Premier’s English Teacher’s Association NSW English Scholarship

Writings from the East: A focus on locating quality Asian texts for the cross-curriculum priority, ‘Asia and Australia’s Engagement with Asia’

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Introduction

**Azaleas**

When you go away

Sick of seeing me,

I shall let you go gently, no words.

From Mount Yak in Yongbyon

An armful of azaleas

I shall gather and scatter on your path.

Step by step away

On the flowers lying before you,

Tread softly, deeply, and go.

When you go away,

Sick of seeing me,

though I die; not one tear shall I let fall[[1]](#footnote-1)

I have included Kim Sowol’s ‘Azaleas’ in my introduction as an example of a text I’d like to see included in the English curriculum for study. Acknowledged as one of the earliest and most important modern poems, ‘Azaleas’ is recognised as distinctly Korean because of its rhythmic similarity with Korean folk songs. The poem is studied by high school students in the South as a reminder of what it was like to be one nation, where one could traverse freely from Youngbyon in the North, down to Busan in the South. It is a poem that resonates powerfully amongst Koreans because of its multi-layered meanings and interpretations. One layer of interpretation is to read the poem as a lament; another is to read it within the contextual framework of Sowol growing up in a Korea under Japanese occupation. And yet another layer is to see the poem through the lens of *Han*, a Korean concept that communicates feelings of deep sorrow and oppression in the face of overwhelming uncertainty. The Eastern literary world is full of treasures like ‘Azaleas’ made available to the English reader through quality translation.

Rationale

Driven by a vision to see more writings *from* the East taught in English classrooms (as opposed to *about* the East), my quest was to discover quality Asian literature that would resonate in the minds of our students and teachers. I hoped to offer a fresh perspective focusing specifically on literature coming out of Asia. Reading the statements provided in the Australian Curriculum and some of the suggested materials sparked a series of questions such as: what *is* an Asian text? Does it have to be written by an Asian author? Does it have to be set in Asia, and if so, which parts of Asia are to be included? Is Shaun Tan a composer of Asian texts because he is ethnically Asian? What is an Asia-related theme and how is it different to any other theme? The definition had become so broad that I had to ask: What is an *American* text? What is a *Russian* text? Do we not immediately think of composers like Hemmingway and T.S. Eliot for America, and Tolstoy for Russia? Why then do we struggle to name important Asian composers valued in the countries of Asia? Sure, we can name the more mainstream names of Haruki Murakami or Anita Desai commonly found on the shelves of Dymocks, but shouldn’t our understanding of Asian texts be informed by writings from the East?

Many of the texts that are currently available to teachers are those written by Western authors about Asia, or perhaps even second generation Chinese, Koreans, Vietnamese or Japanese writing about their experiences while travelling to their parents’ country of birth. While there is definite value in teaching these texts, I worry that the perspective of these texts may lead to a superficial, one-dimensional understanding of Asia.

How are students to become Asia literate if what we teach is glazed with Western perceptions of what Asia is? Such is the portrayal of Asia in texts coming out of the West focusing on war, child prostitution and arranged marriages. While these serve as important social issues, and are a reality in the East, they should be told by writers from the East, writers who are *a part of* and *understand* the history and culture of that country. Only someone like Kim Sowol could capture the feelings of a Korea under Japanese occupation.

Asia as a region had a rich selection of literature centuries before Australia was established, and I embarked on a quest to discover Asian literature, using what is valued in the East to inform Australian teachers and students. I wanted to make it easier for educators and learners to engage with the multiple perspectives and voices of Asian literature.

**The Road**

Walking along a road,

walking along a snow-swept mountain road,

I see bright crimson berries growing in the snow.

I hear the old tales long forgotten.

I hear songs

that flew far away in childhood times.[[2]](#footnote-2)

With Kim Sowol’s poem in my mind, and the vision of rediscovering the old forgotten tales, my quest in search of quality Asian literature had begun.

Scope of my Journey

Travelling to Singapore, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Los Angeles and New York, I met with a range of scholars who were enthused to know that Asian texts had become a priority for English teaching in Australia. Below is an overview of my journey with the names of scholars. Where relevant, I have included their text suggestions, as well as information on the content of lectures attended. A more thorough overview is available at angelinabea@blogspot.com.au.

*Sydney*

* + Dr. Sung-Ae Lee and Professor John Stephens (Macquarie University)
  + Professor Mridula Chakraborty (University of Western Sydney)
  + Professor Mats Karlsson (University of Sydney)  
    Professor Karlsson made many important reading recommendations for Japanese literature including Natsume Soseki’s *Kokoro* and *Sanshiro*, the poetry of Kenji Miyazawa, Yasunari Kawabata’s *Palm-of-the-hand stories*, and Yukio Mishima’s *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*.
  + Dr. Mabel Lee (University of Sydney)  
    Dr. Mabel Lee is translator of the Nobel Prize winning *Soul Mountain,* written by Gao Xingjian.

*Singapore*

* + Professor Deborah Shamoon (National University of Singapore)  
    Invited to attend her lecture on Mishima’s *Confessions of a Mask*, I was intrigued by Mishima’s story and his controversial writings. In an attempt to rekindle wartime militarism, Mishima committed suicide by *seppuku* in 1970. Considered one of Japan’s greatest writers, Mishima won international acclaim as his works were readily translated into English. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize three times. Although *Confessions of a Mask* is better suited to university students, *Temple of the Golden Pavilion* is a text set for study for high school students in Japan. A fictional account about the burning of the temple in Kyoto, it is considered one of his greatest works.
  + Professor Jane Wong (Nanyang Technological University)  
    Professor Wong invited me to attend her lecture on Singaporean Literature and Culture. Timing was perfect as the undergraduates were studying the works of Kuo Pao Kun and S. Rajaratnam, two significant Singaporean writers. Kuo Pao Kun was a playwright who wrote in English, and is considered the pioneer of contemporary theatre in Singapore. He was imprisoned between 1976 and 1980 without trial because of his controversial ‘leftist’ style of theatre. Having his citizenship stripped and re-granted and then subsequently being awarded the prestigious Singaporean cultural award, Kuo Pao Kun revolutionalised the arts in Singapore. He is best known for ‘The Coffin is too Big for the Hole’. Additional texts that Professor Wong suggested include ‘Breaking the Tongue’ by Vyvyane Loh, as well as ‘Emily of Emerald Hill’ by Stella Kon.

*Cambodia*

* + Dara Pen (International School of Phnom Penh)  
    I met with Dara Pichdara Pen, teacher of Khmer Literature at the International School of Phnom Penh (ISPP). Dara and his wife, Sophea Seng, are graduates of the Royal University of Phnom Penh, and specialists in Khmer literature. I wanted to find texts that celebrated Cambodian history and culture well before the Khmer Rouge. Some of the names mentioned by Dara included Krom Ngoy, whose poetry reinforced the rigid principles and expectations of men and women in Cambodian society. Sadly, his poetry is yet to be translated. I am hoping that in at least a decade or so, we’ll be given more access to the literature in Cambodia through translation.

*Bangladesh*

* + Supernumerary professor Niaz Zaman (University of Dhaka)  
    Professor Zaman started the publishing company writers.ink in 2005, located in Dhaka. She suggested additional texts appropriate for secondary students including *From the Delta*, *Seasonal Adjustments*, *A Golden Age*, *Under the Krishnachura* and *Tree without roots.*

*United States*

* + Professor Michael Emmerich (University of California, Los Angeles)  
    Professor Emmerich’s interests range from the classics (11th century) through to contemporary texts. He has done extensive work in translation, recommending texts such as Banana Yoshimoto’s ‘The Lake’, Sei Shonagon’s ‘The Pillow Book’, translated by Meredith McKinney, Murakami’s ‘After the Quake’, ‘The Tale of Heike’ translated by the renown Royall Tyler, and ‘Poems of the Mountain Home’ by Saigyo.
  + Professor Theodore Hughes (Columbia University)  
    Professor Hughes recommended many texts including ‘Peace Under Heaven’ by Chae Man-Sik, ‘River of Fire and other Stories’ by O Chonghui, A Moment’s Grace: Stories from Korea in Translation, edited by John Holstein, and the Columbia Anthology of Modern Korean Poetry by David R. McCann.

Significant Learning Experiences

Aside from being the best professional learning experience of my career, the study tour became an opportunity to read literary treasures recommended by the reputable scholars already mentioned. Of the texts I have read so far, the following is a short description of some that would be appropriate for an Australian High School setting.

* + Natsume Soseki, *Kokoro*  
    *Kokoro,* perhaps the most significant modern Japanese novel, is taught to Japanese secondary students. Translated beautifully by Australian Dr. Meredith McKinney, the text can be taught to a range of students of varying abilities. At its simplest level, themes related to the human condition can be explored. It can also be studied at a much more complex level with the historical context of the Meiji period and how the revolutionary shift in society and culture had created a generational chasm. A text like Kokoro would have made an excellent addition to the Prescribed Text list for the HSC Area of Study Discovery. I’d be tempted to teach it to students as a Related Text!  
      
    ‘Her words struck me as rather severe, although not particularly offensive. She was not one of those modern women who takes a certain pride in calling attention to the fact that she is intelligent. *She seemed to value far more the heart that lies deep within us.*’[[3]](#footnote-3)
  + An anthology of Sijo poems appropriate to years 7 to 8  
    While everyone has heard of the Japanese Haiku, not many have heard of the Korean Sijo. There are already quite a few resources available from the United States, mainly from Professor David McCann who runs Sijo workshops with secondary teachers through Harvard University. The Sijo, a form of classical Korean poetry that appeared during the Koryo period in the late 14th Century, was a lyric that was sung by educated elites who performed for the royal courts. Lasting for centuries through oral comprehension, the Sijo was not written down until the early 18th Century. An example is as follows:  
      
    The three line structure in Korean

이명한 (1595~1645)

꿈에다니는길이자취가곧난다고하면

임의집창밖에돌길이라도닳으련마는

꿈길이자취없으니그것을슬퍼하노라[[4]](#footnote-4)

In translation  
(I have changed the last line from ‘and that makes me sad’ to ‘filling me with sorrow’).

If the path of my dreams  
left footprints,  
The road outside your window, even of stone,   
would have been worn down.  
But no trace remains on dream paths,*[[5]](#footnote-5)*  
filling me with sorrow.

* + An anthology of modern Korean poems suited to years 9 & 10.   
    An extensive range of modern Korean poetry is available in translation. The journal of Korean literature and culture *Azaleas*, with editor David McCann is a reliable resource to extract texts from. Professor McCann has been very helpful in my literary quest to create an anthology of modern Korean poems suited to years 9 and 10. Below is a list of poems suggested and mostly translated by Professor McCann:

Kim Sowol, *Azaleas*

Yi Sanghwa, *Will Spring Return to Stolen Fields*

Han Yongun, *Your Silence*

Yi Sang, *Crow’s Eye View Poem No. I*

No Ch’ônmyông, *Deer*

Yun Tongju, *Self Portrait*

SôChôngju, *Winter Sky*

Kim Suyông, *Grass*

Kim Namjo, *For Baby*

Pak Chaesam, *The Road Back*

Shin Kyôngnim, *Country Bus Station*

Ko Un, *Great Springtime*

Kim Chiha, *In Burning Thirst*

Kim Sûnghûi, *Life in the Egg 3*

Kim Hyesun, *The Titanic, Reincarnate*

In addition to this list, here is an example of a poem that resonated powerfully with me. It will be a definite inclusion in the anthology:

Kim Chi Ha, *An armful of flowers for the rusted locomotive*  
In South Korea, you can visit the rusted locomotive along the DMZ. The locomotive used to travel through all parts of Asia; now it serves as a mere symbol of times past.

If you could come to me

Holding an armful of full-blossomed lilies

And mountain azaleas,

If you could come to me

With bright smiles more precious than flowers,

And if I could go out and meet you

And tearfully embrace

Your flowers and smiles

Rather than your thoughts and beliefs,

I would not need to travel

From Wonju to Haenam, from Haenam to Wonju,

From the North to the South and from the South to the North.

The old outdated coal-fueled car,

The rusted locomotive,

Is now a curiosity to schoolboys.

That car

Used to run the Kyongeu line,

Now cut in half by the demarcation line

If I could ride on the train and come to you,

I would fill the car

With green camellia leaves, shining citrons,

Fragrant gardenias, and fig blossoms

And meet you, the bright smile on my plain face

As broad as a full moon and as beautiful as peonies.

Standing again on Wonjustreet amidst falling snow

Waiting to go back to the South,

I watch the rushing taxis on the streets

And think of the locomotive, still as a rock

On the severed track of the Kyongeu line

And of the loneliness of my people,

Whom the train never carries.

I pour a cup of Soju on the earth as an offering.

Oh! Flowers

When is the time for your glory![[6]](#footnote-6)

Translated by Won-Chung Kim and James Hand

* + A collection of short stories  
    The quickest way to expose myself to some of the literature available was to read short stories. Some of the stories I read, especially from Murakami and O Chong Hui, would be appropriate for Preliminary or HSC Extension English. For stages 4 and 5, however, the following short stories would make interesting and worthwhile additions to units of study.   
      
    ‘Safar Ali’s American Sojourn’  
    A short story written by Bangladeshi writer Mahbub Talukdar, this story exposes the intercultural experiences of a traditional Bengali father travelling to visit his son in America for the first time. The story captures beautifully the shocking encounters the father, Safar Ali, experiences while living in America with a son he no longer knows.

‘The visit’   
In Korea, military service for all men is compulsory. In this story set in 1951, an aged father visits his son who is serving in the military. Holding a small bundle of rice, the sick and impoverished farmer leaves in search of his son.

‘The Silver Fifty-Sen Pieces’  
Kawabata was winner of the 1968 Nobel Prize in Literature. This short story is an extract from his *Palm-of-the-hand Stories* collection. Set in 1946, the story is a subtle portrayal of how the war impacted the life of one family. It also shows the stark contrast in society with the American occupation post World War II.

*A Different Sita*, Niaz Zaman  
This novel was given to me by Professor Niaz Zaman in Bangladesh and I didn’t realise that she had written it herself until later when I began reading it. The novel captures what it was like for a Bangladeshi family in 1971 during the war of independence from Pakistan. I think students can engage with this because it is so different from what they learn about in their history classes. When asking Professor Zaman about the novel through email, she replied:

*Summer Wars*, Mamoru Hosoda  
*Summer Wars* is from Mamoru Hosoda, director of *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time*. With themes more obvious than *Spirited Away* or *Howl’s Moving Castle* it’ll make a refreshing addition to our anime collection. About the interaction between the real and virtual world called ‘Oz’, it questions the validity of the Internet and whether our information is really safe. It could be taught in conjunction with a media study unit, focusing on a discussion and study of real world hacking scandals. There is also a fascinating TEDx talk by Pablos Holman, which directly addresses some of the themes and issues in *Summer Wars*; allowing students to make connections between their world and the text.

*Peace Under Heaven*, Chae Man-Sik  
This text came recommended for study by Professor Theodore Hughes. While it may be more suited to students studying world literature at a tertiary level, I thought it would be suited to a unit on black comedy or even satire for years 10 and up. *Peace Under Heaven,* a Korean classic well known to my parents’ generation, it follows the protagonist, Master Yun, and the experiences he encounters while living under Japanese colonial rule. Little literature about Korea during this time is known to the West, which is why this novel is so appealing. If not for students, I’d recommend it for holiday reading for teachers.

Conclusion: Where to Next?

In just five weeks I discovered a range of texts that had fulfilled my goals of finding authentic writings from the East. I do, however, realise that I have only scratched the surface. My short-term goal is to produce as many teaching resources as possible to disseminate my findings. I also aim to teach many of the suggested texts to my students at Liverpool Boys High School, and rather than explicitly stating ‘this is an Asian text and we must study it because it is now compulsory’, I think it’ll be more beneficial to introduce these texts just as texts. The themes in the Asian texts I’ve read are more universal than their titles might imply. And perhaps by exposing our students to these texts, we’ll realise that we aren’t so different after all, making our engagement with Asia all the more authentic and rewarding.

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2. Shin Kyong Nim ‘The Road’ in *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Korean Poetry*. David R. McCann (eds), New York, Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. N. Soseki, *Kokoro*, Penguin Group, New York, 2010, p.64. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://m.blog.daum.net/choa1210/1411028> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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6. Kim Chi Ha, ‘An armful of flowers for the rusted locomotive’ in *Heart’s Agony Selected Poems.* trans. W.C.Kim and J.Han, New York, White Pine Press, 1998, p.64. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)