary merit appeals more widely than most scholarship, and the historical analysis can be introduced as interest in the subject is raised.

Asian fiction also allows students to enter the consciousness, to some degree, of its authors. My student who wept at the death of Lady Fujitsubo no doubt was responding as Murasaki Shikibu wanted her readers to—as she herself would to such an event. Encouraging empathy with people long gone is one of the ways in which fiction is a passport to the foreign country that is the past. It also helps ripen a cross-cultural imagination that is useful in the present. As noted by Richard Johnson in an early issue of *Education About Asia*, “Reading the Asian classics provides practice in the arts of translation we all must employ on a regular basis, given the multiplicity of the cultures in which we exist.”⁵



For much of the classic literature of Asia, history teachers can benefit from the experience of scholars—often historians themselves—who are experts in a work’s historical context and have taught it in their classes. The Modern Language Association series “Approaches to Teaching World Literature” includes volumes on *Genji* and on Cao Xueqin’s eighteenth-century *Story of the Stone* (also known as *Dream of the Red Chamber* or *Dream of Red Mansions*). The latter includes a helpful section pointing out which parts of the monumental novel are most frequently assigned. Dozens of short essays address

questions that readers of the novel may have and suggest how it reflects material conditions and beliefs in mid-Qing China, such as aspects of Chinese medicine.⁶

At the college level, whole seminars have been organized around *Story of the Stone*, which is probably the best way to incorporate it into the curriculum, given its complexity. Other classic Chinese novels are better suited to sampling. The opening chapters of *Three Kingdoms* evoke the chaotic conditions after the collapse of the Han dynasty, during which three iconic Chinese cultural heroes swear their Peach Garden Oath. The famous first line of the novel—“The empire, long divided, must unite; long united, must divide”—encapsulates the cyclical conception of world order common in Chinese history.⁷ It is also a work that many students have at least heard of; it was adapted into a video game series beginning in the 1980s.

Poetry, the most important literary genre throughout most of Asian history, certainly deserves a prominent place in Asian history courses. Most textbooks designed for such courses include numerous examples that can

easily be highlighted and discussed during class sessions. One of my students wrote an excellent term paper recently on the reception in Japan of Tang poet Bai Juyi’s “Song of Everlasting Sorrow” (*Changhen ge*), a long poem about the tragic love of the Tang Emperor Xuanzong for the Lady Yang (Yang Guifei).⁸ The circulation of poetry and other works of literature within and beyond Asia is a fascinating topic for historical research.

Over the course of several decades spent teaching Asian history survey courses, I have asked students to read and discuss a wide variety of Asian literature. The work

that consistently has appealed to most students in these courses is *Lost Names* by Richard Kim, a book that tells a personal story of life in Korea under Japanese domination and as it is liberated in 1945. A number of factors contributes to its appeal. The writing is beautiful, and each chapter constitutes a drama in itself as a young boy faces a series of challenges over how to interact with his peers, his teachers, his family members, and authorities. The fact that the narrator is a young person sets a tone in which large questions of morality and honor in wartime conditions can be raised in a way that seems natural. The book is quite short, but Kim creates a vivid portrait of Korean society at the time, including its class and gender distinctions, its ritual, and the various ways in which it has been shaped by outside forces, such as Japanese educational initiatives and Western Protestant missionaries.

Another explanation for the book’s warm reception among students in an American classroom has to do with the background of the author. Kim (1932–2009) was himself a young boy in Korea during the period

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depicted in the book. In an interview with Kathleen Woods Masalski, Kim discusses the nature of *Lost Names*: Is it an autobiography or memoir? Is it fiction?⁹ Given the shaky understanding of literary genres displayed by many students in my classes, I find it useful to distribute this interview after the class has read the book itself, as a way of discussing the distinction between nonfiction and fiction, history and “creative writing” (Pearl Buck’s description of *Lost Names*).¹⁰ Can fiction arrive at truths that history has no way of addressing?

His own life experiences allowed Kim to appeal to broad audiences in the contemporary world. In the 1950s, he moved to the US, where he established himself as an Anglophone writer and English professor. Thoroughly familiar with world literature, he employs in *Lost Names* writerly techniques that capture attention and interest. Even with the best translators, literature written within a very foreign literary environment often requires more patience from readers.

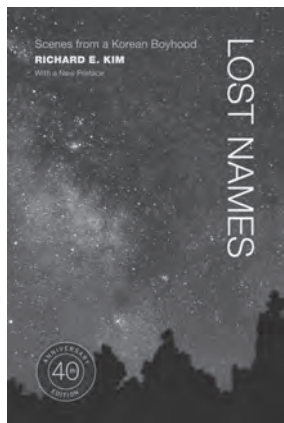
Is *Lost Names* “Asian literature”? A class discussion of this topic would certainly raise provocative questions about how we define Asia.¹¹ Over the years, *Education About Asia* has featured a series of conversations about whether it makes sense to teach about Asia using imaginative literature written by people who aren’t Asian in any generally recognized way. In a forum on Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha* in the first issue of volume two (1997), Catherine Benton warns about the dangers of assigning the book in a class on Buddhism:

Once the Siddhartha model is fixed in the minds of intellectually curious and enthusiastic students, reading and understanding primary Buddhist texts or more authentic interpretations and commentaries become more difficult, as contradictory models are described in these texts. Studying patterns of thinking and perceptions of a culture different from one’s own should feel at the very least unfamiliar, if not unsettling, but Hesse’s presentation of Indian ways of thinking flows easily into our own cultural frameworks—influenced, as American intellectual thinking is, by European literary and philosophical ideas.¹²

In recent history, the picture gets messier, it seems, as the world’s cultures intermingle more promiscuously. In a lively essay in the third issue of *EAA*’s volume three (1998), Charles Hayford points out that Maxine Hong Kingston read Buck’s *The Good Earth* to learn about Chinese society as she was preparing to write *Woman Warrior*. He acknowledges the American flavor of Buck’s depiction of Chinese farmers, but argues that its merits should earn it a place in the curriculum, particularly in courses on US–Chinese relations, in which it can be analyzed in its transnational context.¹³

Another example along the lines of Buck’s work is the Dutch diplomat Robert van Gulik’s Judge Dee detective novels, written in the 1950s but based on a Ming dynasty novel featuring a historical personage—the Tang official Di Renjie (Judge Dee). In this case, Tang society has been filtered through two very different lenses. The stories are a lot of fun, but I would put them on the “suggested beach reading” list for students who show some interest in Chinese law, rather than on the course syllabus.¹⁴

Contextualization and comparison are critical in the effective use of literature in history classes. When I teach *Lost Names*, I like to pair it with a literary work on a similar theme by someone with no experience in the US. I have used two very different works in this way, addressing different aspects of Kim’s story. First, it is my belief that *Lost Names* constitutes the most idealistic depiction of the “Confucian family” in all of world literature. Confucius himself would probably adore the family at the center of the story: the elders lovingly discipline and educate the young, leading



them along the proper path through meaningful family ritual; the young love, respect, and obey their elders. Sibling rivalry appears, but is quickly subdued. It is true that at the end the young boy begins to form judgments different from those of the elders, but his father recognizes this as the flowering of his son's critical skills and encourages it, thus redoubling his son's respect for him.

Ba Jin's *Family* "exposes the dark side" of Confucian culture—how Confucian teachings can be used to suppress the young and justify hierarchy—and it could serve as a good foil to *Lost Names*. Likewise, Lu Xun's compelling story "Diary of a Madman," published in 1918, famously equates Confucian morality to cannibalism.¹⁵ But, rather than these two Chinese critiques, I prefer to assign a subtler reflection on East Asian family life, a short story by the Korean writer Pak Won-so called "How I Kept Our House While My Husband Was Away."¹⁶ The story is set during the tumultuous political crisis that followed the overthrow of Syngman Rhee in South Korea in 1960. What seems to be an ideal Confucian family is confronted by its own crisis as the family head is taken away by security forces. As his wife struggles to keep things together, she sees that, under its harmonious surface, family tensions have been building up for years. Her realization that all the unspoken rules that produce harmony can be violated results in a combination of fear and exhilaration. The psychological complexity of this powerful story makes the depiction of Korean family life in *Lost Names* seem rather too innocent. But the comparison provides a launchpad for conversations about the different eras they depict and the different perspectives of the writers, as well as about "the Confucian family" as a cultural concept.

FACT IN FICTION 1920s China and Ba Jin's Family



By Kristin Stapleton

Fact in Fiction is the sort of work I walk students through to help them understand the structure of scholarship: topic of interest, research questions, evidence from sources, analysis, and conclusions regarding larger significance.

—Robert Foster, *Education About Asia*

Readers are encouraged to read Robert Foster's full review of *Fact in Fiction: 1920s China and Ba Jin's Family* by Kristin Stapleton from the spring 2017 issue at <https://tinyurl.com/yantttq42>.

The other aspect of *Lost Names* that can be explored readily through comparison is the depiction of the Japanese empire.¹⁷ The novel *Harp of Burma* offers a perspective on Japanese soldiers that is very unfamiliar to American students. Published in 1947, the book is set just as the Japanese are losing World War II. A company of soldiers stranded in Burma tries to survive the fear and boredom of confinement in a prison camp while worrying about what has become of one of their comrades who went missing during a heroic attempt to negotiate the peaceful surrender of another unit. Both the novel and the movie based on it were very popular and critically acclaimed in the 1950s.¹⁸ But the novel's depiction of the camaraderie and humanism of the Japanese soldiers contrasts strongly with the picture presented in

most historical accounts of the Japanese army during that era. To what extent does this novel reflect history? Why was it so popular in Japan in the postwar era? Moving from *Lost Names* to *Harp of Burma* takes us along a path into the great East Asian history debates of the Cold War and post-Cold War eras.

This essay has focused primarily on East Asian literature, since it is more familiar to me than work from other parts of Asia. The further one gets from one's own area of expertise, the harder it can be to find literature to assign and feel competent to facilitate students' appreciation of it. In my quest to find



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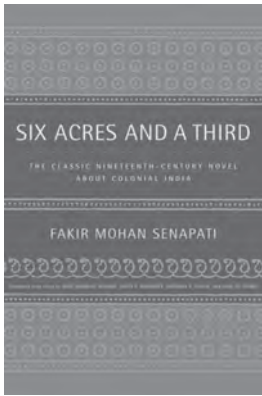
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fiction from South Asia to add to my syllabus on modern Asian history, I have tried several possibilities, including most recently *Six Acres and a Third*, written in the late nineteenth century by Fakir Mohan Senapati.¹⁹ I thought it was a fascinating read, and so did many of my students. We all felt somewhat frustrated, though, with the limitations of our collective understanding of the historical context in which it was written, despite an excellent introduction by Satya Mohanty. Still, the perspective the novel offers on the ripple effects of British power, as it extended across

the countryside of east India, is invaluable.

For effective use of literature in history classes, then, it is vital to study the historical background of the literature you assign, as well as the historical context of the eras the literature represents. I will be working on that before I teach with *Six Acres* again. For many works of Asian literature (although not yet for *Six Acres*), *Education About Asia* is a good place to start the search for context. The richness of EAA content on this topic (available for free in the EAA archives) is suggested by this partial list of relevant articles:

In her “Web Gleanings” in the winter 1998 and winter 2006 issues, Judith S. Ames provides several dozen excellent websites on Asian literature. The spring 2001 issue includes essays on using literature in Japanese and Chinese history classes by Steven Ericson and Timothy Cheek, respectively. In the fall 2005 issue, Andrea Caron Kempf contributes an annotated bibliography of Asian novels suited to teaching twentieth-century history. Sarah Campbell discusses Korean literature and its uses in history courses in the fall 2012 issue. Jeffrey Richey offers a list of Asian fiction and film that addresses religious themes in the fall 2010 issue. Dan Duffy introduces Vietnamese fiction and poetry suitable for classroom use in the fall 1996 issue and reviews a compilation of modern Southeast Asian literature in translation in the fall 1999 issue. Fay Beauchamp’s essay on images of the sea in early Japanese literature appears in the fall 2014 issue. Ihor Pidhainy advocates classroom use of Wu Jingzi’s satirical eighteenth-century novel, *The Scholars*, in the winter 2006 issue. And in the winter 2014 issue, Jennifer Hanson and Peter Gilmartin discuss how graphic novels can be used to teach younger students about Chinese history.²⁰

Happy reading! ■

NOTES

1. Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, trans. Edward G. Seidensticker (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1976).
2. Robert W. Foster discusses my book from the perspective of classroom teaching in a review essay in *Education About Asia* 22, no. 1 (2017): 64–65.
3. Henry Smith, ed., *Learning from Shōgun: Japanese History and Western Fantasy* (Santa Barbara, CA: Program in Asian Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara, 1980). A PDF of this book is available to download here: <https://tinyurl.com/yd8kd7m8>.
4. Mark Ravina, *The Last Samurai: The Life and Battles of Saigō Takamori* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2004).
5. Richard Johnson, “Review of *Masterworks of Asian Literature in Comparative Perspective: A Guide for Teaching*,” *Education About Asia* 1, no. 2 (1996): 54–55. The book Johnson reviewed, edited by Barbara Stoler Miller and published by M. E. Sharpe in 1994, is out of print, but used copies are readily available; it offers a very useful overview of Indian, Chinese, and Japanese literature.
6. Andrew Schonebaum and Tina Lu, eds., *Approaches to Teaching The Story of the Stone* (Dream of the Red Chamber) (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2012). The *Genji* volume in this series was edited by Edward Kamens and published in 1993. Out of more than 150 volumes in this “world literature” series, these are the only two that address Asian titles.

7. Luo Guanzhong, *Three Kingdoms: A Historical Novel*, trans. Moss Roberts (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 5.
8. I’d like to thank Xuanyi “Shane” Zhang for rekindling my interest in Tang poetry. On Bai Juyi, see Victor H. Mair, Sanping Chen, and Frances Wood, *Chinese Lives: The People Who Made a Civilization* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013), 772–846; and Melek Ortobasi, “Bringing Students into the World: Asia in the World History Classroom,” *Education About Asia* 18, no. 1 (2013): 4–7. Wang Anyi borrowed the title of Bai Juyi’s poem for one of her novels set in modern Shanghai, published in an English translation by Michael Berry and Susan Chan Egan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
9. Kathleen Woods Masalski, “History as Literature, Literature as History: An EAA Interview with *Lost Names* Author Richard E. Kim,” *Education About Asia* 4, no. 2 (1999): 23–27.
10. The *American Historical Review* (volume 103, no. 5, December 1998) invited Margaret Atwood to reflect on her work as a historical novelist in contrast to the work of historians; three eminent historians known for their literary skill, including Jonathan Spence, commented on her essay. I have found this forum useful in graduate seminars that address historical method and narrative.
11. What “Asia” means is a central question in the University at Buffalo’s Asian Studies 101 course. When I have taught it, I usually assign Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen, “The Spatial Constructs of Orient and Occident, East and West,” in *The Myth of Continents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); as well as a 2011 essay by Tawada Yōko, “Is Europe Western?,” <https://tinyurl.com/ybh9tr8m>; and Gary Okihiro, “When and Where I Enter,” in *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994).
12. Catherine Benton, “Teaching Indian Buddhism with Siddhartha—or Not?,” *Education About Asia* 2, no. 1 (1997): 9–13.
13. Lisa See’s historical novels based in China such as *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005) and *Peony in Love* (2007) generally get high marks from historians. See Charlotte Furth’s review in *Education About Asia* 14, no. 1 (2009): 18–21. Also see Charles W. Hayford, “What’s So Bad About *The Good Earth*?,” *Education About Asia* 3, no. 3 (1998): 4–7.
14. On the influence of van Gulik’s Judge Dee in contemporary Chinese culture, see Lavinia Benedetti, “Further Definition of Di Renjie’s Identity(ies) in Chinese History, Literature and Mass Media,” *Frontiers of History in China* 12, no. 4 (2017): 599–620. That same journal issue also includes an essay by Michael Szonyi about the history one can see in the racy novel *Jinpingmei* (AKA *Golden Lotus*): “The Case in the Vase: What Can a Ming Novel Tell Us About Traditional Chinese Legal Culture?” In it, he notes that the editors of the MLA series mentioned in note 6 have commissioned a volume on this novel.
15. In honor of the 100th anniversary of the publication of “Diary of a Madman,” the *Los Angeles Review of Books* “China Channel” blog published an essay by historian Emily Baum on the power of the concept of “madness” in early twentieth-century China: “Madness and Modernity: Lu Xun’s ‘Diary of a Madman,’ 100 Years On,” September 25, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/ycpm9a58>. My thanks to the two anonymous reviewers who suggested that Lu Xun should not be overlooked in this essay.
16. Pak Won-so, “How I Kept Our House While My Husband Was Away,” trans. Sol Sun-bong, in *Hospital Room 205 and Other Korean Short Stories*, ed. Korean National Commission for UNESCO (Seoul: Si-sa-yong-o-sa Publishers, 1983), 195–216. Pak’s name is also romanized as Park Wan-suh and other variants. I first read this story as part of a Korean studies professional development program organized by the Asian Studies Development Program and hosted by the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa and the East-West Center, with funding from the Korea Foundation.
17. Richard H. Minear comments on Kim’s depiction of the Japanese in an essay on *Lost Names* in *Education About Asia* 4, no. 2 (1999): 30–31.
18. The history of *Harp of Burma* is analyzed in Richard H. Minear’s introduction in Michio Takeyama, *The Scars of War: Writings of Michio Takeyama*, trans. Richard H. Minear (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 1–29.
19. Fakir Mohan Senapati, *Six Acres and a Third: The Classic Nineteenth-Century Novel about Colonial India*, trans. Rabi Shankar Mishra, Satya Mohanty, Jatindra N. Nayak, and Paul St.-Pierre (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
20. All EAA articles mentioned in this paragraph may be found at the EAA archives page at <https://tinyurl.com/EAAarchives>.

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