

LITERARY SECTION

WRITING FICTION: IMAGINATION, HISTORY, AND VOICE IN SINGAPORE FICTION

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About the Author

Suchen Christine Lim is the prize-winning author of *Fistful of Colours*, which was awarded the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize in 1992. Her fourth novel, *A Bit of Earth*, was shortlisted for the same prize in 2004. *The Amah: A Portrait in Black and White*, a co-authored play, was awarded the Short Play Merit Prize in 1989. Her other novels are *Ricebowl* and *Gift from the Gods*. Her novels are used as texts in literature programs in Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Australia and the US.

She has also published short stories and children's stories. Her latest publication is a non-fiction book, *Stories of the Overseas Chinese*. Currently she is putting together her first collection of short stories and writing her fifth novel.

In 1997, she was awarded a Fulbright fellowship to attend the International Writers' Program at the University of Iowa. She is the first Singapore writer honored as the University of Iowa's International Writer-in-Residence in 2000. She has given readings in Malaysia, the Philippines, USA., UK, Australia and New Zealand, and has been writer-in-residence in Myanmar, Australia, and Scotland.

Editor's Note

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INTRODUCTION

I am deeply honored to be here in Ateneo University before such a distinguished audience. Let me begin my talk with two stories about a professor and a writer from your beautiful country, the Philippines, and how they made an impact on the life of my fragile imagination at a time in the 1980s and 1990s when Singapore, my beautiful island, took great pride in being a robust, hard headed and pragmatic nation. (But we have changed. We have had a makeover. We recognize that we have a heart; we have passion and creativity.)

This is my second visit to the Philippines, but my connection to this country began in 1980 or thereabouts when I took an elective course on the literature of the Philippines at the National University of Singapore. It was taught by Professor Lucille Hosilos, the visiting professor from the University of the Philippines. I was a college teacher on study leave then. I was pretending to read for my honors degree in literature, when in fact, I was

secretly trying to write. But what it was that I was trying to write, I didn't know at the time. And that's the thing about the imagination. It has to stumble about in the land of chaos before knowing what it is doing. So I was very shy and didn't want people to know that I was not writing my honors thesis.

I recall leaving home at 6:15 every morning so that I could be in the university by 7:30 and I wrote in the canteen till 10 when the first lecture or tutorial began. I had an old 10-pound Olivetti typewriter that I lugged on the bus to university every day. Manual typewriters were noisy. I needed a place where I could type without disturbing my fellow students. Professor Hosilos was very kind. She didn't ask too many questions. She probably knew I wasn't writing my thesis. But nevertheless, she brushed aside university rules and regulations, and quietly offered me the use of her office when she went on sabbatical. Her kindness gave me "a room of my own" to write what turned out to be my first novel, *Ricebowl*. In the privacy of her room, my imagination wrote its way out of chaos. I enjoyed that room for a month before the Head of the Social Sciences Department evicted me. (But that's another story.)

Now the writer from the Philippines who made an impact on my writing life is your eminent National Artist, Frankie Sionil Jose. I met Manong Sionil Jose when I won the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize in 1992. He was one of three judges with Professor Edwin Thumboo. What impressed me most at the prize-giving ceremony was that he ignored me, the winner. He spoke to those who did not win so that they could ask him questions about their writing. A few years later when he returned to the National University of Singapore, he asked to meet me. And that was when I felt his detached kindness. I use the word "detached" as a compliment in the way Buddhists use the word to describe a kindness that does not expect gratitude. At that time, I was buried in the Ministry of Education, struggling to write while working full-time as a curriculum specialist. Frankie, who was in his seventies then, asked to have lunch with me. I can still recall the scene. We were in the back seat of a taxi driving past the Botanic Gardens and Gleneagles Hospital. Blazing sunlight on the white walls of the hospital. Frankie took my hand in the taxi. I was taken aback. What was this older writer trying to do? He said, "Suchen, you must write. Don't ever give up. Write." Those words were like drops of water on a parched soul.

Looking back to these two encounters with the professor and the writer, I realize now that the imagination of the beginning writer needs time, space, and a kind word to boost her courage to stumble about in the valley of darkness and chaos, to write her way towards the story or novel or poem or play that she was meant to write.

THE GENESIS OF A NOVELIST LIES IN THE IMAGINATION

Let me illustrate with two stories about beginnings. After the publication of my first novel, *Ricebowl*, I was minding my own business one afternoon when a woman popped into my head. She was painting furiously with her bare hands on a huge canvas. I sat down and wrote what I saw. Then I called a friend and read out the two pages to him. Powerful, he said. Yeah, but who's she? I didn't know. All I knew then was that this woman was too strong for me to handle. So I locked up the two pages and went on to write my second novel, *Gift From The Gods*, to test if I could write. I thought *Ricebowl* was a fluke. About three years later, those two pages that I had locked up in my drawer became part of the opening chapter of *Fistful of Colours*, my third novel, which covers eighty years of Singapore's history. And the woman painter who painted with her bare hands became Suwen, the main character.

Suwen, the product of my imagination, came first, then, the history of Singapore followed, almost like another main character in the novel. The history inside the novel is the result of my tracking of the three main women characters and their family background and relationships.

This was the novel awarded the inaugural Singapore Literature Prize. But after winning the prize, I felt drained. I felt I had nothing more to write. Then one afternoon, I saw an image of a Chinese boy with a queue. He was squatting in a boat on a wide river of no name. Time and place unknown. I saw his back. I couldn't see his face. For weeks, I puzzled over this recurring image as I went about my work in the Ministry of Education, writing English language curriculum materials. A boy wearing a queue, squatting on a boat. That was it. A fragment was lodged in my head.

WE WORK WITH WHAT ENTERS OUR IMAGINATION

I did not plan to write *A Bit of Earth*. In those days, I didn't understand my own creative writing process. So now I will try to recall as faithfully as I can what actually happened. When I did pay attention to the image in my head, I either realized or decided subconsciously that the Chinese boy with the pigtail was fifteen years old. And judging by his queue and his attire, he must be someone from the nineteenth century. One week later, I named him Wong Tuck Heng. When this name came to me, I realized that he was Cantonese. If he had been Hokkien, for example, then his surname "Wong" would have been either "Ong" or "Ooi" or "Wee." Same Chinese character but different sounds. And translated into English, different spellings as well.

At around the same time, I was reading books on Malayan history because I reckoned I had to find out more about nineteenth century Malaya. I am a history buff, and I was a member of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. One morning, I joined Malaya and China together. I gave Wong Tuck Heng a tragic family history in China. His father was a poet. The beheading of his father made him flee to Malaya where he became a tin mining coolie. And that was how I found my protagonist in my fourth novel, *A Bit of Earth*.

IMAGINING HISTORY IS PART OF THE FUN OF WRITING HISTORICAL FICTION

Imagine this scene somewhere in nineteenth century Malaya—two men getting off a boat. Musa Talib and Tai-kor Wong were trading partners bringing supplies up the Sungei Perak. The year was 1873 just before British colonial rule in the Malay state of Perak.

“It’s no good, Che’Wong, for a man to be alone,” Musa had said to him....
“The Almighty Creator made women for men’s enjoyment and we men have to show appreciation by taking pleasure in them.”

Tai-kor Wong thought that the Indian-Muslim’s view of women was not so different from his own. As he told Musa then, women were teacups and men, teapots. “One teapot can pour into many teacups. Never one teacup into many teapots.” Musa had laughed at the image. “It shows that you Chinamen have wit like us Malays. Let’s drink to that, my friend!” (*A Bit of Earth* 103)

This bit of inspired dialogue came to me one day when I was reading an article in the journal of Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (MBRAS) about the history of trade in Malaya. That was how I imagined some aspect of Malay-Chinese relations to be before the arrival of the British. I might be wrong. I might be right. Perhaps such conversations never happened in those days between a Chinese trader and a Malay trader. Perhaps they did. Who knows? That kind of colonial history was never captured. But what we do know is that nothing unites men more than wine, women, and song. And we do know that there were inter-racial unions in those days. Nawawi, a minor character in the novel, was a product of such a union.

A Bit of Earth begins with the stoning and drowning of an adulteress in a fictional village called Bandong, in the state of Perak. This scene in the novel is based on a footnote

in my secondary school history textbook. The adultery of a Cantonese woman and a Hakka tin miner had occurred at a time when the Cantonese and Hakka clans were fighting for tin mining rights in the Malay state of Perak. This adultery case was cited as one of several causes of the tin mining wars in nineteenth century Perak that eventually led to the British colonization of Malaya. This historical footnote was subsequently considered trivial and it was deleted when government-appointed committees of textbook writers were asked to write history textbooks instead of independent-minded professors.

But that colorful footnote stayed in my mind. The footnote gave the barebones of a human tragedy: an adulterous Cantonese woman was punished because she fell in love with the enemy. The fate of her Hakka lover was not mentioned. The footnote also suggests that national history is not simply about a string of wars or boring constitutional developments; that individual and personal events like marriage or adultery could change a nation's fate. Like the fluttering of a butterfly's wings that sets off a chain of unforeseen consequences.

I read and wrote reams of rubbish before I arrived at the start of my novel. Glancing back over my shoulders now, I see those reams of rubbish as necessary rubbish. I threw away pages. The act of throwing the discarded pages down the rubbish chute was cathartic and therapeutic. It taught me not to cling to my writing.

The subject matter of the novel is the lode of tin ore below the surface. One has to remove the rocks and topsoil. Dig it out. In this case, it is the history of a diverse people becoming attached to the land of one's birth and one's adoption. It is based on a piece of historical fact—the Perak tin mining wars in the 1870s. The novel spans a period of forty years to 1912, the rise of the Republic of China. In my Author's Note, I wrote, "*A Bit of Earth* is a work of fiction based on fact sculpted by the imagination."

Storytelling is embellishment. At some point the imagination takes over. Imagining the history of the powerless deleted by the powerful is part of the fun of writing historical fiction. Something that the Czech novelist, Milan Kundera, demonstrated so admirably in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, and his novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. My imagination took the deleted footnote in my secondary school history textbook and embellished it into the first two chapters of my fourth novel, *A Bit of Earth*.

Now imagine a village square. A woman is tied up and made to kneel in front of a crowd of tin miners and their women. They are howling for blood and stoning her.

"Throughout ... the victim maintained a stoic expression. Is it strength or indifference? [Tuck Heng] wondered. He had never witnessed the punishment of an

adulteress before, although he had heard stories of how such women were drowned in rivers and lakes back home in Sum Hor. He peered at the woman as he would a trapped rat. Even a rat would shriek when tortured, but she neither cringed nor whimpered.

Her silence incensed the mob.

“Whip the bitch! Whip the lust out of her!”

The women started to flail her with bamboo poles. The louder the men urged, the harder the women hit. It was as if they had to prove their own fidelity to moral law.”

Chitra Sankaran, who lectures in the National University of Singapore, has written an interesting article on this chapter. She discusses silence as the resisting voice of the powerless. Imagining history enables us to access other silenced voices, for example, the silenced voices of women in a male dominated society.

Imagine a Chinese temple. Go inside and listen to the women talking about Ah Fah, the adulteress, who had just been drowned. They tell her side of the story.

“Ah Lai’s mother, did you know that Ah Fah used to cry her heart out? Each time we went to the river to wash clothes. I’ll go mad soon, she said to me one day. My mother-in-law is turning me into a mad woman.”

The other women tried to stop her (from going on) but she pushed them away.

“Ah Lai’s mother. Your son is twenty-eight this year. But inside his head he’s only six years old. When you locked him in the bedroom with Ah Fah, he kicked and bit her. She showed me the teeth marks. And the lashes. You caned her every night, she told me.... A mother-in-law is the sky, and daughters-in-law are the earth. You can do anything to her as long as she’s under your roof. So she looked for another roof.”

Ah Lai’s mother was strangely quiet after that.” (*A Bit of Earth* 22, 24)

SINGAPORE’S URBAN HISTORY IS A HISTORY OF ERASED PLACES AND VOICES

Place denotes ethnicity in colonial Singapore’s history. When Stamford Raffles planned the city of Singapore, he followed the practice of the English empire builders,

which was to divide and rule. He marked out on a map where each ethnic community would live: the Malays in Geylang Serai, the Chinese in Chinatown along South Bridge Road, the Indians in Little India along Serangoon Road, and the Europeans in Tanglin along Napier Road and the Botanic Garden. Although we still have Geylang, Little India, and Chinatown today, they are now ethnic attractions for tourists. I would like to talk about place and voice in Singapore fiction by reading to you an extract from *Fistful of Colours*. In this scene, Zul, an English-educated, Malay Muslim journalist, is waiting for Janice Wong, who is leaving home and family because her Chinese Christian parents are against her pending marriage to him.

Zul parked his car in the cool shadow of the Geylang Christian Assembly of Christ Church ... He looked at the cars whizzing past him. This Geylang neighborhood was a far cry from the one in which he had spent most of his boyhood. Gone were those familiar landmarks which had given his boyhood a sense of stability because he had once thought they were eternal, suspended in time even though the rest of Singapore was changing. But those totems of his youth, like everything else, had been bulldozed and demolished to make room for the new concrete boxes erected in place of the Flame trees, the angsanas, the lallang patch, the muddy ditch (where he'd caught his first guppy) and the roadside barber's stall under the angšana tree. Ah Seng, the Chinese barber, in khaki shorts and cotton singlet, cut the hair of all the neighborhood boys, right there where the shops were now. Coarse white powder flying in the air, joking, scolding and cajoling the boys, where was the man now? The price was always fifty cents a haircut for children. How old was he when he was brought to Ah Seng for his first haircut? He couldn't remember; but judging by the remembered scene of his bawling and shrieking when Ah Seng lifted him up and sat him on the high cane chair, he must have been five or thereabout. "Mali! Mali, Machik! Potong kepala! Lima puloh sen sa'ja!" Ah Seng had grinned wickedly, and he'd kicked the man's shin, all the while shrieking for dear life. "Mak! Mak! Ta' mahu!" He didn't want to have his head cut off! "Bukan potong kepala, Zul! Gunting rambut sahaja!" his mother had laughed till the tears rolled down her face ...

When he looked up, the view before his parked car was the neat row of two-storey HDB shophouses which had taken the place of the zinc and wood shops of the Chinese grocers and Indian dhobis. With a sharp pang, he recognized what he had known all his life. That, as always, it is the outer physical rim of our social hub

which changes faster than its core of age-old prejudices, cock-eyed perceptions and irrational fears. For as long as we mix and mingle in the comfortable confines of the marketplace, all is well; move beyond that into the personal and the intimate areas, then the hub quivers and shakes like a machine into which one has accidentally poured water instead of oil.” (142-4)

The erasure of physical and linguistic landscapes and with them, our dialect voices and collective communal memories, that inner terrain which is part of society’s intra-psychic landscape, appears to be inevitable. Blame that on progress, globalization, the will of one man or the ruling party, I don’t know. Everywhere in Singapore and elsewhere, vast tracts of land are bulldozed, flattened, and built over until the land is quite unrecognizable. Some pain to a community is involved, especially that of the original inhabitants. When a building or landmark is torn down or turned into a commercial tourist attraction, the individual has little to anchor him to the land. His or her voice is lost among the rubble. Some places in Singapore are subjected to so many physical changes that new places spring up (in the course of a few months) and within a few years, the memories associated with that old place are gone, and a new generation of voices has taken over. As a result, our voices and memories are erased, and most probably, this is the reason that led Singapore novelist Gopal Baratham, one of our most important writers, to name his last collection of short stories, *The City of Forgetting*. One of the roles of the Singapore writer is to remember and not forget other voices, and to chronicle the experiences of individuals, especially those who do not speak English or Mandarin, to add to the nation’s collective memory.

TO IMAGINE SINGAPORE’S HISTORY IS TO IMAGINE HER VOICES

Languages and dialects are places of location and identity. The linguistic landscape of a place offers the writer rich possibilities, experiences, attitudes and memories, and they influence the way we use language. Irish writers and poets like James Joyce and Seamus Heaney, Jewish American writers like Bernard Malamud, Indian writers like Vickram Seth, African writers like Chinua Achebe, and Filipino writers like Sionil Jose and Charlson Ong had dug into their memories of non-English languages spoken or heard during their childhood to mine the rich lode of linguistic resources and experiences.

In past forty-three years since our national independence, Singapore writers, more so than other writers in Southeast Asia, have to deal with the rapid changes of our linguistic landscape. In the 1980s, the government discouraged the use of Chinese regional

languages. Almost overnight, Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew or Hakka operas and films on television and cinema were banned. Recently, there has been a quiet relaxation on the ban. Today, after a quarter of a century, there are regular radio news broadcasts in the Chinese regional languages.

As a writer, when I return to the dialects I had heard during my childhood, certain characters spring to life and I have phrases and sayings that, even if written in grammatical English, would situate the character in Southeast Asia at a particular time. For example, "Umbrellas have different handles; people have different fates." This is not an English proverb. It is not a saying by Mandarin speakers. It is a folk or colloquial saying of the Cantonese immigrants implying that such is the reality of life that people have different lives and fortunes.

I am going to read to you snatches of dialogue. These dialogues could not have happened in modern Singapore or Malaysia. The linguistic landscape today is very different from that of yesterday when the Chinese dialects flourished and gave a person his or her own identity associated with the old homeland, village, and clan.

Imagine Chinatown in the 1900s. A crowd gathered in front of the shophouses. A man stood on a soapbox.

"Pigs and dogs! Sons of sows! Oh how they suck us dry!" the great bullhorn voice of a tua-tow bellowed out in the provincial Hockchia dialect. "We give them our sweat and blood! What did they give us? Ask the towkays! Ask!"

"Nothing! Nothing!" the mob roared its reply in the Hockchia dialect which tied them to one another like an invisible umbilical cord.

In the murky shadows, flattened against the walls of the shophouses, Ong Ah Buck and his Hokkien clansman listened to that bullhorn voice, a guttural voice growling like an enraged tiger, a voice which could send out men in the hundreds to burn and assault other men of other tongues. It spoke no Hokkien, no Mandarin. It had no learning. It had, worst of all, in the eyes of the two men, no earning power. The Hockchia were the poorest of all the poor rickshaw coolies in Chinatown. But this Hockchia voice had the power to move poor men. It could repeat what was said in the shops and marketplaces with the roar of a hungry tiger.

"Patriots! Countrymen! Clansmen! Sons of the Chinese earth! We are the fucking hungry! We are the fucking poor! The homeless and the homesick! But can we the fucking poor make sacrifices for our motherland? Can or not? Say! Can or not?"

"Can! Can!" the mob chanted. (*Fistful of Colours* 100)

You will have noticed that the writer in English can create a verisimilitude of the dialect used, but not the actual Hockchia words themselves. Certain linguistic markers, similar to that used in native English speech, are also used to show the social status of the speaker and the low register at which the dialect was used.

The next example is that of a Chinese dialect spoken at a higher register denoting the higher social status and educational level of the speakers. The wife of Wong Tuck Heng, chief of the Cantonese clan, is consulting a monk in a Buddhist temple. The British authorities are about to deport her husband to China. Mrs Wong, who does not want to return to China with him, fears that her reluctance is a betrayal of her homeland.

“Betray is a very strong word, Mrs. Wong. We have a saying in China, ‘Enter earth, sprout roots’. Do you understand my meaning?”

“Are you saying that I’ve entered the earth of this land and sprouted roots, Si-fu?”

His eyes twinkled with gentle humor as he gazed at a weeping willow he had planted next to a coconut palm. Then speaking in a low soft voice, he turned to her.

“From sunrise to sunset, from one day to the next, till our black hair turns white, we eat, we sleep, we bear children and we watch them grow. We watch them get married and in turn bear children of their own. How time flies, we say to ourselves. Then one day we look down at our feet and we’re surprised. Roots have sprouted in the ground of our daily living.” (*A Bit of Earth* 379-80)

Elsewhere I have done the same thing with Malay speech, but I have added the actual Malay words (to indicate that as a writer, born in Malaysia and raised in Singapore, I am honoring our national language which is Malay). The next example, from *Fistful*, is based on Zul’s recollection of his father and Ah Hock, the man his father had saved during the war.

“Telima kasih, telima kasih,” Ah Hock cried when he woke up after a long sleep.

“Boleh cakap Melayu?” my father asked.

“Sikit boleh, sikit, sikit!”

My father spoke quietly to Ah Hock in pasar Malay, I think, and as I imagine the scene now, I believe it must have dawned on my father then that the essence of our communication lies not so much in words as in the feelings behind the words.

“Hati yang baik.” My father’s kindly look and tone were received with gratitude; Ah Hock grasped his hand and murmured “Telima kasih” over and over again, mispronouncing his Malay words and getting the intonation all wrong. However, that did not bother my father. Neither did it bother Ah Hock that my father’s Hokkien had sounded terrible. Their feelings of sympathy as fellow sufferers gave their words a force which accurate pronunciation could never have. (277-8)

The complexities of the Southeast Asian linguistic and multicultural landscapes inform and shape Southeast Asian writing in English. This is a theme I have explored in an earlier paper delivered in Universiti Putra Malaysia in 2004. And I quote:

For the Singaporean and Malaysian writer, the linguistic landscape is far more complex than that of the Irish writer dealing with English and Gaelic, or the divide between Protestants and Catholics. In his general introduction to “The Fiction of Singapore (up to 1990),” professor and poet Edwin Thumboo gave an illustration of the linguistic complexity that the fiction writer, writing in English, faces.

“[T]hough [the fiction] relied on the experience of one individual, the writing in English increasingly included characters from other communities—Malay, Chinese, Tamil, Eurasian, ex-Colonial—each with its types and sub-types. This expansion in the range of types is exacerbated by linguistic and other changes across the generations, and within the ethnic groups. Among Chinese, it is not unusual to find dialect-speaking grandparents, bilingual parents and grandchildren competent in English and Mandarin but not dialect. Grandparents and grandchildren do not therefore share any language. Ambitious fiction cannot afford to be too much neater than life.... Let us say then that there are two uncles, the first who speaks excellent English and poor dialect and no Mandarin—having been schooled from the age of ten in England—and the second with excellent dialect, fair Mandarin and and poor English, chiefly because he had looked after the family business of Lim Kim Kee & Co. We exclude other close relatives, friends, rivals, etc. Nonetheless, repeat this with variations and modifications, with the Indians—including the Tamils—and the Malays, then ponder on the implications for the first of types and sub-types and their use in fiction.

“Even with the three-generation Chinese family and with two uncles added, and limiting the fiction to one ethnic group, the writer would need to invent an appropriate language for each character in the different, permutating social and

linguistic setting they inhabit and operate in. This is especially so with the middle generation. The second uncle would have to be given excellent English when he is supposed to be speaking dialect, fair English when speaking Mandarin, and poor English when speaking English. The mathematics of the discourses involved in coping with a larger range of types is obviously infinitely daunting.”

A writer writing within a multicultural society like Singapore is acutely aware of the different voices and the need to honor these voices so that they are heard besides English, Mandarin, and Singlish speech. My way of doing it may not be the best way and as we mature as a writing community, Singapore writers and poets will find better ways of developing these different voices into an aesthetic that will mirror our society as it is, and I hope, no, I wish, academics in Southeast Asia will also develop a critical framework to discuss fiction and poetry of Singapore and other writers in Southeast Asia, not as something perceived through the aesthetics based on a western monocultural and monolingual society. Some years ago, an academic in Singapore accused me of not having a consistent voice in my fiction, a criticism to which I had no reply at the time and I dutifully noted my failing. But now, four novels later and the last two displaying different voices, I find that one consistent voice does not suit my artistic purposes in my last two novels, and what I feel as an artist rooted in a multicultural society. We need to develop a polyphonic aesthetic for reading and writing the different voices and languages in a multicultural society to reflect the different points of view and shifting perspectives. And perhaps, this will be Singapore’s literary contribution to the world of literature where many writers in the West, especially in the United States, still write within their own monocultural community for fear of being accused of cultural misappropriation. Singapore literature in English, as reflected in the works of our poets, novelists, and especially her playwrights, has shown that the ethnic borders in our society are porous, and the English language is the malleable clay used to create the verisimilitude of the various languages and voices in our midst.

I would like to end my talk by posing a few questions for academics and critics. Do you see a shared history and aesthetic among Southeast Asian writers writing in English? If there is such an aesthetic, what are its characteristics? Since Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines have literary works in English and other languages, has any academic developed a comparative literature framework to look at these works? What are the issues related to translation in the Southeast Asian context? Many readers, writers, curriculum planners, and syllabus designers, I’m sure, would like to know some of the answers. There

is increasing interest in Southeast Asian writing in English. Last year, the Ministry of Education in Singapore launched a new literature syllabus that, for the first time, included the study of Singapore fiction, plays, and poetry. In time to come, it will include the rich literature of this region. And on this positive note, I will end my talk.

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