

## **Asia Pacific Writers & Translators (APWT) and Griffith University**

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### **Ideas and realities: Creative writing in Asia today**

When it comes to addressing creative writing as a topic of inquiry, the craft and the written product are usually held in two different realms. Often a collection brings together a body of writing – as essays or short stories – to celebrate and highlight finished and polished pieces of work. The process of how the final pieces came into being, often, is irrelevant. With the exception of studies produced at the postgraduate level usually, the process, pedagogical concerns, inspirations, and the discipline of creative writing are dealt with separately in studies and collections that address each specifically.

This special edition of *TEXT* draws from the pool of participants from the Asia Pacific Writers & Translators' (APWT) 9<sup>th</sup> annual gathering in Guangzhou, China in November 2016. The issue compiles a selection of essays about the craft, pedagogy of creative writing and translation, alongside creative outputs in the form of fiction and personal essay. Inspired by the theme 'Ideas and Realities: Creative Writing in Asia Today', the conference brought together over 120 established and emerging practitioners and creative writing academics from the Asia Pacific region and beyond.

While APWT emphasises on the inclusion of participants and issues about what is normally defined and known as 'Asia' from a Western perspective, it operates beyond that traditional description. APWT's understanding of Asia rests on the UNSECO definition and includes countries as far as Iran and Turkey. Moreover, that inclusion is not limited. One of APWT's main concerns is about the interaction, engagement, and representation of that region with the rest of world. The 2016 annual gathering was a true reflection of this diversity, as delegates from over 23 countries from around the world, from as far as Europe and America, participated.

Central to the arguments was the state of creative writing as a form of art for practitioners, teachers and literary translators. Embedded in the discourse was also an engagement with the region – or the idea of Asia and 'Asianness' through literature and the way participants – some from Asia and some not – related on and identified with this concept.

Since its inception ten years ago, APWT has become one of the oldest and most reputable literary networking organisations in the Asia Pacific region, acting as a real hub where lasting connections have been formed between people and people and institutions internationally. It has, consequently, made significant regional contributions to those in the creative writing industry. APWT has also become a platform for the projection and presentation of voices from different countries to wider audiences, and a nexus where teachers, and practitioners alike, can draw on each other's experiences to enrich the craft of creative writing.

This collection, to be launched at the celebration of APWT's 10<sup>th</sup> annual gathering in Bali in October 2017, reflects the spirit of APWT and what it stands for. It highlights

APWT's contribution to creating networks in the Asia Pacific region over the last decade; offers an insight into the various modes of creative writing teaching practices across some Asian countries and provides a platform for diverse creative voices from the region as well as the space for the literary exploration of various connections to Asia.

APWT's history and longstanding contribution to the literary scene of the region is highlighted by novelist, professor of English and creative writing at The University of Adelaide and China cultural expert Nicholas Jose in what was the opening keynote speech, 'That certain cut: towards a characterology of APWT.' Jose pays tribute to and foregrounds what he calls the 'unique profile and formula' of APWT and contextualises APWT's importance to literary communities.

Creative writing academics and APWT participants at tertiary levels from across Asia, offer invaluable insight and first-hand knowledge of the various practices and modes of creative writing curriculum enacted across the region. Professor Dai Fan from Sun Yat Sen University China, APWT's 2016 host, for example, highlights the processes of opening up and managing one of China's first creative writing courses in English. James Shea, an American lecturer at Hong Kong's Baptist University, offers an insight into Chinese-language creative writing in Hong Kong's tertiary institutions through three case studies. Kawika Guillermo, similarly an American in Hong Kong, explores his experience of language and creativity through teaching creative writing in English as a second language in Hong Kong to Chinese students in his essay 'How to drown: bilingual creative writers in a sea of meanings.'

In their epistolary essay 'Dylan-esque gibberish and cloud gates,' Ravi Shankar and Tim Tomlinson, both writers of prose and poetry who have lived and taught across Asia and America, share some of their experience in a conversation through example, anecdote, and comparisons of Asian and US classrooms and students.

In his witty essay, 'A brief plea for East-West literary bridge-building,' Sri Lankan born journalist and writer, Nurry Vittachi, now living in Hong Kong, offers an explanation on the difference of story structures between the Eastern and Western literary traditions, providing an interesting case study into the situation of 'Asian' writing within the world context of literary prizes. Ingrid Woodrow's discursive and fragmentary essay is a beautifully rendered attempt at bridging these narrative lines running between East and West using the ancient Japanese narrative art of *zuihitsu* as inspiration a technique of made famous by Sei Shōnagon's fragmentary text *The Pillow Book*.

Creative writers in this issue, of very diverse backgrounds, display and engage with some of the themes immanent in APWT events. In his evocative story, *Mr. Goes*, about a group of students learning to become teachers in Quetta, Sahib Nazari, an Afghan student living on the Gold Coast, displays the complexity of identity and relationships through the interplay of languages. Adam Narnst a graduate of Griffith University's creative writing program willingly unravels in the urban jungle of ex-pat collectives in Shanghai in his aptly titled personal essay 'The language barrier' and Clint Jewson shares an unsettling vision of the world in his short story 'I don't understand,' where in a parallel reality perhaps not so far from our own the United Nations dispenses control in global conflict zones through 'immersive' techniques.

A number of essays reflect on the theme of identity and relating to the idea of Asia. In his discursive essay 'Writing about Asia from Australia: notes towards avoiding a

firm view’ – part exegesis, part literary analysis – Patrick Allington, uses the circumstances of his early childhood to frame his interest in ‘Asia,’ and analyses the act of writing about Asia from Australia (and from the West).

Jose Dalisay, in ‘Literature in the time of *Tokhang*,’ questions the role of a writer’s responsibility in representing social issues by recounting his harrowing personal experience of the Philippine Government’s war on drugs.

In his engaging piece, ‘The travel writer in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,’ Robin Hemley brings an interesting perspective into the mix, questioning the idea of national identity in an era of globalisation through an examination of travel and travel writing. He asks ‘what is the nation from which we travel and what is the nation to which we travel?’ It’s a position that mirrors the make-up of many APWT members, many of whom are global citizens claiming multiple national identities. Hemley’s essay touches a reflective cord with APWT and its participants.

While the essays in this collection offer a glimpse into some of the concepts engaged with at any APWT event, they are a reflection of some of the most pressing matters – from pedagogical approaches, to creative engagements – in what can be broadly defined as the literature and voices from the Asia Pacific region, it offers just that – a glimpse. The ideas and realities of creative writing in Asia today are as varied as the people who occupy these spaces. We hope this issue offers an insightful introduction to some of the ideas and realities explored at APWT events and contributes significantly to what is an ongoing conversation.

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