

Asia  
*and the*  
Historical  
Imagination

*edited by*  
Jane Yeang Chui Wong



# Asia and the Historical Imagination

Jane Yeang Chui Wong  
Editor

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*Editor*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Asia's Other History

*Jane Yeang Chui Wong*

*Asia and the Historical Imagination* is concerned with the significance of region and locality, and its method is most immediately preoccupied with the exploration of local networks of political and cultural exchanges that have been, and still are, at the heart of an Asian polity. This interdisciplinary project conceptualizes the ways in which literary scholars and historians think about fictional histories, and how the study of historical fiction can generate critical dialogues that attempt to bridge the great divide between the two disciplines and draw attention to some of the challenges scholars face in the interpretation of imagined narratives within historical frameworks. The region's history, the colonization and decolonization of many of its countries, and their rapid development in the race to participate in the globalized economy are duly documented in textbooks and mainstream media. The social and cultural impact that accompanies the larger political reconfiguration on the global stage has been carefully examined but the less tangible impact of these changes is recorded in *imagined* voices. In considering the role of imagined voices against the backdrop of historical narratives, an Asian-centric approach to historical fiction aims to produce more meaningful and nuanced discussions of what it means to be literary and historical when dealing with a genre that essentially has a different set of criteria and boundaries.

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At one level, there are geographical boundaries; at another, there are cultural boundaries, and these are often in flux and fluid as they are determined, defined, and reinvented by socio-political and economic imperatives. Political and ideological boundaries, which are especially pertinent to this volume given the number of essays that focus on Southeast Asian countries, are more strategic. The term “Southeast Asia” came into use from Britain’s commanding post, the Mountbatten Command, in Colombo. Eventually, the Americans, French, and Dutch used it too, and the term was used to locate the vulnerable region that was in close proximity to the two main powers of the East: China and India: “The Americans took some time to accept it because they thought in terms of East Asia, or the Western Pacific. They never looked at South Asia much, the way the British and the French did. On their side, Europeans saw India and they saw China; and they saw the region in between as a residue. So the French used the term ‘Indochine’,” which reflected their understanding of the region as being “a bit of China and a bit of India.”<sup>1</sup> Southeast Asia, in the eyes of Western strategic planners, was situated in terms of India and China. But from the 1980s onwards, the orientation of the region changed. The decolonization of Asia was complete when Hong Kong and Macau became special administrative regions of China in the 1990s, and Timor-Leste gained independence in 2002. The responses to the decolonization in these places are certainly not the same as those in India, Burma, Malaya, or Singapore in the 1940s and 1960s. International coverage and diplomatic dialogues, too, mapped out new local, global, and, for the purpose of our study of literature and history, rhetorical boundaries. Questions of national security and national welfare have also transformed the ways nations perceive and express political and cultural identities, and arguably, nowhere are these complex issues more powerfully and sensitively articulated than in historical fiction.

Without delving into the theoretical debates about narration and narrativity that are beyond the scope of this collection, it should be noted that *Asia and the Historical Imagination* is nonetheless indebted to their influence on literary representations of historical events. Literary narratives are, after all, fictional narratives; the implication of narrating and narrativization and its significance in the development of modern historiography have been persuasively discussed in Hayden White’s seminal essay, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality” (1980), among his other works. Given his interest in the role of imagination in historical discourse, it is no wonder that the historian has received as much attention in literary

circles, if not more so, than among historians. Even though the two disciplines adopt vastly different research methods, they are both interested in storytelling:

Narrative becomes a problem only when we wish to give to real events the form of a story [...]. What is involved, then, in that finding of the “true story,” that discovery of the “real story” within or behind the events that come to us in the chaotic form of “historical records”? What wish is enacted, what desire is gratified, by the fantasy that real events are properly represented when they can be shown to display the formal coherency of a story? In the enigma of this wish, this desire, we catch a glimpse of the cultural function of narrativizing discourse in general, an intimation of the psychological impulse behind the apparently universal need not only to narrate but to give to events an aspect of narrativity.<sup>2</sup>

Historical fiction’s place is distinct and unique, not simply because it shares the impulses of the two disciplines but because it subverts their assumptions as well; as Michel de Certeau puts it, “Fiction is the repressed other of historical discourse.”<sup>3</sup> In “The Anxiety of Authenticity: Writing Historical Fiction at the End of the Twentieth Century,” Maria Margonis describes the historical novel as a “no-man’s land on the borders of fact and fantasy.” The questions she raises are questions that are on the minds of every historian and literary critic, and, of course, the historical fiction novelist: “What responsibility does a novelist have to the historical record? How much—and what kinds of things—is permissible to invent? For the purposes of fiction, what counts as evidence?”<sup>4</sup> These types of questions seem to imply that fiction must play with history’s “rules” (whatever those rules are) to *properly represent*.

Many of the literary works covered in this volume are less interested in addressing, assessing, or critiquing the history as “properly represented” than they are in examining how the stories resist articulation; it is the tensions in this resistance, manifest in the authors’ attempts to represent proscriptions of political loyalties and cultural identities, the oppression of marginalized groups, and the suppression of persecuted voices, that essentially produce other stories—these are stories that cannot be properly represented in history’s story. Georg Lukács’s *The Historical Novel* (1932/1962) asserts that the emergence of historical fiction after the French Revolution was especially significant. Using a Marxist framework, he sees the genre as a form in which the masses can find meaning in class struggle and in the people’s attempt to map out the historical and social

implications in the wake of rising fascist sentiments in Europe.<sup>5</sup> More recently, scholars like R. Johnsen and Jerome de Groot have regarded historical fiction as an important supplement to more conventional histories, which generally neglect underrepresented groups and marginalized voices.<sup>6</sup> For Richard Slotkin, historical fiction opens up avenues for historical inquiry that are traditionally closed to conventional histories:

[Historical fiction] can do more than re-create historical events, ideas, manners, environments. It can create a simulacrum or model of the historical world, miniaturized and compressed in scale and time; a model which embodies a theory of historical causation. The hypothesis can be tested by a kind of thought-experiment: assume that events are driven by the conditions and forces you believe to be most significant—what sort of history, what kind of human experience, then results? For the thought experiment to work, the fiction writer must treat a theory which may be true as if it was certainly true, without quibble or qualification; and credibly represent a material world in which that theory appears to work.<sup>7</sup>

This aspect of historical fiction has also led historians to give new meaning to the understanding of history, and what was once dismissed as not-history is now recognized as an important element of historical inquiry; what historical fiction “lacks” in objectivity, it gives back many times over with its approach to the ethical-oriented subject.<sup>8</sup>

Arguably, history, together with the historical fiction writer, is the co-creator of the fictional characters in the novels covered in this volume; and in many cases, these characters struggle with their co-creator to control and produce alternative histories. The objective of *Asia and the Historical Imagination* is to analyze and demonstrate how this is achieved through literary representation and how so-called truth-telling can only be narrativized and made meaningful with narrative devices that contest assumptions of historical truth. Historical fiction creates a new imperative for historical understanding that is quite apart from the writing and reading of historical narratives; it breaks away from the descriptive protocol that demands the turning of events into coherent stories that promote cognitive meaning, and as it will become apparent in the following chapters, historical fiction often creates meaning by bringing the chaos of events to the foreground and into the lives of its fictional characters—the burden of meaning-making lies entirely with the reader and his/her assumptions of conventional histories. Within the context of regional histories, these

assumptions also question how the interplay between history and fiction can produce meaningful and *critical* narratives against the backdrop of a globalized world.

Regional concern rarely plays a central role in the study of historical fiction; to situate regional significance in the literary representation of history, we should begin by approaching the limitations of examining historical fiction within a global context first. Historical fiction's links to world literature should not be underestimated here; they share a priority to represent histories, peoples, and cultures—to tell the *truth* in its various forms and permutations, and to convey that *knowledge*. David Damrosch, for instance, has pointed out that, aside from taking into consideration the production and transmission of literary texts in a globalized context, there are also questions about how to represent a topic that seems boundless: “If world literature is the sum total of everything ever written, we have to deal not only with an endless array of texts but also with a plethora of local histories and competing literary cultures, which may not have anything resembling an overall history even if such a mass of material could be mastered and presented.”<sup>9</sup> Others like Tim Parks, Philip Hensher, and Pankaj Mishra are skeptical about the authenticity of texts that attempt to reproduce and represent local conditions of countries and nation states. Mishra feels that “the homogenizing and depoliticizing effects of [such novels as produced by Kazuo Ishiguro, Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh can be] exaggerated, to the point where every writer of non-western origin seems to be vending a consumable—rather than a challenging—cultural otherness. [...] such hip self-identifications as ‘Afropolitan,’ risks obscuring that the traumas of the postcolonial world ... still mould the themes and preoccupations of writers from Africa and Asia, and oblige them to explore social as well as intimate relationships.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, Damrosch's and Mishra's observations are concerned with the limitations of generic representations of history and culture, the general, and the particular: literary representations can *fail* to represent.

The anxiety of the failure to represent history and culture can, in part, be addressed with a more rigorous approach toward identifying and situating the changing spheres of political and cultural influences against a more sensitive reading of regional significance. Asia is one such region. This is highlighted in the inaugural issue of *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* (2005). Editors Tina Chen and Eric Hayot note that now, “more than ever, the singularities of world history ... require us to understand the past, the present, and the futures of Asia. The immediate reasons for doing so are

clear: the increasing influence, economic and political, of the new Asian superpowers, China and India; the alternative systems of human rights emerging from the ‘Asian values’ debate; Asia’s role as the socio-cultural vanguard of global futures and global geographies”<sup>11</sup> (vi). The journal’s vision is one I would like to emulate in *Asia and the Historical Imagination*:

Vibrating between the general and the particular, we may well want to consider the ways in which the very categories of generality and particularity operate to produce the ways we know the world in front of us—to consider, for instance, how something like “Asia” has served historians, sociologists, anthropologists, or literary critics in both roles, how the general category of the Asian can emerge as a call to “method” (as in the work of Kuan-hsing Chen) even as it serves in particularization as a justification for the production of a post-imperialized planet.<sup>12</sup> (vii)

Method in Chen Kuan-Hsing’s *Asia as Method* (2010) is concerned with the interruption of decolonization and deimperialization with the outbreak of the Cold War, and how the assessment of imperial histories has shaped Asian studies in Asia. But it is his framework, which privileges the importance of regional interactions that I find most compelling:

[U]sing the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other’s points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt. On this basis, the diverse historical experiences and rich social practices of Asia may be mobilized to provide alternative horizons and perspectives. This method of engagement, I believe, has the potential to advance a different understanding of world history.<sup>13</sup>

Inter-Asia approaches toward the study of Asian histories and cultures have been immensely productive and continue to be so as the synergies that stem from its diverse peoples and ideologies are remarkably complex and plentiful by virtue of the countries’ shared history as a region and by their geographical proximity.<sup>14</sup> These imperatives can be applied to the study of world literature, and Asian historical literature, because they underscore the complex networks and exchanges of political and cultural polities that have been, and will be, at the heart of an Asian identity that is as fragmented as it is unified. And there is no better place to trace these fault lines than in historical fiction, where historical facts are laced with imagination. Unconventional, or what some have called alternative, histories destabilize

History with a capital H. As Brian Fay remarks, unconventional histories—be they literary histories or art installations—“[expose] the strengths and limitations” of historical inquiry; they “[open] doors onto ways we can understand the past (and can understand our understanding of the past), and potentially ‘reveal new conceptual resources and novel forms of representation that might be useful in deepening the possibilities of history as a discipline’.”<sup>15</sup>

To study history in literary narratives requires a leap of faith that does not come naturally to the conventional histories, but it is a leap that can be more representative of historical moments than those that have been carefully scrutinized and represented as historical facts, especially in countries where minority voices and those that challenge state-sanctioned ideas are still very much discouraged and muted. Kit Ying Lye’s essay on contemporary Indonesian literature is especially concerned with the suppression of voices in the 1960s, when political alliances in Asia shifted with the onset of the Cold War in Europe. While Western powers grappled with communist threats, newly independent nations in Southeast Asia found themselves in a political dilemma; they had to take sides and realign their political loyalties with the communists or their Western alliances. Asian nations that rejected communism were consequently embroiled in violent campaigns that were, in some cases, used to legitimize widely unpopular authoritarian regimes. Indonesians witnessed some of the most violent years in their country’s history after a failed coup in 1965 (also known as the September 30th Movement) brought about the persecution of communists, and those who were suspected of supporting their cause. Artists and intellectuals were identified as such, and with Suharto’s assumption of power in 1966, his government sought to suppress and eliminate all forms of expression that were deemed sympathetic to the Left.

Lye notes that most of the political fiction that reassessed Indonesia’s violent past was not reassessed until the early 2000s, even though historical fiction that engaged with the socio-political predicament during the Cold War years was plentiful. Authors like Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Putu Wijaya, Umar Kayam, and Y. B. Mangunwijaya reflected on the mass murders that followed the coup. Most of these authors employ the use of the *Wayang* and a Javanised *Mahabharata* to represent the events of 1965–6 in their attempts to undermine Suharto’s master narrative of the coup. For Lye, what is more pressing is the question of that which has been intentionally omitted in these works; the stories and testimonies do not explicitly discuss the 1965 coup even while they attempt to creatively represent the

politicide which followed it. What can these omissions tell us about the struggle of the people of Indonesia, their responses to the government, their attempts to come to terms with new realities, and their political and moral positions as they witnessed the violence? In her study of Y. B. Mangunwijaya's *Durga/Umayi* and Umar Kayam's *Sri Sumarah and Other Stories*, Lye provides some insightful answers to these questions as she explicates the use of magical realism in these works in relation to the political climate in which they were produced. Working under the strict and often dangerous conditions of state censorship, magical realist literature imaginatively mediates moral conscience, and demonstrates how literary forms can serve as a necessary mouthpiece to represent silenced voices.

I-Chun Wang's "Cultural Encounters and Imagining Multi-cultural Identities in Two Taiwanese Historical Novels" in Chap. 3 is also concerned with voices, or, more specifically, retrieving voices that have been marginalized in official Taiwanese history. Wang's essay is a response to the largely monolithic character of Taiwanese historical narratives, which privilege the Han Chinese perspective. This aspect of conventional Taiwanese history is, however, slowly being revised, in part because of the popularity of historical novels that have proliferated over the last decade. Wang's historical context is seventeenth-century Formosa, in an era of exploration, trade, and cross-cultural encounters, and her subject is the historically underrepresented indigenous Sirayans, whose culture was threatened by newcomers from the Dutch East India Company and the Han government. These cultural encounters provide a rich backdrop for the two novels at the center of this chapter: *Fu Er Mo Sha San Zu Ji* (*A Tale of Three Tribes in Dutch Formosa* 福爾摩沙三族記, 2012), and *Ci Tung Hwa Zhi Zhan* (*The Battle of Ci Tung Hwa* 刺桐花之戰, 2013).

Wang observes that historical documentation of early modern Taiwan is widely available in Western colonial writing, but much less so in Southeast Asia. The novels Wang analyzes in this chapter consider how native peoples like the Sirayans perceived cultural encounters, and the complex political, social, and economic relations among the locals, the new arrivals, and the conquerors. Wang argues that these encounters were imperative in the identity-making and remaking process of the Sirayans, and in creating collective memories and a collective identity. The authors of these novels exemplify one of the most important characteristics of historical fiction. In creating highly personal narratives and equally compelling characters, the authors imagine their strengths and vulnerabilities into

being. In retrieving these voices that are lost to mainstream, conventional histories, they demand that readers reconsider the far-reaching implications of cultural encounters, how the negotiation of socio-politics and cultural policies contributed to Taiwan's multicultural identity.

Identity formation and disintegration, and their more direct connections with realpolitik, feature most prominently in Chaps. 4 and 5. The authors of these chapters work around the contours of China and its relation to the West and within the Asian region. King-Kok Cheung's astute analysis of the political and psychological tensions in Ha Jin's *Map of Betrayal* calls attention to the ways in which history and fiction fuse to create complex narratives that question assumptions of personal loyalties and national allegiances, and the wider implications of the migrant story. *The Map of Betrayal* is arguably one of Ha Jin's most structurally complex novels. Jin's protagonist, Gary Shang, is loosely modeled after the real-life Chinese double agent, Larry Wu-Tai, who infiltrated the CIA for 30 years and was convicted in 1986 for leaking classified information to the Chinese government. The transpacific exchanges between China and the United States are underscored by Shang and his daughter, Lilian; their accounts, including Lilian's attempts to learn about her father's history, take readers through some of the more turbulent periods in Chinese history. But Jin also weaves his personal experiences with political concerns in China and the United States with Shang's narrative, further fusing history and fiction, and complicating an already complex narrative that spans more than five decades.

For Cheung, the layering of identities, which cannot be disassociated from personal and political loyalties, extends, in the character of Shang, into geographical, cultural, and intergenerational concerns that at times overlap, and at other times clash, with each other. Readers of Jin's novel may find it to be fragmented because of its shifting perspectives, but Cheung's argument will persuade them otherwise. Her analysis of the national, cultural, and linguistic liminality of Shang's character, which essentially extricates some of the more problematic issues of individual and political identities, demonstrates that the thematic and structural doubling in the novel effectively underpins the psychological preoccupations of a man caught between state and individual, past and present. These intersections are mapped on to a third-person account of Shang's life, which alternates with his daughter's first-person narrative, and the narrative of the family Shang abandoned in China. Cheung is particularly interested in the themes of duplicity and self-division in the migrant story, and how

Jin's narrative strategy—in pairing himself and Chin, and Shang's history with that of his grandson, Ben—create a powerful commentary that interrogates the reach of state power and nationalism over individual lives.

Following Cheung's discussion of dual identities in the previous chapter, my essay on Vyvyan Loh's *Breaking the Tongue* explores the limitations and implications of dual identities in the decades that bracket World War II in Singapore. This chapter focuses on the cultural and political aspects of Chineseness in Singapore in the immediate years that led up to and followed the independence of the city-state in 1965. Within the context of *Breaking the Tongue*, this chapter considers the development of a Singaporean Chinese identity in this period, and frames my discussion as a response to assumptions of Chineseness in Singapore amidst more recent tensions between Singaporeans and Chinese migrant workers.<sup>16</sup> Assumptions that Singaporean Chinese should/ought to “side” with Chinese migrant workers because of their shared ancestry and ethnicity are contentious and rejected. These tensions are often explained with cultural differences, but where exactly do we locate these differences when many Singaporean Chinese still retain a deep sense of their ancestry and heritage, and still continue to observe Chinese value systems? These much more nuanced differences resist articulation in conventional historical narratives of cultural history in Singapore, but in Loh's novel, they receive careful and sensitive treatment as she captures the ambivalence of Chinese identity formation in the early years of Singapore's independence with her protagonist, Claude Lim, whose quest to construct a distinct Singaporean Chinese identity, set apart but also *with* the “great civilization” of China, is modeled after the experiences of Singapore's founding father, Lee Kwan Yew.

The nationalistic impulses that shape Loh's novel also shape nationalist aspirations elsewhere in Asia. Hyunjung Lee's approach to stage and film adaptations of Korea's ancient past in Chap. 6 concentrate on the ways in which popular media fuses history and fiction to advocate nationalist sentiments and the degree to which this is viable, especially when the works she examines are portrayed as exaggerated fantasies of the past. Her essay investigates recent South Korean cultural productions that recreate historical traumas in three works: *The Last Empress*, a musical theatre production, *The Lost Empire*, a music video, and *Hanbando*, a historical fiction film. All three works feature a historical female icon, Empress Myeongsung. Lee's discussion is grounded in a close analysis where these cultural works

juxtapose a single, century-old incident—Queen Min’s assassination—onto contemporary South Korean social contexts to inculcate anti-Japanese sentiment. Lee suggests that the three works variously re-enact historical trauma and adopt it as a crucial visual ingredient to appeal to public sentiment.

The recreation of the traumatic, even, is of particular interest as Lee questions the producers’ ways of inflicting the Korean trauma upon the image of Queen Min on-screen, and how reinterpretations of the ancient past work alongside the pressure and aspirations of global ambitions in the future, fusing together to produce a cultural product that envisions the country’s future. Lee asserts that the workings of visualization in these three works posit Queen Min’s role within ambivalent frameworks (i.e. between traditional/modern and national/global desire), and she discusses how such positioning manipulates the empress’s significance in order to fulfill Korea’s desire for global visibility and success.

By conflating the story of Queen Min’s tragedy with contemporary national concerns and transforming the figure of the queen into an undying “spirit,” the narratives create a nationalistic icon that promises the nation’s bright future in the global era. Lee’s essay stresses one of the most important aspects of historical fiction in drawing attention to how the reimagining of histories is intrinsically linked to an imagination of the future, and recreations of historical narratives, which are conventionally rooted in local nationalistic discourse, are often serve to shape narratives of globalized futures.

Divya Metha’s essay in Chap. 7 is concerned with another element of the global discourse as she situates Pakistani history within the transnational and cosmopolitan frameworks of postcolonial history. Metha’s discussion calls attention to the textual dynamics of the interface and interflow between history and fiction, particularly in terms of the organization of meaning through specific formal ordering. The textual dynamics inherent in this formal ordering registers the complexities of transference from the historical to the fictional, and through her study of Salman Rushdie’s *Shame* (1983), Metha approaches the political interventions made by historical fiction in the structuring horizons of socio-cultural intelligibility in *forming* historical narratives, as she explores the prescience and historical resonance of Rushdie’s choice of genre for the task of imagining a nation and the fault lines of its social (gender) organization.

Emphasizing the appropriateness of this critical approach, which is especially pertinent in examining texts that are set against the backdrop of

Asian postcolonial cosmopolitanism, Metha highlights the novel's aesthetically hybrid magic-realist negotiation of gender issues in Pakistan, and considers the ways in which local marvelous narrative forms contribute to such a negotiation. Taking into account the mixed cultural and formal cast of *Shame*, and the transnational and cosmopolitan conditions of its setting, this chapter also situates the novel's intervention in critical debates about Pakistani history around the global travel and circulation of aesthetic frameworks in a postcolonial context. In doing so, Metha raises questions about what a culturally "cosmopolitan" literary retelling of history offers to our understanding of that past? What can be the value of this specific optics to read history? And what relationship can such a historical novel have with various modalities of the local? These questions are at the heart of the historical fiction discourse, and as Metha attempts to formulate some possible answers to them within the context of Pakistani cultural and cosmopolitan currents in Rushdie's novel, Mairii Aung-Twin relates his experience, as a professor of history, in addressing some of these questions in the classroom.

The last two chapters in this volume further assert Amitav Ghosh's standing in both historical and literary spheres. As the only writer in the volume flying the historian's flag, Mairii Aung-Twin's essay gives literary scholars a rare glimpse of how historical fiction can be used in history classes. He provides a brief account of some of the challenges he faces in seeking appropriate materials to teach Asian history, and the limitations of conventional histories in teaching Asian history. This is particularly so because new transnational agendas in Asian studies continue to produce research that destabilizes intellectual, spatial, and political boundaries, and because attempts to teach "the region" or country-based histories have become increasingly more difficult to sustain. Even though the content of pre-1830 Southeast Asian history adequately covers the region's dynamic transnational networks, developed over long-standing interactions of different cultures, religions, commercial and linguistic networks, post-1830 historical content has been less sensitive to these important intersections and the region as a global crossroads, as Westphalian boundaries begin to frame how Southeast Asian experiences are written and taught.

Aung-Thwin's essay gives readers a rare glimpse of how a literary text like Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* (2000) can be used to resolve some of these inadequacies and how a historical novel can serve as a practical supplement in the teaching of Burmese history. The novel, he asserts, has been instrumental in addressing the broader intellectual concerns of the period and

serves as an effective way to bridge pre-colonial histories with colonial and postcolonial experiences. For instance, Ghosh's depiction of the circulatory experiences of particular communities during the colonial/postcolonial period in Myanmar amplifies an important approach through which a more fluid regional history might be taught. Ghosh's characters are given highly personal narratives, and their stories, all bound up with the historical exigencies of the period, provide a thought-provoking platform for students to consider the wider implications of historical representation and what constitutes *the* Southeast Asian experience.

Sarottama Majumdar's interest in Ghosh takes a different trajectory as she picks up on Ghosh's interests in anthropology and the environment, and her study of the ecological elements in Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is as promising as Aung-Thwin's reading of *The Glass Palace*; it is entirely possible for *The Hungry Tide* to be used in an ecologist's classroom or an environmental conservationist's lecture. Majumdar's reading of Ghosh's novel draws attention to the delicate relationship among migrant movement, fishing communities, and "intruders" (like scientists) who threaten to change, for better or worse, the environment that has sustained local inhabitants for generations. The complex structure of the novel serves as a springboard for Majumdar's discussion as she charts the dizzying yet seamless juxtaposition of cultural and sociological exigencies of a specific location, the endangered biosphere of the Sundarbans, and a moment within a timeless scope. Majumdar is concerned with the ways in which Ghosh has endowed this historically rich region—the great riverine delta of Bengal (politically, a part of India and Bangladesh)—with characters separated by privilege, and social rank, and, among them, a nineteenth-century Scotsman who dreams of a utopian settlement on an uninhabited island in the Sundarbans. In tracing the interconnectedness among them, and the historical disappearance of a number of dispossessed Hindu refugees from Bangladesh (East Pakistan) from around the island (circa 1978), Majumdar seeks to develop an historically and ethically informed interpretation of a seemingly fragmented novel, as Ghosh's narrative strategy achieves a balance both unique to and assimilative of an indigenous imaginative tradition.

The contributors in *Asia and the Historical Imagination* share a common vision in their take on historical fiction. They all recognize that at the heart of this unique genre is its sensitivity to local conditions and its ability to recast and reimagine those sensibilities in narratives that demand a different kind of historical inquiry. It is a kind of inquiry that dares to imagine,

to speak, and to revolt, and within that locality that is Asia, where the diversity of languages, cultures, and political ideologies converges. In setting the boundaries around the Asian region, this volume of essays does not discount the influences and exchanges between Asia and the rest of the world. Rather, we hope that its focus on different localities, while confined within a continent, will work toward amplifying some of the shared values, and at other times conflicting agendas, that have shaped the way in which the region articulates its anxieties of the past in anticipation of the future. The essays that follow strive to create a constellation of political, cultural, and ethnic links that will form a larger picture of how historical fiction can refigure perceptions of how dominant power relationships in Asia can be reimagined within a uniquely Asian context.

## NOTES

1. Ibid., 95.
2. Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7.1 (1980), 8.
3. Michel de Certeau, qtd. in Hayden White, "Introduction: Historical Fiction, National History, and the Historical Reality," *Rethinking History* 9.2/3 (2005), 147.
4. Maria Margaronis, "The Anxiety of Authenticity: Writing Historical Fiction at the End of the Twentieth Century," *Historical Workshop Journal* 65 (2008), 138.
5. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, translated by Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (London: Routledge, 1962).
6. R. Johnsen, *Contemporary Feminist Historical Crime Fiction* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), and Jerome de Groot, *This Historical Novel* (London: Routledge, 2010).
7. Richard Slotkin, "Fiction for the Purposes of History," *Rethinking History* 9 (2005), 226–7.
8. See Beverley Southgate, *"A New Type of History": Fictional Proposals for Dealing with the Past* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2015).
9. David Damrosch, "Toward a History of World Literature," *New Literary History* 39.3 (2008), 483. Also see his edited collection, *World Literature in Theory* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), esp. "Part Two: World Literature in the Age of Globalization," 69–246.
10. Pankaj Mishra, "Beyond the Global Novel," *Financial Times*, Sept. 28, 2013, <https://www.ft.com/content/6e00ad86-26a2-11e3-9dc0-00144feab7de?mhq5j=e6>.