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Global Asia's Human Rights Challenges: The Prisms of the Arts

Many of our ideas about human rights issues have been influenced by their portrayals in films, novels, poetry and visual art. This is the case in global Asia, but until now there has been little analysis of how creative expression impacts and extends human rights discourse in that sphere, elucidating what it means to be human and to have a life of well-being and dignity. The research of our international team of scholars shows that creative works can powerfully illuminate and expand our understanding of the contexts that shape how human rights are interpreted and experienced across Asia and Asian diasporic communities. Our essays and translations of literary and dramatic works—published in *Human Rights and the Arts: Perspectives on Global Asia* and *Human Rights and the Arts: An Anthology*—show that contexts are not limited to the more familiar worlds of culture, civilization, and nation. They also extend to histories and intergenerational lives; the human body in its physical and psychological dimensions; the spiritual and religious; everyday life; social relationships; and ecologies. Nor can context be reduced to simple dichotomies of local and universal. The arts in global Asia—even when they do not explicitly use the language of human rights—reveal the limitations of the understandings of human experience found in the most commonplace statist, liberal, and legal human rights discourses.

The project on which these books are based involved scholars from Canadian, Asian and European universities and from humanities, fine arts and social science disciplines. They focus on diverse concerns: rights violations during wars of liberation (Vietnam) and atrocities of massive scale (Sri Lankan Tamils); the implications of Buddhist religious cosmologies for human rights (Burma/Myanmar); rights to livelihood for peasant farmers and fishers (Indonesia), ecological justice (Bangladesh), culture and relationships with the land (Tibet); the rights of minorities (Muslims in India; Koreans in Japan; Macanese in Macau), and the problems of transnational communities (Southeast Asian Muslims after 9/11) and migrants (South Asians in North America and Britain; Chinese in Canada). Through analyses of novels, short stories, poetry, films, art installations, blogs and performance art, the essays explore both works that have circulated widely—such as those by Michael Ondaatje and Ai Weiwei—and those little known in the West until now.

Asia Research Briefs

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Many of these harder-to-find works have been newly translated into English and published in the anthology, deepening the experience of readers of the essays. The anthologized works take readers to diverse landscapes and social settings from the hybrid, mobile lives of Asian diaspora communities in urban North America to the poor fisher folk of the Padma River in Bangladesh; from forcibly settled Tibetan nomadic communities and Korean Japanese in prewar Tokyo slums to recently dis-interred Japanese Canadian farm workers in post-WWII Alberta; from harassed women plantation workers in Sumatra to a persecuted Chinese teacher at a Confucius Institute in Canada; and from a stigmatized, terrified Muslim woman at a mainly Hindu middle class New Delhi party to a young Eurasian man damaged by racial stigmatization and sexual abuse, on the eve of Macau's handover to China.

These two books show that the act of reading the arts through a human rights lens, and refracting questions about human rights through the prisms of the arts, not only illuminates the many contexts of human rights in global Asia, but creates new contexts, by encouraging audiences and readers to imagine multiple human rights subjectivities and commonalities in global Asia and beyond.

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Contributors to the essay volume include Michael Bodden; Lily Cho; Afsan Chowdhury; Ted Goossen; Susan J. Henders; Alice Ming Wai Jim; Sailaja Krishnamurti; Arun Mukherjee; Van Nguyen-Marshall; Jooyeon Rhee; Françoise Robin; Arun Nedra Rodrigo; Alicia Turner; and Mary M. Young.

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