

New Asia Now

Griffith Review 49: New Asia Now

Co-edited by Julianne Schultz and Jane Camens. Accompanying the print edition of *New Asia Now* (volume 1) is an exclusive e-book (volume 2) that includes an additional eighteen pieces. All available from <https://griffithreview.com/editions/new-asia-now/>

GRIFFITH REVIEW –the leading Australian literary, cultural and current affairs quarterly –has always adopted an outward looking perspective, but this year it has undertaken a most ambitious venture: publishing a collection of young writers from the Asia Pacific region. Over its twelve-year life Griffith Review has published a number of editions with a regional focus, most notably the New Zealand themed *Pacific Highways* (2014) and *In the Neighbourhood* (2008), but *New Asia Now* took this to a new level, publishing 49 writers from 20 countries.

Australia is part of the Asian hemisphere, and in recent years there has been increasing public policy and economic focus on ways of engaging with the region. Almost all of this discussion, however, has been about the economic opportunities as the countries in Asia become more prosperous and increasingly middle-class. Asian countries are Australia's main trading partners and increasingly the source of its immigrants; Australians travel extensively in the region, and hundreds of thousands of young people from these countries study at Australian universities.

Although Australian arts groups perform and exhibit widely in many of these countries, cultural exchange has received less attention than trade. But, last year the Australia Council decided to make this cultural exchange a focus of its activities in 2015, as part of its agenda as the leading arts funder of a 'culturally ambitious nation'. Griffith Review proposed and received support for a special edition featuring writers from throughout the region –in an endeavour to showcase with more depth and nuance the issues that shape the lives of people as they are lived today. We decided to limit the edition to those writers born since 1970, writers who had grown up in what we now think of as the *new Asia* –post war, post colonialism, post revolution –and who were likely to become increasingly influential in their own countries and abroad.

Griffith Review 49 New Asia Now

Edited by Julianne Schultz and Jane Camens.
Maggie Tiojakin, Joshua Ip, Sheng Keyi, Murong Xuecun,
Miguel Syjuco, Annie Zaidi, Michelle Law, Omar Musa.



Detail from: *Nomads 2014*, by Baatarzorig Batjargal, Mongolia b.1983.

Much of the writing about Asia that is available in the west has come from an older generation of writers, and is often framed by earlier political and economic situations. We were determined to showcase the voices of younger writers; not only did many of the authors address contemporary issues, a number wrote about the process of interrogating the past, a past which was often glossed over as they were growing up. This edition presents investigations of the past in relation to China, Hong Kong, Japan, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Kashmir, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, the Philippines, and in the writing by Australian writers who have a connection by heritage or experience in the region.

As we embarked on the task of selecting the articles to be included, we realised how brilliantly these writers were addressing the core issue of making sense of the reality behind the talk of the Asian Century. The complexities of living in rapidly changing, yet traditionally informed societies were teased out. Similarities and differences were thrown into shape relief. Reflecting on different forms of political organisation, the way democracy is evolving, the points of optimism and resistance, were all themes that recurred. Interestingly the fault lines also recurred – particularly around issues of corruption and dynastic power, and the place of women.

This has been a huge and ambitious project, and a unique example of cultural diplomacy –some of the authors felt that they could say things in an internationally published journal that they could not say at home. A number of the authors have expressed their gratitude for this opportunity and explained the formal and informal retribution they might receive if they published these essays at home. One Indonesian writer explained that after years of being censored, to write in her authentic voice was a life-affirming gift for which she was deeply grateful.

By publishing in this way, not only are Australian and international audiences given an insight into the richness and diversity of regional writing, but it demonstrates Australian commitment to the exchange of ideas and artistic excellence and cultural ambition. *New Asia Now* is not only a beautifully written and crafted collection, but it is the starting point for a much deeper exchange.

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New Asia Now: only connect

Review of Schultz, J. & J. Camens (eds.) 2015.
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Review by Richard Newman

THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAY, memoir, reportage, fiction, and poetry –an assembly typical of Griffith Review –both reacts to and emerges from the pluralism and ambition of 'the Asian Century'. It is, in a substantial sense, this quality or posture of reactive, receptive, critical awareness that helps to constitute what Jane Camens and Julianne Schultz, in the volume's introduction, call 'New Asia'. *New Asia* is not a matter simply of time, nor purely of geography; it is also alomb, daring, difficult retrospection, hope, anger, and intelligence.

The introduction affirms that the following work is that of a younger generation, born since 1970, "one that has grown up during a period of extraordinary change: countries decolonised, civil wars fought and won, political systems turned inside out, authoritarian states fallen to democracies." Murong Xuecun's opening essay, 'Wake up while the flowers are blossoming: Chinese thinking in the age of the internet', reflects on the opportunities for individualistic chat, jokes, and complaints, made available to an expressive Chinese public through the internet. But this online botany is not quite, as Murong makes clear, the signal of a political system decisively turning or being turned inside out; it is in many ways, less encouragingly, presage to an authoritarian power growing more flexible in order to effect different, profound constraint. A population exultantly breathes out, and coils (firewalls, arrests, crackdowns of various kinds) implacably tighten. The awareness, the interconnected wakefulness, of the Asian Century this volume rightly values and richly communicates, is visible, audible, and very largely unacceptable to authoritarian governments unfallen to democracy and enduringly hostile to the gentlest dynamics of modern cultural life.

Powerful uncertainties

Joshua Ip's poem 'the umbrella men' offers affectingly well-judged comment on the necessary, poetical unpredictability of authentically shared political activity in Asia and elsewhere. Ip's poem registers, with some pathos, how sluggish and

impetuous and reversible political change can be –how fierce, for the time being, is New Asia's dialectical clinch with Old Asia. And André Dao's essay, 'All for the people, without the people: Asian values, democracy and human rights', properly and powerfully includes Australia in a vision of promising, but often faltering social change in our region. As Dao writes, "The campaign leading up to the 1967 referendum, which granted Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the right to vote, stretched out over ten long years. That campaign was –it had to be –an incredibly broad and powerful social movement that crossed the usual divides of class, gender, race and ideology. But following the successful referendum, that movement splintered. In the nearly fifty years since that watershed, progress on Aboriginal rights in Australia has failed to live up to the promise of that campaign." Dao's unsparing essay is the highlight of this collection. Victory and defeat are not the sole possible outcomes of struggle, and liberal democracy and victory are not synonymous.

Miguel Syjuco's essay, 'Beating dickheads: The writer's role in defective democracies', is good on this point: on the compatibility of an expanding middle-class and a stable government with rancid power-hoarding and astonishing inequality. The artistic expression of historical identities and memories helps, but culture is consistently marked for destruction. Keane Shum's piece of reportage, 'The way one fell', concerning democratic reform in Hong Kong, cuts effectively to the past to illustrate the city's long-running churn of self-definition and (brutal and bureaucratic) subjection: "The Song Dynasty was steward of the greatest technological advancements man had ever known. But all the art and literature, the scientific breakthroughs, even gunpowder, could not hold at bay marauding Mongol invaders from the north, and in a string of military defeats and naïve alliances, the Song Dynasty kept retreating, always south."

Displacement and shame

Tammy Law's series of photographs, 'Burma untold', is another significantly valuable part of this edition of *Griffith Review*. Images of great rural peace are undercut by captions indicating the poverty that exists alongside agricultural fertility, and the terrifying displacement of Burmese people within and without their country's borders. Succeeding photographs show some of the Burmese resettled abroad, some longing to return to a socially peaceful homeland.

Jessie Cole's brief memoir, 'The Asian invasion', is worth mentioning in relation to this manifestly unthreatening picture of refugees; Cole throws back on itself Pauline Hanson's hypocritical loathing for people allegedly refusing to assimilate. Anne Zaidi's memoir, 'Embodying Venus: Memories of shame and shamelessness', turns from the national, trans-national, oil-spill dimensions of Hanson's strident embarrassment, to the personal, "private view of our bodies" she acquired as a girl at a convent college-hostel in Ajmer, Rajasthan. Zaidi captures and communicates with understated moral force the fairly mechanical, fairly taken-for-granted twist whereby the shame flowing from acts of "statutory rape at the very least" coalesced not around the men responsible but around the bodies of the girls. It is detailed, vital commentary on the stigmatised, unaccepted power of the female body.

A new generation of writers and thinkers

The volume does an admirable, often acute, job of illustrating what it is, what it might increasingly be, about new generations of writers and thinkers in Asia that gives some cause or license for the introduction's positive-spirited outlook. This regularly consists of scathing realism and honest scepticism about political dogma; Asian orthodoxy and imported liberalism alike. *New Asia Now* is a populous, vigorous, diverse collection, with an interesting and powerful belligerence about a number of its pieces. There is a fierce excited consciousness that not knowing what might happen is no good reason to stop or slow down. It's proper, and useful, to say that efforts to hold back time are truly efforts to hold back people, to hold down imagination, to limit a vocabulary. And this is an entertaining series of buoyant, severe, spirited rejoinders.

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References

- 1 This is a modified version of the original review written by Richard Newman. All changes made for space requirements, by editors of The Newsletter.