

COMPLETION REPORT

Research Summary

The Second World War remains a largely contested site for many scholars working on Japan-ASEAN relations. Firstly, the war, which ravaged many parts of Southeast Asia, foregrounds the region's fragile position in Japan's bid for world ascendancy in the first half of the 20th century. Secondly, war memories continue to unsettle the notion of historical accountability as many of those who have suffered losses and atrocities, particularly, the women, continue to demand for apology. Attendant to these sentiments are the symbols and rituals of commemoration, both on the part of Japan and Southeast Asia, which further complicate the historical imperative of remembering.

The question has always been: why has Southeast Asia been ambivalent about remembering the war? Moreover, it has also been asked, why have there been less official commemorative acts toward such goal. Yet, one of the noteworthy observations that has come out of this issue relates to the nature of "remembering" itself.

Over the past two decades, there have been novels in English written by a younger generation of Southeast Asian writers that has Japan and the Second World War as their central motif. This body of work, unlike the earlier generation of historical fiction, is not only concerned with "remembering" but of recuperating and constructing a new historical narrative. The thematic range of these novels includes the search for self-identity (national and ethnic), sexuality and awakening, betrayal, acceptance, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

In this research, selected contemporary Southeast Asian novels in English have been read against the light of "memory" and the corresponding debates between history and fiction. Selected titles considered for the study—Tess Uritha Holte's *When the Elephants Dance* (2003), Vyvyane Loh's *Breaking the Tongue* (2004), Tash Aw's *The Silk Harmony Factory* (2005), Tan Twan Eng's Booker-prize nominated work *The Gift of Rain* (2007), Rani Manicka's *Rice Mother* (2004) and *Japanese Lover* (2010)—portray in different ways the stake of today's writers on history. They represent a different rendering of Japan and the war—one that 'humanizes' many of those involved, even to the extent that these representations are deemed 'historically inauthentic.'

The study looks as well at how effective the novels are as tools in teaching the intimate links of history and fiction. Although the field is fraught with debate, these novels nonetheless voice an aspiration, and in the end offer new albeit controversial ways of reading history.

Publication of the Results of Research Project:

Verbal Presentation (Date, Venue, Name of Conference, Title of Presentation, Presenter, etc.)

- (1) March 4-5, 2011: Asia Research Institute National University of Singapore: "Inter-Asia and the Japanese Empire International Workshop" : Presented the paper titled **"Malaysian and Singapore Fiction Through the Other Empire: Narrative Incursions into the Past"**
http://www.ari.nus.edu.sg/events_categorydetails.asp?categoryid=6&eventid=1126
- (2) March 23-25, 2011: The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies : Ramada Hotel, Osaka, Japan : under the panel "Linguistics, Language and Cultural Studies"

Thesis (Name of Journal and its Date, Title and Author of Thesis, etc.)

Southeast Asian Review of English (SARE), No. 50 – Singapore and Malaysia Special Issue (article under review)

Book (Publisher and Date of the Book, Title and Author of the Book, etc.)