



Asian Fiction of the Twentieth Century

A Novel Approach to History

By Andrea Caron Kempf

History viewed through the lens of fiction can enhance a standard textbook, making the subject more immediate and compelling to students. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students who read a novel in conjunction with a history class become more engaged with the subject. Both the grand themes of a work of fiction and its quotidian details inform and educate, remaining with a reader long after the novel or the course in which it was assigned is completed. The cataclysmic events of the twentieth century—world wars, regional wars, the end of colonial rule, emigration of large populations, national, ethnic, and religious movements, communism—all of these convulsed Asia; and all of these events are dramatically presented in fiction. Here are a few examples:

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress by Dai Sijie is a nuanced portrait of life in China during the Cultural Revolution, describing the hardships suffered by those deemed intellectuals in need of reeducation. Yu Hua presents a more expansive view of China under Mao in *To Live*, where the protagonist's experiences and miraculous survival span a period from before the revolution to almost the present. The effects of World War II are examined by authors like Rani Manicka, who in *The Rice Mother* describes the Japanese occupation of Malaysia; Ismail Marahimin, who recounts an ill-fated attempt to escape from a prisoner-of-war camp in Sumatra in *And the War is Over*; Sa Shan who examines the Japanese

occupation of Manchuria in *The Girl Who Played Go*; and Agawa Hiroyuki, whose *Citadel in Spring* presents the Japanese point of view as his protagonist is first numbed by the brutality of war and then is overwhelmed by the bombing of his home, Hiroshima. The Korean War's impact on traditional society is portrayed in Junghyo Ahn's *Silver Stallion*; the effects of the Communist regime on village life in Vietnam is the theme of *The Paradise of the Blind* by Thu Huong Duong. *A Suitable Boy*, Vikram Seth's saga about the search for a bridegroom, is also a panoramic view of the changes that occurred in India during the first years after colonial rule.

The bibliography below contains twenty-eight novels, each of which develops significant historical themes. All have been read by this author, and selected for their historical relevance from a much larger bibliography of Asian fiction. Dates of publication and publishers are those of the editions in the Johnson County Community College's Billington Library. These include titles written by a Nobel Laureate and other winners of prestigious prizes and works by first novelists still finding their voices. Many authors are former political prisoners or soldiers, and most of these novels have autobiographical aspects. All authors are of Asian ancestry, and an attempt has been made to include titles from as many countries in Asia as possible. It is possible that a reader's favorite novel is absent from this list. Like all works in progress, the bibliography will continue to be refined and grow.

Asian History in the Twentieth Century: An Annotated Bibliography of Fiction

Agawa, Hiroyuki. *Citadel in Spring* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1990)
A young Japanese naval recruit, who has become desensitized to war's brutality, later views the atomic bomb's devastation of Hiroshima, his home. (Japan)

Ahn, Junghyo. *Silver Stallion* (New York: Soho Press, 1990)
A young widow is forced into prostitution and her son shamed when UN troops set up base near an idyllic Korean village. The author contrasts the old values of the village headman with the realities of life during war. (Korea)

Alai. *Red Poppies* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002)
The younger son of a Tibetan warlord tells the story of the Chinese occupation of his country. Although the young man is generally considered to be an idiot by his family, he is the wisest voice as he watches the Chinese destroy his culture. (Tibet, China)

Bao Ninh. *The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam* (New York: Pantheon, 1993)

This semi-autobiographical account of a North Vietnamese soldier fighting for ten years in the Vietnamese War is an excellent view of the war from a northern soldier's point of view. (Vietnam)

Botan. *Letters from Thailand* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Silkworm Books, 2002)

A Chinese immigrant to Thailand writes his mother a series of letters describing his life as an immigrant, as a husband and father, and as a merchant. The novel is an excellent example of how immigrants and the local population view each other. It could be written about immigrants anywhere. (Thailand, China)

Dai Sijie. *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* (New York: Knopf, 2001)

Two teenage boys, the sons of disgraced intellectuals, are sent to the countryside for reeducation during the Cultural Revolution. Discovering a cache of nineteenth century French novels translated into Chinese, they are intellectually liberated by the power of imagination and love. (China)

Duong, Thu Huong. *The Paradise of the Blind* (New York: Morrow, 1993)

Three generations of women in Vietnam are divided by past grievances where, despite war and political upheaval, village traditions remain paramount. This novel has been banned in Vietnam. (Vietnam)

Ghosh, Amitav. *The Glass Palace* (New York: Random House, 2001)

This is an historical novel about the British in Burma, their treatment of the Burmese royal family, and the involvement of Indian military personnel in British activities. (Myanmar, India)

Holthe, Tess Uriza. *When the Elephants Dance* (New York: Crown, 2002)

The devastation visited on Filipinos during World War II shows how villages became battlegrounds between Japanese and Americans. (Philippines)

Kim, Richard E. *Lost Names: Scenes from a Korean Boyhood*. (New York: Praeger, 1970)

This haunting narrative follows a young Korean boy through the years of World War II when the Japanese imposed their culture, religion, and will over native Koreans—a story of courage in the face of overwhelming odds. (Korea)

Kushwant Singh. *Train to Pakistan* (New York: Grove Press, 1956)

This novel explores the effect of the 1947 Partition of India on lives in a remote village in the Punjab where Sikhs and their Muslim neighbors lived together in harmony for generations until ethnic hatred exploded as the country broke apart. (India/Pakistan)

Manicka, Rani. *The Rice Mother* (New York: Viking, 2003)

A Malaysian family originally from Sri Lanka endures hardships from the World War II invasion of the Japanese to the 1990's financial bubble and its aftermath. The novel features an indomitable matriarch who through every trial holds the family together. (Malaysia)

Marahimin, Ismail. *And the War is Over* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1986)

In this novel of three clashing cultures at the end of World War II, Dutch and Indonesian prisoners in a Japanese work camp on the island of Sumatra plan an escape from their captors, unaware that the Japanese have lost the war. The novel won the Pegasus Prize for literature in 1984. (Indonesia)

Mishima, Yukio. *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (New York: Knopf, 1959)

This novel, considered one of Mishima's masterpieces, is based on an historical event in which a young Buddhist monk burned down a temple in Kyoto to prevent its falling into foreign hands during the American occupation. (Japan)

Mistry, Rohinton. *A Fine Balance* (New York: Vintage, 1997)

During a political emergency and the time of the government's sterilization policy, a disparate group of individuals forge an unlikely community in the Bombay apartment of an independent widow. (India)

Mistry, Rohinton. *Such a Long Journey* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992)

The fortunes of a Parsi family in Mumbai diminish as Hindu supremacy, economics, and entanglement in a secret service plot during a war with Pakistan affect their lives. (India)

Oe, Kenzaburo. *Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids* (London: Marion Boyars, 1995)

A group of delinquent boys are sent to a remote village in the waning days of World War II. Abandoned by the villagers, they establish a reasonable society that is tragically destroyed when the brutal peasants return. (Japan)

Ondaatje, Michael. *Anil's Ghost* (New York: Knopf, 2000)

A forensic pathologist returns to her home in Sri Lanka to search for the corpses of presumed torture victims during the civil war. (Sri Lanka)

Rushdie, Salman. *Shame* (New York: Knopf, 1983)

This is the author's fanciful retelling of the history of modern Pakistan. (Pakistan)

Seth, Vikram. *A Suitable Boy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993)

This more than 1,300-page-long novel relates the interconnected stories of four Indian families during the 1950s. The central theme is the attempt to find a suitable husband for a young woman with several suitors.

Shan, Sa. *The Girl Who Played Go* (New York: Knopf, 2003)

A sixteen-year-old Chinese girl living in occupied Manchuria plays

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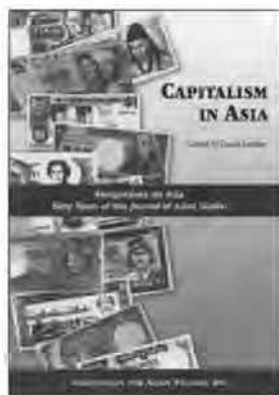
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Go in the town square every day with a stranger who is actually a Japanese soldier in disguise. As world events lead them both to tragedy, the game becomes more important than life. (Japan, China, Manchuria)

Sidhwa, Bapsi. *Cracking India* (Minneapolis: Milkweed, 1991)
The partition of India is viewed through the eyes of an eight-year-old girl from a Parsi family in Lahore. Ethnic and religious hatreds are exposed. (India, Pakistan)

Tanizaki, Jun'ichiro. *The Makioka Sisters* (New York: Knopf, 1957)
Four sisters of an impoverished aristocratic family struggle to survive and preserve their outdated traditions in the face of modernity. Their main goal is to marry off the demure third sister so that the wilder youngest sister can be married before a scandal occurs. (Japan)

Toer, Pramoedya. *A Child of All Nations* (New York: W. Morrow, 1993), and Toer, Pramoedya. *This Earth of Mankind* (New York: W. Morrow, 1991)

These two historical novels chronicle the story of Indonesia's struggle against Dutch colonialism. (Indonesia)

Yokomitsu, Riichi. *Shanghai*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2001)

This novel looks at the lives of a group of Japanese expatriates living in Shanghai during the 1920s. All are trying to make a living while China, lacking a cohesive government, is a pressure cooker about to explode. (China, Japan)

Yoshimura, Akira. *One Man's Justice* (New York: Harcourt, 2001)

This is the story of a former officer in the Japanese Army who goes into hiding after World War II when the Army of Occupation is searching for war criminals. The novel is a meditation on what is right and what is wrong during a war, and who is a war criminal. (Japan)

Yu, Hua. *To Live* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003)

This novel follows the life of a ne'er-do-well rich young man who before the Communist takeover gambles away his family fortune. It demonstrates his experiences surviving the political upheavals of the twentieth century as he becomes a representative of everyman. (China)

Individual annotated items have been previously published by the author in a variety of bibliographies on the Johnson County Community College, Billington Library Resources Web page:
<http://library.jccc.net/reference/guides/index.html#lite>. ■

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