

Modern Southeast Asian Literature in Translation

A Resource for Teaching

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Here is a book that will allow any dedicated teacher in the humanities or social sciences at the secondary, tertiary, or graduate level to prepare a course or a class meeting drawing on the modern literature of four nations in Southeast Asia. It is a quiet triumph of Southeast Asia Studies generally, of the research careers of its contributors, of the conference that brought them together, and of the publisher who badgered their contributions into a volume of historical overview, critical insight, and specific bibliographic reference. Suitably produced as a spiral-bound manual with wide margins, the volume is a royal road for the instructor to the English-language materials through which our students can join the audience for Southeast Asian authors.

The modern literatures of Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines are discussed in separately authored sections. Each introduces a syllabus for a course with eight thematic sessions with specified readings (not included). The contributors for each national literature also provide a bibliography of translations and critical work in English. Most usefully, there is a list of specialist booksellers for every reading list.

The instructors tested their syllabuses on each other, every author actually taking courses from one another as fellow students at a summer institute. All of the sections reflect this area studies milieu, situating the literary works in social context viewed from several disciplinary perspectives, and work from national texts out to broad themes relevant to Southeast Asia. Interestingly, the contributors adopt distinct approaches to presenting national literature. Keith Taylor and Peter Zinoman, authors of the Vietnam section, are historians. Their introduction recommends that each author studied be read on his or her own terms, rather than as a speaker for the nation, or a period. Still, they organize their class meetings in topics selected from Western history of Vietnam (e.g., Prose Fiction and Colonialism) and from local Vietnamese literary history (e.g., The New Poetry). An important section for teachers here in the U.S. treats the literature of the overseas Vietnamese.

Chetana Nagavajara and Susan Fulop Kepner express a buoyant confidence in Thai literature as a window on the thoughts of Thai writers, and a mirror on their nation. The two scholars intend their course to acquaint the student with modern Thai life. Their

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meetings begin with two sessions on background (e.g., The Rise of Modern Thai Literature), then proceed with three meetings on four individual authors (e.g., Kukrit Pramoj: the Sly Aristocrat), and three on issues of general importance (e.g., Beyond Romance: Women Writing Their Lives). It is suitable, given that Indonesianists have been at the vanguard of critical studies of the nation-state, that Ariel Heryanto and Hendrik Maier should found their course of study on the observation that Indonesian language and literature is a field of contestation rather than a bounded area of study. Their course begins with a meeting on the problems and history of Indonesia as a construction, and then proceeds through issues (e.g., Religion [Islam], Ideology and Culture) whose processes make and remake the institutions of Indonesian literature.

Resil Mojares and Doreen G. Fernandez, by contrast, take the disparity of Philippine literature as read, and try to lend their subject some coherence. They begin with an overview of an untidy situation (An Introduction to Philippine Literature in Vernaculars, Spanish, and English), then treat two major authors (e.g., Jose Rizal and the Rise of the Modern), four major subjects and genres (e.g., Tradition and Modernity: Poetry), then devote the final session to summing up. Importantly for English-language teachers, Mojares and Fernandez also treat the matter of Philippine literature in the United States.

The only criticisms to make of such an outstanding product of scholarship applied to teaching come in a spirit of envious carping and from reservations so broad as to be unhelpful to the non-specialist teacher. Personally, I don't teach the Vietnamese authors Taylor and Zinoman recommend, or I teach different works by them. Generally, I question the value of the humanistic study of Vietnamese literature, of curating and teaching it or any Southeast Asian national literature as such here in the U.S. Isn't the appropriate site for such projects within the nations themselves?

It's not an unfamiliar opinion. Indeed, the funding officer for this splendid project, the anthropologist Toby Volkman, has moved on from the Joint Committee on Southeast Asia at the Social Science Research Council, to the Ford Foundation, where recent re-organization has replaced area studies with thematic, global programs, and country officers now focus on strengthening local institutions rather than the foreign scholars who study them.

So this marvelous volume wraps up and puts a bow on the fruits of a kind of scholarship that is now an heirloom strain. That's a matter for Southeast Asianists to think over. For others, all you need to know is that this collection's contributors mix critical awareness and the hard work of literary scholarship in an accessible blend. If you want national, even regional literature, it is here for you, and you can also reach in to grab individual authors through whom your students may view the world. ■

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