



Teaching Islam in Southeast Asia

By Nelly van Doorn-Harder

Teaching about Islam in Southeast Asia is simultaneously one of the most delightful and most frustrating activities in which to engage. The sheer richness of history, culture, literature, and locally-developed expressions and interpretations of Islam allow a teacher to show a side of Islamic faith and culture that seldom reaches a class focused on the Middle East. Architecture, art, fashion, media, education, and folk festivities provide wonderful illustrations for show and tell.

The frustrating part is the paucity of material suitable for the level of high school and college students. In spite of its accessibility, the area used to be among the stepchildren of Islamic studies. After 9/11 several publishers have started to include Southeast Asia in their textbooks about Islam, yet few books or articles are at an introductory level. However, works are being commissioned as we speak. In the meantime, teachers can take refuge in articles, book chapters, newspaper articles, and entries from encyclopedias, many of which have updated their scholarship with more information about Islam in Southeast Asia. Of course, visual material such as pictures of Islamic art and movies are excellent tools for teaching. And yes, the Internet yields many interesting pieces via Web sites of Islamic groups in the region and via the English language departments of local newspapers and journals.

The other challenge when teaching about Islam in Southeast Asia is its diversity in the respective countries. This “Muslim archipelago” encompasses Malaysia (around 60 percent of 23.5 million people is Muslim), Indonesia (around 88 percent of more than 238 million), Brunei (68 percent of 330,700), and the Philippines, where Muslims (4 to 7 percent of 74 million) are concentrated in the south on the island of Mindanao and on the Sulu Archipelago in the vicinity of northeast Malaysia. Local situations in each country yield interesting case studies about the interaction between Islam and other religions and indigenous cultures. Although Islam came to the area in a relatively unified form, local conditions influenced its reception, while later colonial governments engineered its development in the respective countries.

These negatives, however, can be treated as positives when we consider the vast range of opportunities to teach Islam in a comparative frame. Comparisons between different modes of and developments within Islam can be made within the region, or one can contrast, for example, Muslim expressions from the Middle East with those of Indonesia. Using certain moments in history can be helpful as points of departure in the classroom. What follows is a short survey of some formative historic developments of Southeast Asian Islam.

POINTS OF HISTORIC IMPORTANCE

There is evidence of Islamic influences as early as the eighth century, but it was in the thirteenth century that lasting processes of Islamization started through the activities of Arab Muslim merchants. The kingdom of Aceh at the northern tip of Sumatra is known to be the first Islamic-inspired political structure where the sultan applied Islamic law. With local rulers embracing Islam, the religion spread rapidly and took over political, educational, and legal systems. At the same time, Islam developed a cosmopolitan character due to the area’s location at the crossroads of extensive global trade networks. A pluralist version of Islam developed that was mostly tolerant of the Hindu, Buddhist, and indigenous traditions it encountered. Incorporating local trends of mysticism, a vibrant Sufi tradition arose, while Islamic learning focused on *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *kalam* (philosophy), and Sufism.

While Islam was still spreading, the colonizing histories of the respective countries resulted in a variety of religious developments. By the sixteenth century, the Spaniards had successfully driven the Muslims (and Jews) out of Spain, and acting in the same spirit of *reconquista* stopped the Islamization process in the Philippines. Around the same time, Dutch powers established in Indonesia ignored the deep influence of Islam on society, instead stressing and enforcing local and Dutch laws. British rule in Malaysia (1841) allowed the local sultans to apply Islamic law.

Through these colonial pressures, Islam became more inward-oriented, losing some of its original vibrancy. However, Muslim teachers and students never stopped traveling to the Islamic centers of learning in the Middle East, thus building important networks of academic exchange. Upon return these scholars, using Arabic, the lingua franca of Islamic scholarship, disseminated their views in local *Qur’ān* boarding schools—the so-called *pesantren*—from where their works were translated, popularized, and interspersed with local knowledge. The work of the seventeenth-century Sufi writer Hamzah Fansuri provides wonderful and accessible examples of this continuous flow of learning. Writing about the religious and philosophical debates



Female santri in the Krapyak pesantren at Yogyakarta preparing for her exam.
Photos courtesy of Nelly van Doorn-Harder.



Ibu Nafisa is the students' teacher and is the director of the pesantren for girls.

Students in the pesantren honor the Prophet weekly by chanting songs in his praise and visit the graves of their great leaders, insisting that they neither venerate them, nor pray to them, rather “honor them with a visit.”

of his time, Fansuri places these in and reflects on his own local environment in Sumatra.¹

Colonization inevitably led to resistance, especially from Muslim leaders. A contemporary of Fansuri called Shaykh Yusuf embodied the far-reaching influence a local leader could have. Born in South Sulawesi, he had studied extensively in the Middle East before settling in a pesantren in Banten, West Java, where he taught until 1682. Because of his anti-colonial activities, the Dutch banned him to South Africa from where he kept sending his teachings to the Muslims back in Java, simultaneously founding what later became the South African Muslim community.²

By the nineteenth century, both colonial pressures and developments in the Muslim world influenced Muslim religious life in the area. Due to improvements in transportation and communication, the area became more closely connected with the Middle East. Muslims could easier go on the *hajj* in Mecca after the Suez Canal opened in 1869, and Southeast Asian Muslim scholars spent longer periods of study in the Middle East. At the same time, more Arab immigrants moved to Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. On the wings of these exchange movements came ideas about reformation and modernization proposed by Egyptian scholars such as Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905), who taught that a return to the scriptural sources of Islam and purification of indigenous practices would lead to a renewal of Islam.

This movement had wide-ranging consequences, especially in Indonesia. Firstly, it was at odds with mystical or Sufi practices. However, it did not eradicate these the way Wahhabism did in, for example, Saudi Arabia, but rather convinced Muslims gradually to abandon rituals that it deemed reprehensible and to focus on the purely spiritual aspects of Sufism. Reformists considered practices

such as chanting praises for the Prophet and holding *dhikrs* (circles that repeat phrases of the *Qur'an*, or the name of Allah) as un-Islamic. They also condemned the veneration of holy persons and visiting their graves (*ziyarah*). The success of the reformist movement in Indonesia can especially be ascribed to the fact that it replaced indigenous practices slowly with its own puritanical models.³ At the same time, it had to accept the existence and strength of the traditionalist Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) movement that to this day allows indigenous and Sufi rituals as long as these do not infringe on the teachings of Islam. NU members hold “common sense” *dhikrs*, considering these prayers of praise. Students in the pesantren honor the Prophet weekly by chanting songs in his praise and visit the graves of their great leaders, insisting that they neither venerate them, nor pray to them, rather “honor them with a visit.”⁴

Secondly, as was the case in the Middle East, reformist Islam greatly influenced society when it became a rallying banner against colonialism. Reformists set up schools that democratized education and brought Islam outside what were considered to be dusty pesantren with “backward” (not modern) leaders, the NU *kiai*. Modern forms of Islamic education led to an intellectual revolution that until today yields fruits in contemporary Indonesia and Malaysia.

Thirdly, in 1912, Muhammad Dahlan set up the reformist social-religious Muhammadiyah movement in Java. The schools it built opened wide vistas for Muslims who up to then could follow religious curriculums only at the pesantren *Qur'an* schools as the majority was denied access to the Dutch school system. Muhammadiyah schools offered a mixed curriculum of religious and academic subjects. They trained Indonesia’s future leaders, provided venues for upward mobility, and inspired the pesantren to reconsider

In Indonesia, the various modes of Islamic thinking prepared the grounds for the new independent state to set up Higher Institutes for Islamic Learning (IAIN) that provided graduate and undergraduate degrees for future leaders of Islam. The initiators of the IAIN schools were committed to teach a tolerant, broad-minded form of Islam that allowed room for women scholars of Islam and for the acceptance of non-Muslims.

their role in the Muslim landscape. In fact, Muhammadiyah's presence forced the pesantren leaders, the kiai, to work together, which resulted in the founding of NU in 1926.

Thus were born two definitions that characterized the main forms of Islamic thinking in the area: reformists and traditionalists. Reformists, also called Kaum Muda in Sumatra, Malaysia, and Singapore, stood for those who sought education and science, in short: progress. They wanted to purify Islam and in some places tried to enforce its faithful practice. For example, in certain provinces of Malaysia local shopkeepers could be fined for selling snacks in the daytime during the fasting month of Ramadan. Nahdlatul Ulama and other traditionalists continued to include indigenous practices in their rituals and often practiced Sufism as long as these practices were not at odds with the teachings of Islam. Of course, the traditionalists did not want to stay behind, and during the past fifty years they adjusted the curricula in their pesantren and other schools.

The reformists, at the same time, set up voluntary organizations that promoted business, built hospitals, and took care of the poor. Furthermore they encouraged women to study Islamic sources to provide educational and spiritual lessons for women and children. The model of the activist Muslim scholar was born: one who would be actively involved in shaping the new state after Indonesia gained independence from Dutch rule (1945) and again after the fall of the suppressive Suharto regime (1966–1998) that denied Islam political power.

In Malaysia, the reform movement was halted by the British colonial government and opposed by traditionalists and Malay elites. It drew educated, urban Muslims who gathered around journalistic enterprises such as the periodical *Al-iman* (1906). Due to the obstacles it met and lacking an organizational model similar to Muhammadiyah, Malay reformism remained less diverse and socially effective than in Indonesia.

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In spite of the attempt of the Suharto regime to curb the potential powers of Islam, Muslim leaders and intellectuals continued to design models for Islamic-based democracy and civil society. Leading intellectuals such as Abdurrahman Wahid and Nurcholish Madjid advocated a spiritual, intellectual, and economic renewal of Islam, rather than developing a "political Islam." Suharto, however,

suppressed voices of extremist Islam that in the more open climate after he stepped down swept over society with what seemed to be great force.

TRENDS OF EXTREMIST ISLAM

Radical Muslim groups were not entirely new to Indonesia; they just became more visible after Suharto's demise. Some extremist leaders had been in exile in neighboring Malaysia, others—for example Abu Bakir Ba'asyir, the inspirational source behind the Bali bombers—kept quiet, while running an extremist pesantren. A *dakwah* movement (Islamic mission) had operated underground, transmitting from the Middle East radical ideas that propagated the reduced role of women, anti-Christian ideas, and called for the establishment of an Islamic state.⁵

One cannot speak of one single movement, as many young Indonesians feel attracted to a stricter form of Islam. For example, on university campuses a movement called Islam Baru (new Islam) came up during the 1980s. Its leaders rallied students around assiduous study of the *Qur'ān* and meticulous execution of Islamic rituals. Disillusion with a failing state system and a collapsed economy led to feelings of sympathy for radical groups among the population. However, the call from radical groups to implement Islamic law failed as Parliament rejected it in 2003, supported by both Muhammadiyah and NU. It was only allowed in districts where the majority of the population voted for its application. So far this has mainly been the case in the province of Aceh. Yet, in the 2004 elections, the "shariah-minded" Justice Party (PKS) went from less than two percent of the vote in the 1999 national elections to over seven percent in 2004.

In Malaysia, *dakwah* movements could operate more actively and found an ally in the Islamic opposition party PAS (Partai Islam Se-Malaysia) in the quest to create an Islamic state, although Muslims are barely the national majority. Giving in to Muslim pressure, the government introduced new Islamic laws in the 1990s and amended existing laws such as the personal status law taking away women's protection against unilateral divorce by the husband and against polygamy. In certain provinces under PAS control, laws were passed with provisions for punishments such as flogging and amputation of limbs.⁶

Philippine Muslims, the Moros, live in the only Christian-dominated country in Southeast Asia and do not identify themselves as Filipinos. Since the 1950s, Moro Islam has witnessed a revival in Islamic piety, and feelings of being marginalized gave rise to armed secession movements such as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Its actions caused the Filipino government to implement affirmative action programs for their benefit, such as building religious schools and offering scholarships for Moro students.⁷

POSSIBLE POINTS FOR TEACHING SUGGESTIONS FOR TOPICAL APPROACHES

Assuming that few of us have the luxury to spend an entire semester on Islam in Southeast Asia, the best way, in my view, to approach this enormous field is to focus on one or two specifics and to contrast those between two or more Southeast Asian countries, or with Middle Eastern expressions of Islam. These could be:

1. The infamous/famous pesantren model (*Qur'ān* boarding schools that are often referred to as *madrasahs* in other Muslim countries).
2. Organizational models of Islam and the trends of thinking and interpretation of the *Qur'ān* resulting from these models.
3. Wahhabism and its call for a puritanical form of Islam that eradicates mystical expressions and indigenous practices.
4. The role of women.
5. Expressions of art and media (the *wajang* shadow theater).
6. Folk Islam (for example, visiting the graves of saints and holding *selamatan*s, or “meals of reconciliation”).

Some examples of these themes could be intra-Islamic varieties and varieties in ritual and indigenous practices. One can illustrate some of the varieties within Islam by focusing on the ritual called *selamatan* or *kenduri*. This is a meal to reconcile between the here and the hereafter, and between people. Clifford Geertz was among the first to describe this meal in English. Its roots go back to pre-Islamic cultural beliefs whose goal was to pacify the spirits, and is held at times considered crucial in someone's life—for example, on the seventh month of her pregnancy to prepare a mother for birth, and at the 3rd, 40th, and 1,000th day after a person dies. Reformists no longer practice it but traditionalist Muslims value the qualities of praise, thanks, consolation, and spiritual sustenance they get from the celebration. By replacing indigenous prayers with Muslim ones, traditionalists have “Islamized” the ritual.⁸

Ziyarah, visiting the graves of saints, is another topic that can lead to interesting observations. The act itself in Indonesia is a perfect blend of local and Islamic cultures as many of the popular graves are those of syncretistic sultans. It has become the hallmark of being NU-minded, while Muhammadiyah is squarely against it, and in Malaysia pilgrimage to graves has more or less been suppressed.⁹

Looking at an educational institute such as that of the pesantren provides insights into a traditional model of education. Via a range of topics students can gain understanding of the formation of Muslim morality, mindset, and intellectual pursuit.¹⁰

REACTIONS TO RADICAL ISLAM—Looking at the strategies developed by religious leaders to fight against extremist trends of Islam is most instructive for students. For example, after the bombing in predominantly Hindu Bali, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist leaders held an interfaith service that included Hindu rituals to restore the balance between earth and heaven. At the same time, a plethora of groups that are against the radical expressions of Islam have launched journals and set up courses and institutes to teach an “antidote.” A high profile example of these activities is the group called *Islam Liberal* (Liberal Islam) that airs its ideas via radio, TV, and its Web site where several articles can be found in English. Muslim women's groups have thrown themselves into this battle as well, even organizing open forums and public protests.¹¹ Another surprising development is that some of the NU pesantren have started programs to promote a form of Islam that is inclusive of non-Muslims and to a variety of expressions of Islam.¹²

ISLAMIC LAW—When one wants to focus on the topic of Islamic law (given that it keeps the minds of Americans spellbound), a comparison between Indonesia and Malaysia would be very interesting. In Malaysia there is an ongoing debate about the role of Islam in society that has a heavy component of ethnicity: to be Malay is “to be Muslim.” While Malaysian society is as pluralistic as Indonesian, since the 1970s (after clashes with the Chinese population), being Malay came to be defined in terms of being Muslim, using the Malay language (not English, Indian, or Chinese), and having local sultans serve as guardians of Islam and Malay custom. Islam and “Malayness” also mean political dominance, and Islam is coordinated through the state, rather than through independent socio-religious organizations as is the case in Indonesia. Another interesting Malaysian voice comes from the Sisters in Islam (SIS), a group of Muslim feminists who contest the PAS party that since 1955 seeks the application of Islamic law. SIS also runs a Web site that espouses its ideas.

ISLAMIC REVIVAL REFORM MOVEMENTS—In the respective countries a revitalization of Islam has become visible in a variety of expressions. For example, more people engage in learning how to recite the *Qur'ān*, and extravagant *Qur'ān* reciting contests portray the results.¹³ In spite of puritanical efforts to reduce the influence of Sufism, there is an intense interest in Sufi practices and literature. Popular preachers draw thousands. For example, the famous Aa Gym stresses purification of the heart and mixes his sermons with religious songs in popular tunes.

These trends arise from the desire to create Islamic-based answers to the manifold challenges of life in a contemporary world. In Indonesia this has resulted in creative and interesting solutions unique to the Muslim world. Firmly rooted in the past and referring to Qur'ānic-based sources, Indonesian Muslims have started to devise new models of interpretation that provide a role for Islam in a democratic government, civil society, human rights, women's rights, children's rights, and religious pluralism. These have resulted in a variety of forms of Muslim activism and allowed for models of society and modes of living together suitable to an increasingly interconnected world in the twenty-first century.¹⁴

THE ROLE OF WOMEN—Finally, the role of women in Southeast Asia Islam is a fascinating topic. Indonesian women are far ahead of women in other countries in the region as far as their roles in religious leadership are concerned. They are teachers in the pesantren and in the Islamic universities; organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah have trained thousands of women preachers, who lead women in prayer and have high-profile, public positions in Islam. For example, in 1980, Maria Ulfa was the first woman to win the national *Qur'an* reciting contest, but then could not proceed to the international level as other Muslim countries denied women participation in this activity. Women professors have set up Centers for Women Studies at the main IAIN schools and produce a constant stream of writing whose aim is to debunk prejudices about women.

SELECTED SOURCES

Sources concerning a specific topic are mentioned in the footnotes. Apart from these, useful books for history and background are:

- Andaya, B. Watson, and L. Y. Andaya. *A History of Malaysia*. 2nd ed. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1982, 2001.
- Bowen, John R. *Islam, Law and Equality in Indonesia*. Cambridge, UK, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Bowen, John R. *Muslims Through Discourse: Religion and Ritual in Gayo Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Dijk, Kees van. *A Country in Despair: Indonesia between 1997 and 2000*. Netherlands: KITLV Press, 2001. Provides a wealth of newspaper clippings about the period of transition between the Suharto regime and the current more open society.
- Geertz, Clifford. *The Religion of Java*. London: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1960. Now dated, the book provides a fascinating picture of the interaction between Muslim and indigenous cultures. It also has detailed descriptions of certain rituals.
- Gelman-Taylor, Jean. *Indonesia: Peoples and Histories*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.
- George, Kenneth M. and Mamannoor. A. D. *Pirous: Vision, Faith, and a Journey in Indonesian Art, 1955–2002*. Bandung: Yayasan Serambi Pirous, 2002.
- Laffan, Michael F. *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia: The Umma Below the Winds*. London: Routledge Curzon, 2003. A detailed study about the interactions between Indonesia and the Middle East before 1948.
- Nakamura, Mitsuo. *The Crescent Arises over the Banyan Tree: A Study of the Muhammadiyah Movement in a Central Javanese Town*. Yogyakarta: Gadjah Mada University Press, 1993. An engaging ethnographic study of a Muhammadiyah community.
- Reid, Anthony. *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680: The Lands Below the Winds* (paperback edition). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990.
- Reid, Anthony. *Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450–1680: Expansion and Crisis* (paperback edition). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995.
- Ricklefs, M. C. *A History of Modern Indonesia, c. 1300 to the Present*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.

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- G. W. J. Drewes, *Directions for Travellers on the Mystic Path: Zakariyya' al-Ansari's Kitab Fath al-Rahman and its Indonesian Adaptations*. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977).
- Michael Feener, "Shaykh Yusuf and the Appreciation of Muslim 'Saints' in Modern Indonesia," *Journal for Islamic Studies*, 18–19 (1999).
- I have described in part the process of how reformists replaced indigenous models with their own in the second chapter of my book: *Women Shaping Islam: Reading the Qur'an in Indonesia*. (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2006).
- About visiting the graves of the saints, see, for example: James Fox, "Ziarah visits to the tombs of the Walis, the Founders of Islam on Java," in M. C. Ricklefs, ed., *Islam in the Indonesian Social Context*. (Clayton: Monash University, 1991), and Nelly van Doorn-Harder and Kees de Jong, "Ziarah to Tembayat," *The Muslim World* 91, nos. 3, 4 (Fall 2001) 325–354.
- Especially Robert W. Hefner has written about the radical Muslim groups: *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), and R. W. Hefner and P. Horvath, eds., *Islam in an Era of Nation-States: Politics and Religious Renewal in Muslim Southeast Asia*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997).
- Works that discuss these processes of Islamization in Malaysia are: Judith Nagata, *The Reflowering of Malaysian Islam*. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1984), and Michael G. Peletz, *Islamic Modern Religious Courts and Cultural Politics in Malaysia*. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002). And Candra Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia*. (Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti, 1987).
- Some useful titles about Muslims in the Philippines are: C. A. Majul, *The Contemporary Muslim Movement in the Philippines* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1985), and *Muslims in the Philippines*. (Diliman, Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press, 1999). T. M. McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels. Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: The University of California Press, 1998).
- A good new book about this ritual is by Andrew Beatty, *Varieties of Javanese Religion: An Anthropological Account*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- For suggestions about literature: see footnote 4. Also see the entry "ziyara" in the *Encyclopedia of Islam* (new edition) Edited by P. J. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C. E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, and W. P. Heinrichs (Leiden, Brill Publishers, 1998–).
- Zamkhashari Dhofier. *The Pesantren Tradition: The Role of the Kiai in the Maintenance of Traditional Islam in Java*. (Tempe, Arizona: Program for Southeast Asian Studies, ASU, 1999), and the book by Ronald Bull-Lukens mentioned in footnote 12 are useful resources for this topic.
- For an example of such a group see: Nelly van Doorn-Harder, "Indonesian Women Creating Justice" in the *Nordic Journal of Human Rights*, Oslo (Spring 2003).
- The book by Ronald Bull-Lukens, *A Peaceful Jihad: Negotiating Identity and Modernity in Muslim Java* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), provides examples of this trend in the pesantren.
- Anna M. Gade describes this process in detail in *Perfection Makes Practice: Learning, Emotion, and the Recited Qur'an in Indonesia*. (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004).
- Interesting examples about this topic can be found in Greg Barton and Greg Fealy, eds. *Nahdlatul Ulama, Traditional Islam and Modernity in Indonesia*. (Clayton: Monash Asia Institute, 1996), Peter G. Riddell, *Islam in the Malay-Indonesian World: Transmission and Responses* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), and in Mark R. Woodward, *Toward a New Paradigm: Recent Developments in Indonesian Islamic Thought*. (Tempe, Ariz.: Arizona State University Program for Southeast Asian Studies, 1996).

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any other Chinese text, purely textual analysis is not enough and can sometimes lead to misunderstandings. Effort is needed to place the studied text in a larger cultural context to examine Chinese value or belief systems. After all, literature is nothing but a cultural product, and the goal for teaching a foreign literature is not to study this product *per se*, but to gain an understanding of the underlying cultural perspectives. ■

NOTES

1. I would like to first thank the two anonymous readers for their valuable suggestions on the revision of this essay.
2. We may embed the text in its social and historical context, introducing students to the life stories of the author or to the social and historical conditions under which the text was produced. However, our focus still seems to be on the literary work. In essence, the historical knowledge only serves as a means for the students to understand the text, rather than the culture through the text.
3. *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century: Including Chinese, Classical Languages, French, German, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish* (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, A Collaborative Project of ACTFL, AATF, AATG, AATI, AATSP, ACL, ACTR, CLASS, and NCJLT-ATJ, 1999), 474.
4. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), 5.
5. Wimal Dissanayake, "Cultural Identity and Asian Cinema: An Introduction," in *Cinema and Cultural Identity: Reflections on Films from Japan, India, and China*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake (New York: University Press of America, 1988), 2.
6. Qu Yuan has been identified as the first poet in Chinese literary history whose poetry represents an individual voice. A native of Chu during the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), he was a scholar and eloquent orator at an early age, and was summoned to serve at court in his early twenties. Qu Yuan's ability and moral integrity soon won him King Huai's favor. However, his success subjected him to the jealousy of a handful of courtiers, and his proposal of "government by the virtue and the able" resulted in these courtiers' schemes to have him removed from court. They slandered him in front of the King, causing doubts in the latter's mind about Qu Yuan's intention and loyalty. As a result, Qu Yuan was exiled, and *Li sao*, written during the exile, records the poet's feelings over this unjust treatment, his remonstrations with the King over right and wrong, and his reaffirmations of his loyalty to the King. In his exile, Qu Yuan refused to go and be employed by other states, a common practice at that time, because

of his love for his own country and his commitment to the King. However, when Chu was defeated by Qin, the superpower that finally conquered all other states and gained the hegemony in the empire, Qu Yuan committed suicide by drowning himself in the Milo River on a fifth day of a fifth month in the Chinese lunar calendar. Legend has it that upon learning of his death, the people of Chu threw rice dumplings into the river and raced dragon boats in it to keep the fish away. In the south of China, the custom of dragon boat racing is still alive today as a way to commemorate Qu Yuan, called in the twentieth century a "people's poet" or a "patriotic poet."

7. For the influence of Qu Yuan and his poetry on Chinese intelligentsia from the Han dynasty down to the twentieth century, see Laurence A. Schneider, *A Madman of Ch'u: The Chinese Myth of Loyalty and Dissent* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1980).
8. The English translations of *Li sao* in this essay are all taken from *The Songs of the South*, translated by David Hawkes (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1985).
9. James J. Y. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 69.
10. Pan Xiaolong, "Lun Qu ci zhi kuangfang he qiyuan," *Wenyi yanjiu*, 2 (1992):130–140. One of the seven states in the Warring State period, Chu was located on the banks of the Yangzi river in its middle reaches. Warm and humid, the area was marked by stretches of high mountains, the tributaries of the Yangzi river, and broad ancient forests. This geographical location and the local worship of shamanism were, according to many scholars, contributing factors for the rich imagination and unrestrained emotional temperament of people living in the area.
11. Liu, *Chinese Theories of Literature*, 68.
12. Lu Yulin, *Chuantong shici de wenhua jieshi* (Beijing: Zhongguo shehuikexue chubanshe, 2003), 41.
13. A typical expression of such opinion can be found in Jerah Johnson's translation, *Li Sao: A Poem on Reliving Sorrows* (Miami: Olivant Press, 1959), 11.

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