



ASIA-PACIFIC AND LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

The Asian Family in Literature and Film

Challenges and Contestations-South Asia,
Southeast Asia and Asian Diaspora,
Volume II

Edited by
Bernard Wilson
Sharifah Aishah Osman

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Asia-Pacific and Literature in English

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Bernard Wilson · Sharifah Aishah Osman
Editors

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To our families, for their love, constancy and support. To Faizal, Farisya and Farynna. To Karen, Sam, Ellie and Charlie.

SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

Family may appear to be a relatively innocuous term, yet as these two volumes make clear it comes freighted with controversy. The first, most obvious, question to ask is: does it pre-exist any specific kinship formation, whether Asian or Western, or do these have their own distinctive genealogies? Biologically, the imperative of reproduction might be regarded as species-universal, though in an increasingly post-human world even this might be regarded as an optional variable. The monogamous couple appears a narrow, frequently oppressive, bond: why not, for example, prefer Genji's practice of adding new wings to the palace to accommodate his multiple ex-mistresses? More specifically, is the nuclear family in Asia an indigenous development and how things inevitably turn out in any society, or is it an imported model which is as much coercive as it is normative?

One may turn to early European philosophy for the initial definition of the relation between *oikos* and *polis*. In an aggregative model, the household precedes the state, but it is only the latter that brings about the conditions that permit the former to flourish. Patriarchal control is undisputed: women and children are frequently grouped alongside slaves, and even animals, as devoid of reason and therefore of rights. Fulfilment through conjugal love is seldom advocated, and even the bond of parent and child is regarded with some scepticism.

Plato's doctrine of anamnesis in the Socratic dialogues *Meno* and *Phaedo* posits a preformed soul falling into existence. Yet in the *Republic*,

education is of crucial importance to the interest of the state—even Homer's poetry is banned because of its unworthy gods. The bond between the guardians is homosocial, sometimes openly homoerotic. Procreation may be necessary for the eugenic improvement of the race, but ultimately heterosexual desire and parental attachment prove unwelcome distractions to the extent that Socrates even proposes holding women and children in common.

Though Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* may appear more accommodating to the family unit, it is still the welfare of the polis which takes precedence over the prior condition of that which constitutes it. Its cohesion is underpinned by the fulfilment of life-aims and the ethic of friendship among adult male citizens, to which marriage and procreation remain subordinate, to the extent that anxieties about surplus population permit the practice of infanticide. Though *Politics* closes with a discussion of education, it is uncertain how the transition from child to citizen is possible for, if a social contract model is invoked, at what point is consent expressed?

In these texts, the celebration of the family as monogamous unit founded on heterosexual desire is conspicuously absent. Pederastic bonds are valued more highly. Attachment to wife and children offers not pride, stability and contentment but partiality, self-interest, and indulgence of emotional avarice, for the temptation to give priority to personal affection over public justice is considered intrinsically corrupting. The psychological trauma of repression and retribution is vividly dramatised in both the *Oedipus* and *Oresteia* trilogies, and little support is offered for the assumption of the nuclear family as foundational to European culture.

One might expect the Judeo-Christian tradition to be more hospitable to the monogamous unit with which family is now often associated, but in the Old Testament, conjugal loyalty led to the loss of Eden and a subsequent history of oppression, concubinage and polygamy. The anti-family emphasis in the New Testament is often as pronounced as Buddha's renunciation of domestic responsibilities, for Christ insists "if you will not leave your parents you cannot be my followers" (Luke 14.26), and while Paul concedes that it is "better to marry than to burn" (Corinthians 1 7:9), the assumption that sexual desire is at best a necessary evil continues in the insistence on celibacy within Catholic clergy.

Prior to the eighteenth century, in Europe aristocratic unions were primarily motivated by dynastic alliance, with the lower classes often opting for a range of informal liaisons, as was still evident in Defoe's

Moll Flanders (1722). What becomes obvious, then, is that the modern nuclear family derives not so much from philosophical or religious traditions as from the rise of the novel. The marriage plot predominates as a companionate if not necessarily romantic bond, addressed to a property-owning bourgeois audience preoccupied with wealth transfer between generations. Its characteristic milieu, somewhat less patriarchal than contemporary legal definition, forms the basis of nineteenth century European realism (Austen, Balzac, Tolstoy, Mann), which defines the family ties of obligation and duty, compulsory heterosexuality, and aspiration to collective upward mobility. As one such pertinent example, Roweena Yip's essay on Ong's adoption of *King Lear*, seen in Volume II of this collection, makes evident the absence of nuclear family in the early modern period: no Queen Lear; no children for any of the daughters (unlike the sources), and ultimate uncertainty about who inherits—circumstances in distinct contrast to the Anglo-Irish poet Nahum Tate's 1681 adaptation, which novelises an Edgar-Cordelia pairing ensuring clear succession.

Perhaps what is most striking about the Asian family in recent decades is the accelerated transformation which it has undergone. It is possible, as Bernard Wilson and Sharifah Aishah Osman point out, to exaggerate the dominance of a patriarchal Confucian-based model given the range of ethical and religious traditions. However, it is undeniable that previously relatively conservative societies have been confronting and absorbing neoliberal imperatives of individual freedom, consumerist globalisation and diasporic mobility. Challenges to traditional assumptions are arguably in advance of Western debates, such as the sharply declining birthrates in Korea and Japan indicating the individual, the nation (and perhaps even the species) unable to perpetuate themselves. The family itself becomes the problem rather than resolution—it being “paradoxically synonymous with guidance and order but also with control and repression”, as the editors note.

Given these considerations, it is notable that the novel appears to possess relatively less importance within the diverse range of media treated in the collection. Some forms—short stories, daytime soaps—remain broadly within a realist tradition, but the media representing the twenty-first century Asian family appears largely post-novelistic. Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko* (2017) is one of the exceptions, and perhaps the most notable recent example of a multi-generational family saga, tracing as it does the Korean *Zainichi* experience in Japan through the course of the twentieth

century. The two essays discussing it, the first by Cristina Naranjo-Lobato, and the second by Bettina Charlotte Burger and Lucas Mattila, prefer to redefine its multi-faceted genealogy in terms of fissiparous life-writing and traumatic collective memory, for if it is “History [which] has failed us”, as Lee’s famous opening line puts it, the novel’s capacity for mimesis, reshaping and giving intelligible form through merging abstract concept and individual circumstance allows us to reinterpret and reengage that past. There are only two essays which focus on concerns in India (Vandana Saxena on surrogacy narratives in two recent Indian novels, and Sony Jalarajan Raj and Adith K. Suresh on Malayalam cinema), and more attention to such major practitioners of the novel of manners by Indian authors such as Anita Roy, Kiran Desai, and Vikram Seth would have altered the overall balance. However, the focus of both volumes is most particularly on emergent rather than residual forms. Also significant is that less interest is shown in family defining nation as a form of collaborative narration than as a mode of hierarchal indoctrination. (The sensitivity of the topic is indicated by the multiple rewrites demanded of comedy sketches for China’s CCTV Spring Festival, the most viewed televisual event on the planet). Thus, it may be argued, the Asian family moves from pre-modern rigidity (if Confucian ethics may be so broadly categorised) to post-modern fluidity, with little pause for modernity. This collection poses the question of what happens when family (and the nation which it frequently foreshadows) have become, as Wilson and Osman conclude, “no longer sacrosanct”, and the imperative of reproduction itself has become outmoded. The dynamism and heterogeneity of response by its contributors give intimations of the multiplicity of possible futures for the family in Asia and beyond its borders.

Steve Clark

FOREWORD

The twenty-first century is a period during which societies are experiencing profound and rapid transformations, and the dynamics of the family unit are at the core of these cultural, social, and emotional changes. Volume II of *The Asian Family in Literature and Film*, subtitled *Challenges and Contestations*, is a fascinating exploration of the complex tapestry of Asian family structures and their evolution across a vast and culturally diverse continent which contains numerous ethnicities, languages, religions, and traditions. The title of this volume of the collection denotes the challenges and contestations for the Asian Family, yet what constitutes Asia is geographically disparate and therefore the representations of Asian families in this book vary widely, depending on the specific cultural context being portrayed. Thus, although the multidimensional spatiality upon which the contemporary South and Southeast Asian families are portrayed implies a “connected” Asian family, it is one which can only be perceived in a sense of general relatedness or divergency.

Though it is not possible to choose between either space-bounded analyses of the family or the sophistication of border-blurring approaches to understand Asian families, this collection merges these competing analytical approaches rather than imagining them as mutually exclusive, belligerent opposites. What can be said when discussing a region that is this vast and diverse is that nothing is absolute, and what the analysis of the illustrative texts in this volume indicates are broad movements that must be considered in both the localised and at times disparate contexts

which continue to shape the ways in which these cultures consider the concept of family. By including the Asian diaspora in the reimagining of the Asian family, the spatial parameters of all discourses and cultural forms of the family are further altered and expanded. For Asians living outside of Asia itself, text and film about the family inevitably locates itself, whether through choice or necessity, in a space and place, a troubled positioning which has contributed to the at times complex lived experience of the Asian diaspora. As cultures adjust, adapt, and mutate rapidly, the trajectories of the changing nature of the family just as often lead to divergence as they produce patterns of cultural convergence, and another dimension of this collection that needs to be commended is its coverage of diverse temporalities where historical colonial influences are also revealed to have played an important role in the constitution and governance of families in the postcolonial era.

This book explores the rich and diverse cultures of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Asian diaspora, examining how the concept of family is evolving against the backdrop of globalisation, technological advancements, and changing societal norms. It goes beyond a mere documentation of changes, offering a nuanced understanding of the forces that shape the Asian family and how the complexities of continuity, cohesion, resistance, and reinvention are navigated. As we traverse the pages of the collection, we encounter stories of continuity and cohesion, where familial ties serve as the bedrock of identity and resilience. Simultaneously, narratives of resistance and reinvention are also present, in which individuals and families challenge established norms, redefine roles, and forge new paths. The book encapsulates the myriad ways in which the Asian family is adapting, negotiating, and transforming itself, embodying both resilience and dynamism in the face of a rapidly changing world.

Part One of this volume contains chapters on trauma, resistance, and resilience. It highlights the resistance and reaffirmation of family through pain and hardship, and reveals the harsh realities for, and effects on, fractured families. The second section on power and obligation presents the family as a hierarchy in which the power exercised leads to different types of subjugation that are connected to familial roles and responsibilities. The third section deals with the position of the intergenerational female in the family as it is depicted in film and text, covering changes in traditional female domestic roles and the role feminism has played in the shaping and perception of families in Asia. These range from challenges to heteronormative family structures to domestic servitude. The fourth

section examines texts and films that reflect and contest national concerns and directives, dealing with individual and family responses to nationalist policies, and also provides analyses of the evolving concept of the family. The fifth section on diversity and the diaspora opens up a range of possibilities in its exploration of the myriad forms of the contemporary Asian family, and is marked by its investigation of difference and acceptance. This section examines fluidity through transgendered, intercultural, and queered portrayals of the Asian diaspora. The final section of this collection offers a diasporic re-envisioning of the Asian family through both contemporary transformations and indications into possible forthcoming sites of contestation and change to suggest a future marked by cultural nostalgia and identities in flux.

In all of the diverse regions of Asia discussed in this volume, including the Asian diaspora, patriarchal structures and their consequences for the institution of family and the individuals who comprise it inevitably lead to discourses on the collective good of the family in society or the need to uphold the rights of the individuals who are its members. There is an increasing contestation of these frameworks and of the Asian values discourse. Feminists challenge these hierarchical power structures, which are oppressive and repressive of women, and which have also exposed the injustices inflicted on women within the family. Yet to attribute such a resistance solely to external Western influence would be to deny the contestation emerging from within Asia itself. Patriarchy in the family nevertheless remains deeply embedded in most, if not all, Asian societies and changes are slow and incremental, though gaining traction. Thus, the challenges for the Asian family are many and varied, indicating that transformations in its conception and workings will continue to intensify. Literature and film by and about Asians play a key role in bearing witness to these changes and continuities.

The contributors, a diverse array of scholars and experts, bring their unique perspectives and expertise to the table, offering a wide-ranging and multidimensional view of the Asian family experience. Through insightful analysis, they contribute to a broader discourse beyond literary studies which spills over into family studies and gender studies. The second volume of *The Asian Family in Literature and Film* serves as a vital resource for academics, researchers, policymakers, and for anyone interested in understanding the intricate fabric of Asian societies and its diaspora spread throughout the world. The collection is testament to the richness and adaptability of Asian cultures, showcasing as it does how

families in this diverse region and its diaspora navigate the challenges and opportunities of the contemporary world.

This book invites readers on a journey through the past, present, and future of the Asian family, urging us to contemplate not only where we come from but also where we are headed. It is an essential contribution to the ongoing dialogue about the evolution of familial structures and their profound impact on societies in the unfolding narrative of the new millennium. The family clearly lends behavioural quality, content, and meaning to social relationships and it has an imaginative and creative dimension because it is also clearly a product of our mental processes and is expressed and embodied in our language and social existence. Thus, even though we know that families are indeed “constructed” we cannot but be “emotionally connected” to this institution, and it is this connection that is fundamental to the ways in which we envisage society and, indeed, the broader world around us.

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The two volumes of *The Asian Family in Literature and Film* comprise collections of essays which we hope will showcase not only the diversity of the regions under discussion, but the increasing diversity of the understanding of *family* itself. A quarter of a century into the new millennium, we are continuing to see the resilience of this core social unit but also a willingness, across a number of cultures, to adapt and mutate—evidence of an appropriate elasticity as the structure and conception of family reflects rapidly changing circumstances at local, glocal, and global levels, but also underscores its capacity to retain fundamental points of connection and continuity. Such changes (and consistencies) are reflected broadly across a range of social, political, religious, ideological, and administrative fields: in the reconsideration of patriarchal structures through a feminist prism; the recalibration of national ideologies and imperatives; challenges to heteronormative and cisgender structures; decreases in the number of marriages and attendant decreases in the rate of childbirth, combined with increases in divorce rates and ageing populations (most particularly in East Asia); and, importantly, legal reinterpretations of what constitutes the family and the protections and guidelines it is afforded. Many of these considerations are played out in—and may be witnessed through—the literature and film of Asia and its diaspora, in the proliferation of multimedia and multimodal discourse, and in the increasing immediacy of audience participation and influence. These collections, both in the forms of art and communication they employ and in the subjects they discuss,

reflect the rapidly evolving ways in which we, as cultural participants, are reinterpreting the world around us. They show our awareness of and responses to that most fundamental component of society across nations and regions, across cultures and belief systems: family. We hope that these two volumes go some small way to advancing discussion on the inevitable evolution of family, of its metamorphoses but also its steadfastness.

Collective projects of this size necessarily involve a high degree of commitment, collaboration, and cooperation. These collections would not be possible, most obviously, without the dedication, scholarship, and hard work of our chapter contributors. Each has brought to the table academic endeavour and inquisitiveness across an eclectic range of topics that have at their base—in one form or another—interrogations of the idea of family in Asia and its diaspora. To each and every contributor, we extend our sincere and heartfelt thanks.

We also wish to acknowledge the origins of the project. The genesis of this work came most specifically from a previous collection of essays co-edited with Professor Sharmani Patricia Gabriel of Universiti Malaya, entitled *Asian Children's Literature and Film: Local National and Transnational Trajectories* (published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2020). This in turn had grown from a 2018 special edition of the *Southeast Asian Review of Literature* (SARE), which focused on representations of children in literature and film. A further stage in the development of the project came with a generous invitation in 2022 from Professor Robert Ru-Shou Chen and Junwei Lu to speak at National Chengchi University in Taiwan on the subject of rupture, trauma, and release in the family, principally as it is represented in the Japanese anime of Hayao Miyazaki. The germination and continued academic support of such ideas and pursuits are crucial in order for them to come to fruition, and we thank all involved.

We would like to specifically express our thanks to the following people and institutions:

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Finally, the focus of this book is families and so it is that, in closing, we turn to thanking our own families and their role in the creation of these volumes. To Faizal Abdullah Sanusi, Farisya, and Farynna; and to Karen, Sam, Ellie, and Charlie Wilson for their love, support, and consideration in all things, always, we are truly grateful.

February 2024

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A NOTE ON NAME ORDER

For any editors collating a large group of essays which discuss (and are more often than not written by) a wide range of people with varying Asian ethnicities, name order can be a vexed question. Though the Eastern name order is invariably preferred across China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, and this order influences other communities of East Asian ethnicity across Asia, including Malaysia and Singapore, such is not absolutely and consistently the case.

Given the difference among Asian societies and Asian diaspora in terms of naming, we have attempted a degree of consistency, while also allowing for preferences in terms of family word order. These vary from country to country, and in some instances according to the personal preference of the author or director discussed and the common global usage of their name. Thus, a common-sense compromise has prevailed and the following should be noted:

1. Contributing authors are listed with the family name last.
2. The index is, naturally, listed with the family name first.
3. Each individual contributor has been granted leeway in terms of the discussion of Asian authors, directors, and other creative artists, given the preference for some contributors to use family names followed by first names and vice versa, and in consideration of the more common usage of the names of authors and directors as it

is recorded in media and public domains. Each chapter will be internally consistent in this regard, but will reflect the usage and preference of that particular contributor.

While this may perhaps in some instances call for a small degree of adjustment from the reader, what it more importantly indicates—and celebrates—is the eclectic and diverse nature of the authors, directors, and other creative artists under discussion.

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Reimagining the Asian Family in the New Millennium: Continuity and Cohesion, Resistance and Reinvention in South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Asian Diaspora

Bernard Wilson and Sharifah Aishah Osman

The parameters of this second volume are broad in geography, scope, and purpose, considering as these chapters do the understanding of the Asian family in its diverse and diasporic configurations in South Asia and Southeast Asia and across the globe—in its durability, but also in its challenges and mutations. Family comes in many forms, subject as it is to cultural influence, social practice, legal and political structures and strictures, and theological and theoretical interpretations. Nowhere is this truer than in these regions of Asia (and of the Asian diaspora), whose religious and

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