

Introduction: The Silk Road of Ideas

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Background

The Silk Road, the land route of antiquity from India and China to Europe through Central Asia, and the Spice Road via the sea channels through Southeast Asia was not just a historical trade route. It has left a shared legacy underlying the fraught geo-colonial concepts of “East and West” and continues as a narrative idea still shaping world history. The many past chapters written in Asian countries through domination and conquest overtook or established new ports and economic centres of influence. The nautical segment through Southeast Asia, the Arabian peninsula, parts of Africa, Egypt to Europe flourished between the second-century BCE and the fifteenth-century CE (Sidebotham 1-3). With it came ceramics, fabrics, spices and precious metals, but also forms of art and architecture that established Hinduism, Buddhism and eventually Islam within East Asia and Southeast Asia. After Vasco De Gama landed in Calicut, however, on the Malabar Coast in 1498, the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and later the English and French established the Spice Road or Route around the Cape of Good Hope at the tip of Africa, challenging the Arabic hegemony of maritime trade through North Africa and the Arabian peninsula (The Columbia Encyclopedia).

Melaka (known historically as Malacca), located on the Malaysian coast facing Indonesia, has a long history as a prominent trading port in Southeast Asia. It continued to be a cultural entrepot for 130 years after the Portuguese annexed it as a colony in 1511, followed by Dutch colonialisation from 1641–1825, a further 183 years of rule, introducing more Christian influences in a region dominated by Islam (Ricklefs, 23). Following this, Singapore, founded as a British colony in 1819 by Sir Stamford Raffles, diverted Dutch interests in the East Indies (Java and Sumatra) and Malaya and became the pre-eminent centre of trade in the region following the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of London in 1824, effectively swapping the British port of Bencoolen in south-west Sumatra for the Dutch protectorate of Malacca (Leifer 9). The island of Singapore at the southern tip of the Malayan peninsula throughout its history under British colonial rule and after becoming a republic in 1965 established itself as the biggest container terminal in the world until the port of Shanghai took that honour in 2010 (Lloyd’s List, 12). Nevertheless, due to its political and economic stability Singapore remains the fourth largest financial hub in the world after Hong Kong, London and New York (Global Financial Centres Index). The New Silk Road is now in the process of being created and will enable super trains to speed from Singapore up through the Malay Peninsula

to Thailand, Burma, India, China through Central Asia to Turkey and eventually to Europe by land, providing new geo-political and Sino-centric trading options again both on land and at sea.

The Festival

Just as historically over a period of centuries the trading ports became crucibles that brought together cultures, culinary habits and linguistic and artistic influences from far and wide, so too has Lit Up Asia-Pacific brought together a confluence of literary genres that interpret text through performance — spoken word, theatre, film animation and 3D design spaces in virtual domains from around the Asia-Pacific. In its eighth year, from October 12-14 2018, Lit Up Asia-Pacific (formerly Lit Up Singapore), was rebranded as a regional event. Following the triadic theme of Water (past), City (present), Sky (future) over 150 artists came together for three days and nights at the LASALLE College of the Arts, close to Singapore's Little India, and the Aliwal Arts Centre in Kampong Glam, long associated with historical Arabic and Indian trading communities. Over the three days of the festival these venues including Haji Lane and Blu Jaz Cafe witnessed performance works, both classical and contemporary, celebrating oral traditions of text onto stage and screen alongside contemporary expressions of spoken word poetry. Scholars also delivered papers on Southeast Asian oral forms that were then illustrated through live performances. The festival staged the inaugural Asia-Pacific Poetry Slam event hosting contingents from Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia, China and Singapore.

In his keynote address Dr Kirpal Singh, recently retired from the position of Associate Professor with Singapore Management University, struck a personal note reflecting on his long history as a poet, scholar and literary promoter of Singaporean writing. He went on to speak about a range of issues relating to literary practice including the impact of performative forms like poetry slam and spoken word developments in Singapore, observing how these introduced a new way of looking at poetry, poets and poetry readings, particularly in its first decade (Singh). He also spoke about developing regional literatures in English through stimuli like The Epigram Prize, which offers \$25,000 and a publishing contract in Singapore, that has generated a flood of interest in novel writing since its inception in 2015, but also sounded a note of warning about both independent awards and government funding:

Singaporeans are, as has often been said, a very pragmatic people and so good material rewards will, of course, attract many. However, I cannot see this as a 'forever thing'— sooner or later it will have to stop, especially if money runs out. Also, writers will have to carve their own art and not depend too much on official sanctioning.

He also saw that The Epigram Prize being opened to ASEAN members was a positive thing for Singaporean writing because it will offer much-needed competitiveness. “As of now a lot of money is spent on promotion. Once our writing is seen to be ‘mature’ it can then begin to enter the highly intense field of competition.” When answering a question on Singaporean censorship policy and how this impacts on the kind of books that get published, Dr Singh answered saying that these laws are “far more relaxed than they have ever been,” and that in time, writers will say what they want to say despite restrictions:

Throughout history, books have been censored, no matter where. And no one can guarantee that a book or a poem will not be censored today-anywhere. The type and form of censorship might differ but censorship always exists in one form or another.

Finally, when asked what it would take to produce a Singaporean Nobel-Prize winning author he responded:

Being small is an important and critical factor but it cannot be used as a reason or excuse for official propaganda, or for publishing/supporting only those who subscribe to the ‘official’ doctrine(s). For maturity, we need to move away from such thinking. Small countries have produced some very fine writers and if one looks at different awards, prizes and honours one will find these everywhere — in small as well as big ways.

Lit Up Asia-Pacific 2018 gave special attention to the Balinese arts, especially its traditions of theatre, shadow puppetry, mime and dance along with Singapore-Balinese collaborative productions by Dr Chris Mooney-Singh and performed by Teater Kini Berseri. The first was based on a narrative poem that highlighted the trade in nutmeg, one of the most valuable commodities of the region, ending with the Dutch annexation of Bali in 1906 where the King of Denpasar and more than a thousand of his family members and court retainers committed *puputan* or public ritual suicide, that in turn, sparked the firing of rifles by a substantial force of the Dutch East Indies Army named the Sixth Military Expedition that had landed at the northern part of Sanur Beach to establish a centre of opium production and trade on the island (Pringle 106). This military force was under the command of Major General M.B. Rost van Tonningen, a Major-General of the Dutch Royal Army (ter Keurs, 161 and Hanna 140-141). The *puputan* followed an earlier instance where The Raja of Buleleng killed himself with the ritual *kris*

blade along with 400 followers in 1849, also in opposition to the Dutch (Chupin, Hubé and Kaclaf citing *Le Petit Journal*, 1849).

Jayawarman IX Remembers the Dragon Archipelago with its evocation of Water, City and Sky narrated in English by Malay actor Gene Sha Rudyn and performed with traditional topeng dancers, along with multimedia slides, animated film sequences and music was a seminal work of the festival. It presented contrasting views of what constitutes great art and advanced forms of civilisation beyond purely technological advancement where a whole culture preferred to abdicate to a “higher realm” through ritual sacrifice rather than endure the machinations of a western power bent on polluting a pristine world through opium production and trade. Likewise, its comic counterpart, *Bali Snapshots*, was a satirical commentary on contemporary western tourism in Bali, a legacy of the colonial process. It was appropriately staged with strong elements of western face-paint, white-glove mime, showing the adaptability of modern Balinese actors and how they can take on influences by viewing European mime traditions through YouTube (Purusha). Such east-west cross-cultural contemporary borrowings are ironically reminiscent of Antonin Artaud’s appropriation of Balinese dance-mime-theatre elements in his writings after being “electrified” on seeing the Balinese actor-dancers at the *Exposition Coloniale* held in the Bois de Vincennes late in July 1931 which “provided him with the central idea for his ‘Theatre of Cruelty’” (Clancy 397-412). Such “Silk Road” confluences were characteristic of Lit Up Asia-Pacific 2018, which, in itself was a three-day “caravanserai” event where various countries in the region showcased their traditions alongside each other.

More Balinese art forms were explored through performances of *kecak* (the monkey chorus) alongside British-Punjabi poet Daljit Nagra’s “Punglish” version of the *Ramayana: A Retelling* that resonated with Southeast Asian audiences, given the text’s canonical influence in the region from the early centuries of the Christian Era (Desai 5). Another archetypal Balinese item that anthropomorphised an animal was the Cendrawasih Heavenly Bird Dance, one of the few dances based on the Bird of Paradise where an angelic creature comes down to the earth from the sky.

In addition, Singapore’s Nam Hwa Teochew Opera company shared an excerpt from its classical repertoire with two actors visiting from mainland China. They performed a scene from “The Butterfly Lovers” (梁山伯与祝英台), one of the four great ancient folk love stories of China, handed down over a period of 1700 years, and deemed a work of National Intangible Cultural Heritage (Baidu Baike). Reasonably unique among traditional operas, the roles of Liang Shanbo (male) and Zhu Yingtai (female) are performed by actors of the same (female) gender. Adding a further layer of complexity to this, in the story itself, Zhu Yingtai, a female, dresses up as a male to be able to receive a high-level education, which was not commonly open to females in China historically. As she studies alongside her classmate Liang Shanbo, the friendship between the two becomes stronger and stronger,

although Liang has no idea Zhu is actually a female, and that Zhu has in fact fallen in love with Liang. Eventually Liang learns Zhu's real identity and her love is reciprocated, but sadly before it can be consummated, the pressures of society (particularly on Zhu) lead to the tragic deaths of both.

Lit Up audiences also witnessed a unique indigenous Filipino form of debate poetry, known as Balagtasan, which has roots in social protest. Vim Nadera's paper on the subject looks at the history of the form comparing it with "fliptop" or Filipino rap poetry, which in turn, was relevant at Lit Up Asia-Pacific because of the presence of contemporary spoken word poets in the audience, many of whom were to compete on Day Three during the first regional Southeast Asian Poetry Slam event. Singapore's Keelat Theatre group performed contemporary pantuns set to music that also resonated very well with the audience.

The Merlion Anthology performance by drama students from the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, directed by Shana Yap was a creative mash-up of poems by notable Singaporean poets, written in the tradition of Edwin Thumboo's iconic 1979 poem "Ulysses by the Merlion" as a symbol of nation-building which was also screened as an animated machinima using the 3D Merlion Portal in Second Life created by digital artists Dr Scott Grant with the Merlion model by Rebeca Bashly. This interpretation by prize-winning French filmmaker Tutsy Navarathna (Basile Vignes) creatively showcased Bashly's Merlion as a multimedia gallery of Singaporean poetry and fine arts. The film can be viewed on YouTube ("Ulysses by the Merlion").

In the evening of Day Two, the Crash Test Theatre finals provided a great opportunity for the best playwrights, actors and directors who had come together previously for three months of events to showcase their polished works in the Flexible Space at LASALLE College of the Arts (two of the leading plays are published in the "Plays" section of this issue). Finally, Lit Up staged for the first time a virtual concert of live spoken word and music for two user-created virtual worlds, Second Life and the VR-enabled Sansar, where an international audience in their "avatar forms" danced freestyle to the musical poetry which was streamed on screen real-time in the virtual environments.

The SARE Special Issue

This special issue of *SARE* brings together a selection of papers, fiction, poems, short plays and an interview from the Lit Up Asia-Pacific festival.

I. Articles

Professor I Nyoman Sedana opens the ledger for this issue with a focus on a triadic relationship that is the key to understanding the transformative nature of traditional Balinese Wayan theatre. Not limited to solely local

traditional material, Wayang puppetry uses form, plot and character as a framework to transform literature from anywhere and any time into what is an unmistakably Balinese artform. The power of the *dalang*, the Wayang master, is able to transport their mortal audience to the spiritual realm of the gods and goddesses, and to transform the regular into the holy. In this process, three elements are used: *gangga* (water — the flow of history and traditions of the region); *agni* (fire – the city – the embodiment of human refinement or cultural life); and *maruta* (wind – which blows in the sky – the inspiration to infinite art and culture).

From the Philippines, Dr Vim Nadera brings us the (hi)story of Balagtas, a unique form of Filipino debate poetry. In alignment with the triadic theme of Water (past), City (present) and Sky (future), we are taken on a journey from the historical roots of Balagtas, through a period of great popularity that saw this grassroots form of oral performance provide a cohesive literary space for the jousting of ideas for a widely dispersed group of performers and audiences, to the recent past when this fully Filipino oral tradition has been in danger of being swamped by more popular performance styles. However, we are also shown a way forward. Through the collective efforts of Dr Nadera and a number of his colleagues, the art of Balagtas is being kept alive through academia and, performance-wise, by its coming together with more modern forms of oral expression such as rap and slam poetry. Moreover, while still quintessentially Filipino, through a series of invitations to international events such as Lit Up Asia-Pacific 2018, Balagtas has also reached out and touched an international audience.

In a piece entitled “Translation as style and technique in the hybrid Englishes of Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* and Eileen Chang’s *Lust, Caution*,” Sreedhevi Iyer brings the perspective of one of the oldest professions in the world, (Sofer, 19) translation, to the challenge faced by many post-colonial bi/multilingual writers — the conveying of one cultural and linguistic heritage to an audience from another in the language of this target audience. Often writing from within cities that are “cosmopolitan centres foreign to them,” Iyer argues that these writers “face issues of translatability in their authorial choices almost on a constant basis.” The challenge for both the author and the translator is how to achieve intelligibility for the target audience without compromising the literary quality of the work as judged by the prevailing standards of the target language. Quality could be impacted by, for example, overly overt explanations of unique features of the source culture. To illustrate her argument that the decisions made by the post-colonial author are “highly similar to the act of translation,” Iyer analyses works by Raja Rao, who was born in India but also wrote in France and the USA, and Eileen Chang, who was born in Shanghai and subsequently writing in the USA. She contrasts Rao’s “unapologetic use of foreign vocabulary, expressions and idioms, with occasional explanations but many times, none” with Chang’s penchant for overt explanation in an initial draft of her novel 色戒 (called “The Spying” in the English draft version, later translated

as *Lust, Caution* from the published Chinese version). A further layer of nuanced analysis is added through a comparison of Chang's own English draft with the English translation of her published novel by Julie Lovell.

Our final paper for the issue "Harold Stewart's Autumn Landscape Roll, the 'Buddhist Divine Comedy'" by Dr Chris Mooney-Singh offers us an in-depth look at an Australian scholar and poet who journeyed by ocean liner seeking release from his Europeanised upbringing through immersion in the flow of an Asian future and settled permanently in a Japanese city that would become his cultural, spiritual and inspirational home. By the time this journey began, Harold Stewart had spent more than the first half of his life immersed in the flow of the history, religion, politics and culture of Australia, which at that time was distinctly western in nature. In stark contrast, his new home in Japan was "a city built on a thousand years of Buddhist learning". Yet, for Stewart, this was in a sense a true "homecoming" given his strong interest in Asian culture since his youth, also evidenced subsequently by the substantial body of literary work created in the Japan years. Stewart's significant contribution to transcultural comparative religious and literary scholarship, however, has only ever received limited recognition in Australian literary circles. Dr Mooney-Singh gives the reader an exclusive insight both into Stewart's works themselves, and into the reasons why this literary pioneer has been overlooked by history.

II. Interview

As mentioned in Section 2 above, Lit Up Asia 2018 involved a number of firsts, not the least of which was the inclusion of two online 3D virtual worlds, Second Life and Sansar, in the festival. Three international guests at the festival, one from Germany, and two more from Australia, gave live demonstrations of both virtual worlds. Independent virtual film-maker Bernhard Drax from Germany demonstrated a range of features of the 3D VR virtual world Sansar, where on the final evening of the festival the live audience in Singapore joined with an international audience in a purpose built virtual Lit Up Asia venue for an evening of music, dancing and readings. Dr Scott Grant from Monash University and Jay Jay Jegathesan from the University of Western Australia gave a brief co-demonstration of the 3D screen-based virtual world Second Life with a focus on Chinese Island, a virtual Chinese township used for immersive Chinese language and culture education at Monash University, Australia. Dr Chris Mooney-Singh, the festival organiser, also gave an informative demonstration and introduction to the Merlion Portal, a 3D multimedia exhibition of Singaporean literature and poetry embedded within Second Life.

A post-session, in-depth interview with Bernhard Drax, Dr Grant, Jay Jay Jegathesan and Dr Mooney-Singh was subsequently carried out by Savinder Kaur, the Executive Director of the Lit Up Festival, focusing on arts and education in 3D virtual worlds. In the interview each of the participants offers their insights into 3D

virtual worlds as new sites (City) for the extension and ongoing development (Sky) of artistic and educational activities currently carried out in what is commonly known in virtual world parlance as “RL” or real life (Water).

III. Stories, Poems, Plays

The creative works mentioned here were all presented by Singaporean participants during the Lit Up Asia-Pacific Festival. Uma Jayaraman’s story “The Stained Window” looks primarily at an Indian mother and daughter relationship set in contemporary Singapore’s highrise heartlands while Chris Mooney-Singh’s modern folktale, “The Boy with the Boar’s Head Face,” goes behind the scenes of the Muzium Theatre and its internal animosities when a young boy is recruited from Bali by Tuan, the theatre director and principal artist, to become his successor. The story is also accompanied by an audioscape version which suits the text-to-performance theme of the Lit Up Festival.

Most of the poems like the stories in this issue are also aligned with the festival theme of “Water, City, Sky”. Darryl Whetter’s “Plastic Water Bottles” looks at the ecological impact of bottled water while Peter Morgan’s poem set in Bali, “Sekala Niskala at the Tanjung Sari,” contemplates the Balinese philosophy of the Seen and the Unseen from a hotel facing the Indian Ocean. Likewise, Chen Cuifen’s “What My Net Dragged To The Surface” processes the detritus of a relationship through a strong evocation of sea horse remains, shells and fish skeletons. This poem also won the prestigious Troubadour International Poetry Prize 2018 from the United Kingdom and appears here in print for the first time. Valery Ang’s poems evoke a range of references from Chinese mythology, family traditions and contemporary Singaporean culture in her poems “Pointing to the Moon”, “There are No Magpies” and “Sonnet for Ah Gong,” which all speak with a lyrical intimacy about love and relationships. India-born Priyanka Srivastava evokes memories of her birth land and present-day home in Singapore, alluding subtly to inter-racial misperceptions in “Bindi” and “A Celebration.” Finally, Kirpal Singh directly addresses the Lit Up theme in his poem “Water, City, Sky.”

Also included in this issue are two ten-minute play scripts from the Lit Up Festival’s Crash Test Theatre Finals. The best production *Naturalism* written by Tay Kai Xin Ranice and directed by Uma Jayaraman won the grand prize of \$1000. Three separate monologues slowly uncover taboos and family secrets, while *Chain Reaction*, written and directed by a French permanent resident in Singapore, Olivier Castaignède, is set in the city of Yangon. It centres on state repression and terrorism, a growing concern in the region. Although the play deals with police repression of the Rohingya migrant community in Myanmar, the same scenario could easily be translated to Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia or the Philippines where Islamic nationalism and communal poverty are creating political instability and tension.

All of these creative works, although contemporary in subject, play against historical or traditional backdrops and thus unconsciously evoke the confluence of mixed cultures in Southeast Asia which still bear the mark of colonialism through European language influences, religious conversion, systems of jurisprudence, modern education, forms of parliament and statecraft as well as the continuing influence of online media and technology. While local in their particulars these works address universal issues in a shifting globalised world.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank Professor Sharmani Patricia Gabriel for her professional and insightful guidance throughout the whole process of putting this issue together. Our thanks also go to the other staff involved in running and maintaining *SARE*. As editors we are grateful for the opportunity to bring the fruits of the Lit Up Asia-Pacific 2018 festival to the *SARE* audience. Our thanks also go out to each of the contributors of this special issue. Their depth of insight, creativity and willingness to share has been inspiring for us, and we hope that it will be for you, the reader, equally true.

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