



ASIA-PACIFIC AND LITERATURE IN ENGLISH



The Asian Family in Literature and Film

Changing Perceptions in
a New Age-East Asia, Volume I

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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Editors

Bernard Wilson
Department of English Language
and Cultures (adjunct), Faculty
of Letters
Gakushuin University
Tokyo, Japan

Sharifah Aishah Osman
Department of English
Universiti Malaya
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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

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 that is as 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 that 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 a 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 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 the 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 that 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, that 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 the 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

Volume 1 of *The Asian Family in Literature and Film* addresses ways in which creative arts are representing one of the most pressing social issues in East Asia, the impact of economic, demographic, and cultural transformations on traditional family structures. Over the millennia of human existence, society and family have been inextricable and changes within one are in some way reflected or duplicated in the other. These essays explore how twenty-first-century creative minds are responding to perceived changes in the family. Scholarly (and popular) debates about the traditional family—Is it disappearing? Should it be preserved? Is it just developing new, more pluralistic forms?—have predominantly dealt with Western societies and are more recent in the East. Conversations about socio-cultural shifts in East Asia effectively began with Ochiai and Hosoya's collection, *Transformation of the Intimate and the Public in Asian Modernity* (2014), but there was little attention to literature and media there and it has remained uncommon. Now this impressive collection represents the contributions of thirty-three authors, from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, to the development of this emerging topic and to the identification of its core elements. While the focus is on corpora drawn from literary and multimodal sources, especially film, and analysis is primarily from a critical content approach, the collection demonstrates that the field is most productively explored from areas as varied as sociology, political sciences, cultural history, literary studies, media studies, psychology, and cognitive studies.

As contributors to this collection concur, Confucianism, which considered the family to be the foundation of society, overtly or implicitly informs conceptions of the family across East Asia. However, the traditional families of Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Taiwanese cultures were always structurally and culturally different from each other and have been challenged and modified in different ways and at different times, between Japan's Meiji revolution (1868), China's tumultuous upheaval after 1949, and South Korea's "compressed modernity" in the later twentieth century (Chang 2014, etc.) So while the Confucian base assumes that individual people are merely members of the family unit and are duty-bound to fulfil assigned social roles, various elements of individualism now modify or challenge that assumption. Nevertheless, the consistent respect for Confucianism across time has contributed to the unique dynamics that characterise family life today.

Because modernisation processes, industrialisation and economic development have occurred within a short time span, East Asian societies are marked by "the dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements" (Chang 38). The concomitant cultural transformation has included some dramatic changes to family structure and family life. Changes such as revisions to marriage law and the weakening of the Confucian principle of filial piety have occurred at different times and at different rates across and within the region, and in urban and rural communities, so a research collection that addresses familial rights and responsibilities in an atmosphere of changing values and demographics across the region is a very welcome contribution to knowledge.

Despite the challenges posed in recent decades, the conceptual basis of the family in the institution of marriage and the separate spheres of men and women remains substantially unchanged in East Asia, in contrast to the declining commitment to marriage in the Western world. But it has been and remains under pressure because of several key factors which the creative works analysed in this collection engage with both directly and obliquely. Special attention has been given to the strong focus on family in the films of Kore-eda Hirokazu, which range from the claustrophobic family environment of *Still Walking* (2008) to the ebullient disregard for blood connections in *Shoplifters* (2018). On the other hand, motifs of social change may be an unmarked flicker in the discourse: for example, the 2018 Japanese remake of the South Korean film *Sunny* (2011) introduces such small local changes as when the lead protagonist Nami (Shinohara Ryoko) reveals that she married young because of an

“oops marriage”. It is helpful for viewers to know that the average age at which Japanese women marry passed 29 in 2013 and that the number of marriages prompted by pregnancy had increased to 25.3% in 2009. As Ochiai Emiko comments, “The gap between the frequency of premarital sex and the contrasting conservative standards has presumably been responsible for this increase in ‘oops marriages’” (“Unsustainable” 74).

Although it seems that across East Asia the importance of the institution of family in terms of duty and responsibility remains intact, Ochiai aligns the extreme decline in fertility and the increase both in divorces and in age at first marriage with desires to avoid or flee the burden of a family (“Unsustainable” 78). Other domains which may function as a deterrent to embracing family life are the heavy commitment of resources to the raising of children and the required delivery of the intergenerational transfer of advantage; the viability of support for elderly relatives in ageing populations; the endemic failure to establish gender equality in the workplace; the persistence of son preference in China, Taiwan, and South Korea, along with the acute gender imbalance produced by persistent practice of sex-selective abortions; and the increasingly ambiguous status of filial piety.

All these challenges to the traditional family have been thematised or at least represented in literature and multimodal productions across the region. Because the various cultures have both commonalities and differences, there is a large scope for jumping off from specific discussions in the present collection to assemble cross-cultural corpora as a basis for sustained, highly original comparative studies. For example, the ever-shrinking fertility rate and the increasing number of elderly citizens are already beginning to produce a crisis of care, which has been represented in the twenty-first century from various perspectives. Living conditions of the elderly in South Korea, for example, especially those in depopulated rural villages, are the worst of any country in the developed world (Lee 2018), and have attracted extensive attention in film and other media. Elderly citizens across the region often feel burdensome and lonely and are prone to depression. They live with the threat of inadequate care in the onset of dementia or related cognitive impairments. A preliminary research corpus for a comparative study might thus consist of something like the following: *Mama!* (dir. Yang Lina, China, 2022; aka *Song of Spring*), which is introduced here in Chapter 7 by Zou Ping, is the story of a mother and daughter whose responsibility of care is reversed as the daughter succumbs to Alzheimer’s disease at age 65; *Mourning Forest*

(dir. Kawase Naomi, Japan, 2007), through the relationship between an elderly man with dementia and his institutional carer explores the ageing of contemporary Japanese society and the breakdown of the family system; *The Way Home* (dir. Lee Jeong-Hyang, 2002) and *Cherry Tomato* (dir. Jung Young-Bae, 2008), are two South Korean films which address the abandonment of the elderly and the expectation they will nevertheless care for abandoned grandchildren. The bleakest approach is the dystopian *Plan 75* (dir. Hayakawa Chie, Japan, 2022), which premises a future society in which at the age of 75 people are offered consensual euthanasia. The film alludes to the Japanese folk narrative, *Ubasuteyama* (abandoning a parent on a mountain), in which an older relative is carried to a mountain, or some other remote place, and left there to die. A well-known Korean folktale analogue is alluded to in *The Way Home* and *Cherry Tomato* (see Lee 2018), implying that the practice has simply taken a less direct form. Finally, such a study might include two Taiwanese documentaries: *City of Memories* (dir. Lee Ching-Hui Jasmine, 2007), which explores family and marriage, and the positions of women and the elderly in society, and *Go Grandriders* (dir. Howard Hua, 2012), which celebrates the achievement of seventeen octogenarians who fulfilled their dream of riding around Taiwan by motorcycle.

The depictions of family not as an institution but as a practice—the things people do—in Kore-eda's *Shoplifters* or Song Hae-Sung's *Boomerang Family* (South Korea, 2013) envisage family as more variable, diverse, and multi-faceted than the traditional Confucian structure, even if society resists the emergence of such families. I look forward to further research into this fluidity by contributors to this volume and scholars inspired by them. Wonderful opportunities for both similar and innovative inquiry about family life in Eastern cultures currently exist.

John Stephens
Emeritus Professor
Macquarie University
Sydney, Australia

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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 also 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 the 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 the 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 is 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 Karen, Sam, Ellie, and Charlie Wilson; and Faizal Abdullah Sanusi, Farisya, and Farynna, for their love, support, and consideration in all things, always, we are truly grateful.

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Bernard Wilson
Gakushuin University
Tokyo, Japan

Sharifah Aishah Osman
Universiti Malaya
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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 vexing 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.

CONTENTS

Reimagining the East Asian Family in the New Millennium: Prevailing Practices, Changing Perceptions	1
Bernard Wilson and Sharifah Aishah Osman	
Tradition and Traversal	
The Conception of Family in Japanese Law: Its Changes and Continuities, 1868–2015	37
Hiromi Sasamoto-Collins	
The Voices of Korean Families in Literature and Film	67
Jieun Kiaer and Loli Kim	
Past in the Present: Film and TV Drama, Korean Families, and the Palimpsestic Neo-Confucian Family Schema	89
Sung-Ae Lee	
Transcending Traditional Notions of Family: A Cinematic Exploration by Kore-eda Hirokazu	109
Da Seul Lee	
That Which Goes Unsaid: <i>Our Little Sister</i> and Kore-eda Hirokazu's Revision of Ozu Yasujiro's Familial Dynamics	129
Joshua Fagan	

Contesting Patriarchy

A Comparative Study on the Representation
of the Confucian Family and the Image of the Father
in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Hulk* 149
Qiao Li

The Chinese Family at the Dinner Table: The Father
Figure in Ang Lee's *Eat Drink Man Woman* 169
Lung-Lung Hu

A New Perspective on Taiwanese Motherhood
and Domestic Dynamics in Ang Lee's *Pushing Hands*
and *Eat Drink Man Woman* 189
Ting-Ting Chan

From Paterfamilias to Pariah: Identity Negotiations
in the Landscape of Taiwan Cinema and *The Fourth Portrait* 209
Xing Zhao

Spatial Writing and Feminist Practice in Yang Lina's
Trilogy of Women 235
Ping Zou

Dismantling the Family Ideology in Contemporary
Japanese Literature: Hatred, Disgust, and Reconciliation
in Three Father–Daughter Stories by Kakuta Mitsuyo 253
Letizia Guarini

Gender, Sexuality, Identity

Transforming and Transgressing: The Dilemmatic
Transgender Women in Naoko Oigami's *Close-Knit*
and Eoji Uchida's *Midnight Swan* 273
Nicola Ulaan Wan

Queering the Family in Japanese Manga: Acceptance
of LGBTQ+ Identities in Gengoroh Tagame's *My Brother's
Husband* and Okura's *I Think Our Son Is Gay* 287
Jesse Bair

Sex Work, Secrecy and Sisterhood: Jo Keung-ha's <i>The Body Confession</i> and Post-colonial Family Constructions	303
Ariel Schudson	
Nation, Narration, Contestation	
Staging the Family, Upstaging the State: Performances of <i>Jia</i> in Zhang Yimou's <i>To Live</i>, <i>Curse of the Golden Flower</i>, and <i>Coming Home</i>	329
Valerie Wee and Susan Ang	
Family-Nation Narrative: Representations of the Family Unit in China Central Television (CCTV) Spring Festival Gala's Comedy Sketches, 1983–2022	369
Danqi Lu, Tianyue Tang, Jade Jue Yu Phua, Ruiqi Ren, and Jack Allen	
Changing Representations of Family Images in Chinese Children's Books of the Past Century	397
Lijun Bi and Xiangshu Fang	
Haunted Family: The Representation of National Identity in Taiwanese Horror Films	421
Yi Chun Wu	
<i>Sans Famille</i>: Lack, Loneliness, and the Everyday Landscapes of Isolation in Hong Sang-soo	447
Adam Bingham	
Transitions and Trajectories	
Taiwanese Picturebooks and the Changing Images of the Family in the Age of Globalisation	469
Andrea Mei-Ying Wu	
Childist Rebellion: Rethinking Family in the Transmedia Storytelling of <i>The Bad Kids</i>	487
Miao Dou	
The Nuclear Family in the Twenty-First-Century Korean Drama	515
Selma Chouchane	

“How to Cultivate an Ideal Marriage”: Korean Coupled in the South Korean Reality TV Shows <i>Marriage Hell</i> and <i>Groom’s Class</i>	535
Eun Bin Ladner-Seok	
The Ageing Father and the Changing Family Dynamic in South Korean Webtoons	557
June Oh	
Index	579

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Jack Allen graduated from Peking University (M.A. in Chinese Literature and Culture) and Princeton University (AB in Slavic Languages and Literatures). His research focuses on state messaging in visual culture and literary nonfiction in Russia and China.

Susan Ang is an assistant professor in the Department of English, Linguistics and Theatre Studies at the National University of Singapore. She was educated in Singapore and the University of Cambridge (B.A. (Hons), M.A. Ph.D.). Among her teaching interests are Romanticism, modern poetry, the modern novel, science fiction, and its related subspecialties. She is the author of *The Widening World of Children's Literature* and has also published work on Diana Wynne Jones, Louis Macneice, Geoffrey Hill, Peter Ackroyd, and China Miéville, among others. Her essay on Miéville was given the SFRA Innovative Research Award in 2019.

Jesse Bair is currently Resident Director at SUNY Brockport. He has also served as an intern for social/restorative justice organisations like Peer Seattle and the Institute for the Study of Sport Society and Social Change. He received his master's in Children's and Young Adult Literature from Central Michigan University and his bachelor's in English Education from Montana State University.

Lijun Bi is a lecturer at Monash University, Australia. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Melbourne. A specialist in Chinese children's literature, she has published books and articles on the social

role of children's books in China. Her other research interests include moral education in China, education of the deaf in China, and Chinese intellectual history.

Adam Bingham is a lecturer in Film and Television Studies at the University of Nottingham in the UK. He is a critic for *Cineaste* in the US, a researcher on contemporary Japanese cinema in particular and author of *Japanese Cinema Since Hana-Bi* (2015) and contributor to books on Hong Kong Neo-noir, Yasujiro Ozu, Shohei Imamura, and forthcoming texts on Hiroshi Teshigahara, Sumiko Haneda, and on the visual culture of Bengali Cinema.

Ting-Ting Chan is Assistant Professor of English at Asia Eastern University of Science and Technology in Taiwan. Her research interests include Asian American and African American representations in cinema, motherhood in Science Fiction films, and star studies. Her work has appeared in *East-West Cultural Passage* and *The Quint*.

Selma Chouchane is an associate professor of Literature at Sétif 2 University, Algeria. Her interests in scholarship include modern and postmodern literature, comparative literature, feminism, womanism, and gender studies. Chouchane's publications include "A Womanist Reading of Denver in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (*The Criterion* 2013), "The Outcast of Black Women from the Ideal Womanhood in *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye*, *The Color Purple*, and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*" (*Ichkalat Review* 2019), and "Racism, Sexism and the Genesis of a "Womanish" Identity in Selected Novels by Alice Walker and Toni Morrison" (*Human Sciences Journal* 2019).

Miao Dou is currently Visiting Assistant Professor of Chinese at the College of the Holy Cross. Her field of research includes youth studies, women's and gender studies, and modern Chinese culture. Her current book project explores the cultural history of female youth in early twentieth-century China.

Joshua Fagan is a graduate student at St. Andrews, specialising in American and British literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, with a particular focus on shifting conceptions of history and science. His current project focuses on literary uses of Darwinian ideas of time and flux in response to the impermanence and overstimulation of the fin-de-siècle world. He has published on William Morris and Mark Twain, and

his writing on the relation between the premodern and naturalistic transcendence in Robert Frost's poetry received the Lesley Lee Francis Prize from *The Robert Frost Review*.

Xiangshu Fang before retirement, was a senior lecturer at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences of Deakin University, Australia. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Melbourne. His main research interests include Confucianism, Taoism, and other ancient Chinese philosophy.

Letizia Guarini is an assistant professor at the Department of Intercultural Communication of Hosei University, Japan. She received her Ph.D. at Ochanomizu University. Her research examines contemporary Japanese literature from a gender perspective. She has a strong interest in the emergence of new father figures in Japanese society, the father-daughter relationship in contemporary literature, and the representation of childbirth and childcare in works by contemporary authors. She has recently published "Voices against Gender-based Violence in Contemporary Japanese Literature: An Analysis of Two Novels by Kaoruko Himeno and Aoko Matsuda" (*Voiced and Voiceless in Asia*, Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 2023).

Lung-Lung Hu is a senior lecturer at the School of Language, Literatures, and Learning at Dalarna University in Sweden, and he earned his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature at Fu-Jen Catholic University in Taiwan. His research interests include Law and Literature, Interdisciplinary Research, Comparative Literature, and Sinology.

Jieun Kiaer holds the YBMK KF Professorship in Korean Linguistics at the University of Oxford. As a linguist, pragmatist, and specialist in Asian studies, she has published extensively in the fields of theoretical and applied linguistics as well as translation studies. Her research goes beyond the traditionally Western and text-focused approaches to language, embracing non-European and multi-modal perspectives to offer a more nuanced understanding of human communication. She is currently co-authoring *East Asian Voices in English Children's Picture Books* (with Loli Kim, Cambridge University Press).

Loli Kim is Postdoctoral Researcher on The Leverhulme Trust's *Sea, Song and Survival: The Language and Folklore of the Haenyeo Women* project at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University

of Oxford. As a multimodalist specialising in cross-cultural approaches to East Asian texts, her interests lie in the development of approaches that support Western scholars to engage with the East Asian voices in texts. She is co-authoring *East Asian Voices in English Children's Picture Books* (with Jieun Kiaer, Cambridge University Press), and authors fiction set in East Asian contexts, represented by the BKS Agency (London).

Eun Bin Ladner-Seok is a Ph.D. student in Performance Studies at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, and her research focuses on Korean popular cultures, such as K-pop, K-dramas, and Korean reality TV shows. She recently co-authored a paper called "Ambassadors of K-Culture: Korean Americans, Korea, and K-pop" (International Institute for Asian Studies, 2022). Her research examines how national identities, gender, and sexuality all move within the transnational context of K-pop.

Da Seul Lee is a Ph.D. candidate in the Graduate School of International Culture and Communication Studies at Waseda University, specialising in Visual Culture. Drawing on her experience in both academia and the arts and media sectors across the United States and East Asia, Lee's research delves into narratives and aesthetics in Japanese and Korean contemporary cinema. Her current projects include a dissertation on director Kore-eda Hirokazu and articles that investigate the aesthetic approach of magical realism in portraying trauma and the significance of car interior space in film narratives.

Sung-Ae Lee is a lecturer in the Department of Media, Communications, Creative Arts, Language and Literature at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. She has two doctoral degrees, one in Asian Studies and the other in English Literature. Her research areas range across Asian cinema, adaptation, trauma studies, and Korean literature, film, and TV drama. Her recent publications include "Coming-of-age in South Korean Cinema" (in *The Oxford Handbook of Children's Film*, OUP, 2022) and "Between script and genre: a space where east meets west" (in *Orientalism and Reverse Orientalism in Literature and Film: Beyond East and West*, Routledge, 2021).

Qiao Li teaches the theory and practice of filmmaking at Edinburgh Napier University. He is Visiting Professor at Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University and the editor-in-chief of the UNESCO book project on the global film industry. He is the co-editor of 3 books: *Migration & Memory: Arts and Cinemas of the Chinese Diaspora* (MSHP, 2019), *Development*

of *Global Film Industry: Industrial Competition and Cooperation in the Context of Globalization* (Routledge, 2020), and *The Transformation in Global Film Production, Distribution and Consumption in the Post-Pandemic Era* (Routledge, 2023). Additionally, he is recognised as a digital filmmaker and film festival curator.

Danqi Lu is currently a teaching assistant and Presidential Ph.D. Scholar at the School of Chinese, The University of Hong Kong. She graduated from Peking University (M.Phil. in Literature) and Zhejiang University (B.A. in Literature). Her research interests focus on contemporary Chinese literary and visual culture, Hong Kong studies, gender and sexuality.

June Oh is an assistant professor of English and Digital Studies at The University of Texas at Tyler. Oh's research focuses on the intersections between Korean culture and British literature, with a special interest in age/disability studies and digital humanities. Oh is currently working on a project that traces the cultural history of ageing in East Asia. Her work has been published in *The Gerontologist*, *Age Culture Humanities*, *The Korean Society of British and American Fiction*, and *Studies in Modern British and American Poetry*.

Sharifah Aishah Osman is a senior lecturer at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Her research focuses on the intersection between feminism and literature for children and young adults. Her publications have appeared in *Asian Children's Literature and Film in a Global Age: Local, National, and Transnational Trajectories* (2020), *Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, and *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*. She is co-editor of *The Principal Girl Redux: Feminist Tales from Asia* (2023), and is working on a monograph on feminist folktales and folktale adaptations in Malaysian youth literature.

Jade Jue Yu Phua graduated from Peking University (MPhil in Economics and Management) and from University College London (BSc Economics and Geography). Her research interests lie in the intersections between technology and society.

Ruiqi Ren is an M.A. student at the Centre for China Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. She graduated from Minzu University

of China (B.A. in Journalism). Her research interests include Literary and Art Theory, Film Studies and Visual Culture.

Hiromi Sasamoto-Collins is a former lecturer in Modern Japanese History at Durham University and currently teaches Japanese History and Politics at the University of Edinburgh. She obtained her Ph.D. from Edinburgh in 2005 for her study of modern Japanese political dissidents. Her publications include “Facilitating Fascism?: the Japanese Peace Preservation Act and the Role of the Judiciary”, in Stephen Skinner (ed.) *Fascism and Criminal Law: History, Theory, Continuity* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2015); and “The Emperor’s Sovereign Status and the Legal Construction of Gender in Early Meiji Japan”, *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 2017, 43:2.

Ariel Schudson is an independent scholar and moving image archivist. Contributing several articles to the Library of Congress website’s National Film Preservation section, she worked as a columnist for online media journals, most notably Quentin Tarantino’s New Beverly Cinema publication. She began writing about Korean films in 2011, moving to Seoul in 2019. Her work focuses on classic Korean cinema and women’s representation, emphasising disability, postcolonialism, and sexual expression. Her chapter “To Speak and To Be Spoken For: Deafness, Stuttering and the Women in the Films of Kim Ki-young” was recently published in a collected volume by Edinburgh University Press.

Tianyue Tang is currently working at the University of Electronic Science and Technology of China. She graduated from Peking University (MPhil in Literature) and Xiamen University (B.A. in Literature). Her work focuses specifically on Contemporary Chinese popular culture and media communication.

Nicola Ulaan Wan is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the City University of Hong Kong. She graduated from the University of Hong Kong with a master’s degree in Literary and Cultural Studies. Her research interests centre on Hong Kong and Japanese literature and film, world literature, and world cinema.

Valerie Wee is an associate professor lecturing on film and media studies in the Department of English, Linguistics and Theatre Studies at the National University of Singapore. Her research areas include horror films, youth culture, and Hollywood and the American culture industries. Her