

## Introduction

# Reading through Southeast Asian Contexts: Literature, Modernity, and Politics of Nation-Building

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This special issue is an experiment of Southeast Asians being Southeast Asianists. It includes Southeast Asian scholars' reading of Southeast Asian texts of different genres including films, literature, poetry, and journalistic accounts. By comparing these works side-by-side, our authors reveal fresh insights into the ways that Southeast Asian writers and artists grapple with shared concerns and challenges. In doing so, they also demonstrate the potential for comparative study to generate new forms of appreciation and engagement with individual texts.

The contributions approach texts produced from across the region in comparing with each other, asking the question of how such a way of reading potentially provokes new appreciations of each text while making them engaged in social criticisms that arise with modern nation-building across postcolonial Southeast Asia. These social criticisms target diverse issues including education, education, urbanization, environmental destructions, postwar traumas, non-human narratives, diasporic population and identity, and feminism. The authors featured in this issue explore the ways that art, literature, and media can serve as sites of resistance and

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critique. Through their analysis, they shed light on the ways that Southeast Asian artists and intellectuals are contributing to ongoing debates around national identity, citizenship, and belonging.

One key contribution of this special issue is its emphasis on the importance of centering Southeast Asian voices and perspectives within global conversations about literature, art, and politics. By presenting their research and insights in an international English-language forum, our authors seek to expand the boundaries of Southeast Asian studies beyond traditional Western frameworks. This is crucial for modernity and nation-building in Southeast Asia, as it highlights the multifaceted nature of national identities and the interplay between local and global influences. Comparative literature, in this context, becomes a vital tool for understanding how Southeast Asian nations navigate their postcolonial realities, engage with modernity, and construct their national narratives.

At the same time, the articles underscore the need for continued dialogue and exchange between scholars working both inside and outside the region, recognizing the rich diversity of experiences and viewpoints that exist even among those who share a common geographic or linguistic heritage. By foregrounding this diversity, the special issue also fosters a deeper appreciation for the unique contributions of Southeast Asian authors to world literature.

The first article in this special issue engages Southeast Asian scholarship broadly. Keat Gin Ooi and Chi P. Pham's "Southeast Asians as Southeast Asianists: Promoting and Nurturing Home-grown Scholarship" questions why, since the end of World War II, the study of Southeast Asia has largely been dominated by foreign scholars. Although these non-native scholars have made significant contributions to the field, there is still a lack of Southeast Asian specialists from within the region. Ooi and Pham forward that scholars from the region bring a distinctive approach to Southeast Asian Studies given their diverse backgrounds and experiences, making their work distinct from that of non-Southeast Asian scholars and contributing significantly to the richness of the field.

The next articles in the issue comparatively approach Southeast Asian literatures from various perspectives and

disciplinary orientations. In “Educational Dialogues in Southeast Asian Children’s Literature: Reading the Vietnamese Novel *Ticket to Childhood* (Nguyễn Nhật Ánh 2008) and the Indonesian Novel *The Rainbow Troops: A Novel* (Andrea Hirata, 2005) in Comparison,” Trinh Nguyen Huong and Chi P. Pham demonstrate how education in Southeast Asian developing countries is becoming a top national priority. They argue, however, that true change comes from understanding and respecting the psychological and physiological development of children and promoting interactive teaching and learning. Exhibiting compassion grounded on analysis, the paper highlights the importance of love, trust, and autonomy in child development, urging Asian countries to avoid putting excessive pressure on children in the name of economic growth.

Occupied still with children’s culture, **Nguyen Thi Thanh Huong and Tran Tinh Vy’s** “Politics of Southeast Asian Children’s Literature: The Case of North Vietnam from 1945 to 1975” examines juvenile characters in Vietnamese literature for young readers. During this time, children’s literature in North Vietnam aimed to instill values such as patriotism, revolutionary spirit, and civic consciousness. This study identifies three main character types: the young soldier fighting in the war, the exemplary citizen, and the role model representing bravery and self-reliance—figures that answer to the demands of the revolution over aesthetics. However, **Nguyen and Tran** forward that the politics espoused by contemporary Vietnamese children’s literature has led to stagnation in comparison to the literary production for children in some neighboring countries that approaches relevant issues such as gender, culture, and immigration.

The next article continues the thread of childhood studies in this issue. In “Ecological Education in Southeast Asia Ecocriticism: Ecocritical Approaches to Children’s Literature in Vietnam,” **Bui Thi Thu Thuy** investigates the growing interest in using children’s literature as a tool for ecological education. Indeed, Vietnamese educators view ecocriticism as both a literary analysis tool and a mechanism for fostering environmental awareness among students and the wider community. This study suggests that the Vietnamese ecocritical approach to juvenile literature aligns with the emphasis

on pedagogy evident in international scholarship on children's culture and ecocriticism, particularly in Southeast Asia.

**Phan Tuan Anh and Tran Tinh Vy** move away from children's literature and towards popular genre fiction in Vietnam. Their work, "Southeast Asian Detective Stories from a Post-colonial Perspective: The Case of Vietnamese Detective Stories in the Early Twenty-first Century," demonstrates how detective literature in Vietnam has emerged as a vital force in postcolonial discourse, challenging dominant narratives of power and offering fresh insights into justice, identity, and morality. Despite tropes that may have already been worn out, this genre offers a potent platform for discussing race, gender, nationalism, and imperialism. By analyzing Vietnamese detective novels alongside those of other Southeast Asian nations, **Phan and Tran** observe striking parallels in their use of the form to challenge Western hegemony and articulate local cultures and histories.

The final two articles in this special issue provide critical readings of Philippine texts in comparison with other national literatures in the region. **Nguyễn Thị Thúy Hạnh's** "Issues of Literature, Language, and Identity in Southeast Asia: Poetry by Marjorie Evasco and Dư Thị Hoàn from a Feminist Perspective" compares the poetry of foremost women poets. Their works tackle themes of femininity, feminism, and motherhood. By employing differing languages to unravel their identities, these poets bridge divides and establish a third space for women in Southeast Asia. Utilizing the juxtapositional model of comparative literature and adopting a feminist perspective, this paper reveals shared experiences and common concerns transcending geographical and temporal barriers. This interpretive approach challenges imperialist views of culture and underscores the significance of Southeast Asian literature in the global context.

Dania G. Reyes and Jose Monfred C. Sy compares a Filipino and a Singaporean novel in their paper "Rivers as Counter-monuments in Manila and Singapore: The Urban Poor's Remembrance in Liwayway Arceo's *Canal de la Reina* (1972) and Suchen Christine Lim's *The River's Song* (2013). Both novels feature

the trope of the river, which functions as counter-monuments to modernity and allows for memories and voices often excluded from national narratives to emerge. The authors argue that Arceo and Lim utilize narrativization as a mnemonic process, reminding readers that collective memory should acknowledge sources of injury. By critiquing modern urbanity in Southeast Asia, these literary works offer fresh perspectives on history, memory, and trauma, serving as a reminder that remembered memories hold significance against the forces sustaining the postcolonial nation's networks of power.

Ultimately, we hope that this special issue will inspire further exploration and collaboration around the themes and questions it raises. By amplifying the voices of Southeast Asian scholars and highlighting the vibrant intellectual life of the region, we aim to contribute to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of one of the world's most dynamic and rapidly changing regions.

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