Cultural and Material Exchanges in Literary Southeast Asia

TALIC COIL Sharing

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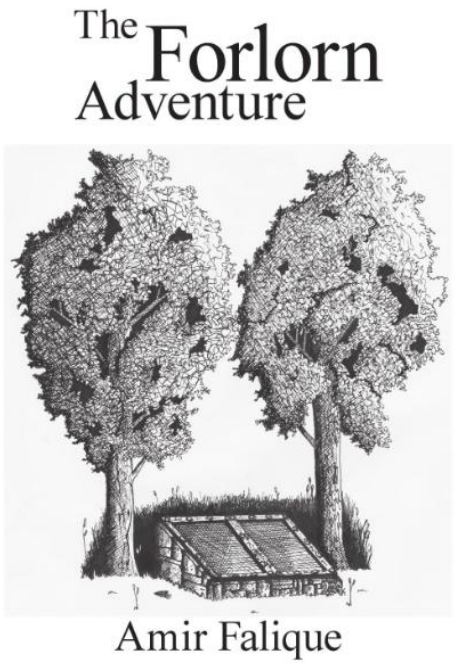
Literatures of Southeast Asia

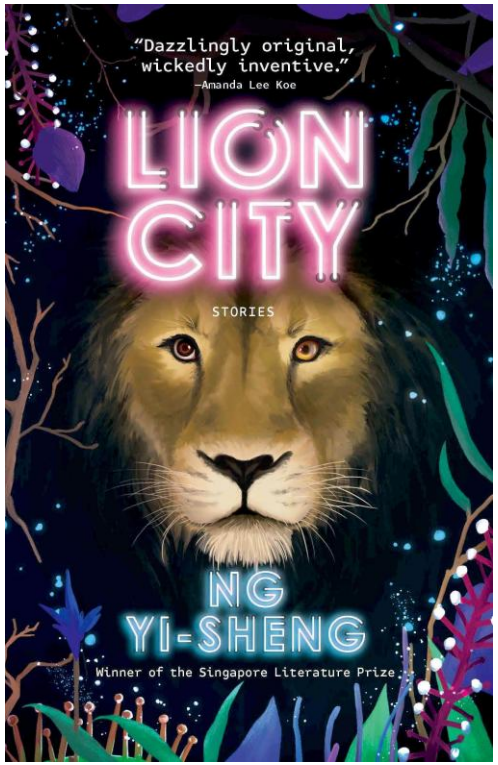
- A collaboration between NIE-NTU and Universiti Brunei Darussalam (Two runs since 2024)
- A literature survey module covering the literatures of Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia

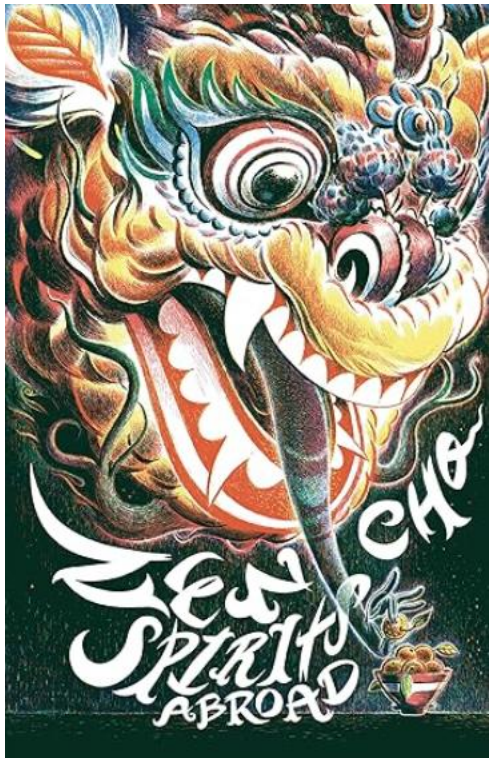
Learning Outcomes

- Interpret and appraise Southeast Asian writing based on key literary techniques, writers' backgrounds, and local, social or cultural contexts
- Develop comparative and creative insights into Southeast Asian literary texts in connection with the geopolitical, historical and cultural contexts of specific societies, while evaluating interconnections within the region
- Collaborate effectively during seminars to generate multiple perspectives on Southeast Asian texts according to the concerns of diverse cultural and linguistic communities in the region.

Imagining as Being
Transnational Connections
Magical Realism
Historical Fiction and Imagined Histories







Challenges of Teaching Literatures in Southeast Asia

- A diverse region with more than 350 languages and 11 nation-states
  - Student knowledge is often limited to their respective countries
  - Faculty tend to be country and language specialists
- Southeast Asian writing is a dynamic canon that continues to be shaped from year to year by new writers
- Major publishing houses in the region and in the west exert an outsized effect as literary gatekeepers for new work

Literary and Stylistic Concepts

Speculative Fiction

Orwellian Doublespeak

Sociohistorical Contexts

Legend of Sang Nila Utama

National narratives of Third World to First

The Literary Text

Cultural and Political Frameworks

Meritocracy

Founding Myths

Material Contexts for Literary Production

Local vs. Global Audiences / Markets

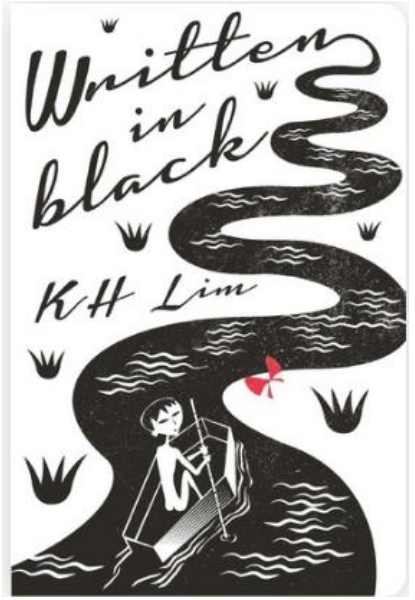
Paratextuality

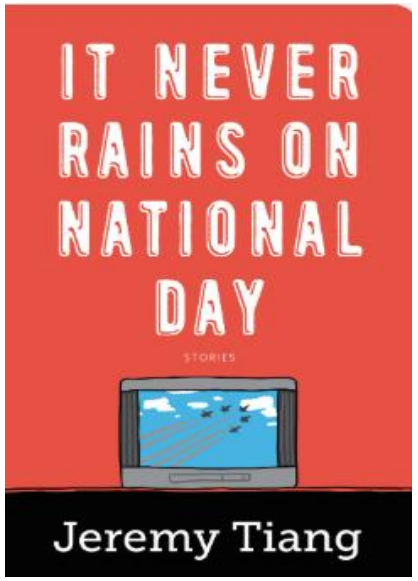
Pedagogical Approaches

Hybrid Seminar Format	Guest Lectures and Speakers	Bringing Material Contexts Into View
Three-part structure to each seminar • Hybrid lecture • Breakout rooms with students from Brunei and Singapore • In-person discussion to close	• Guest lecturers from Malaysia and Indonesia	Interact with publishers, authors and book-sellers during the local field-trip in Singapore Meet Bruneian literary creatives, publishers and authors during the overseas field-trip Visit bookstores in Singapore and/or Brunei to collect data on the circulation of Southeast Asian literature

Comparative Conversation 1

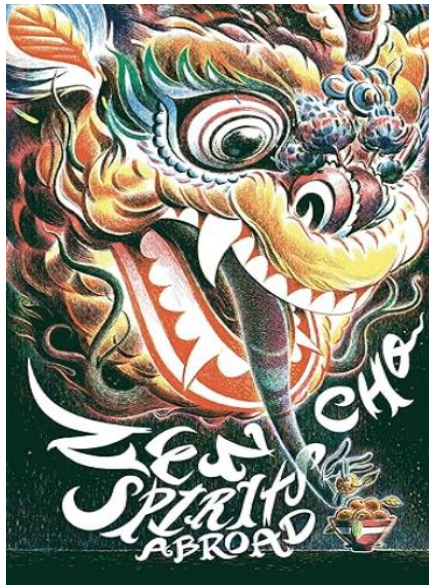
- The chronotope of the car-journey in *Written in Black*
- The main episodes in the narrative take place in the enclosed space of the car
  - The main character escapes from the ancestral Lim house is on the lorry that delivers his grandfather's coffin
  - Meets a kind stranger who drives him home
- The chronotope of the train journey in a foreign country, in "Trondheim"
  - An enclosed but liminal space in which two Singapore characters meet
  - They learn about each other, but do not reflect on themselves



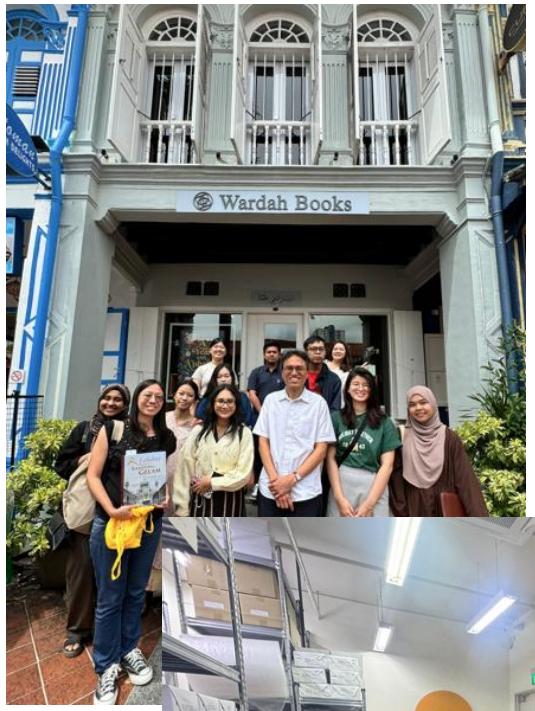


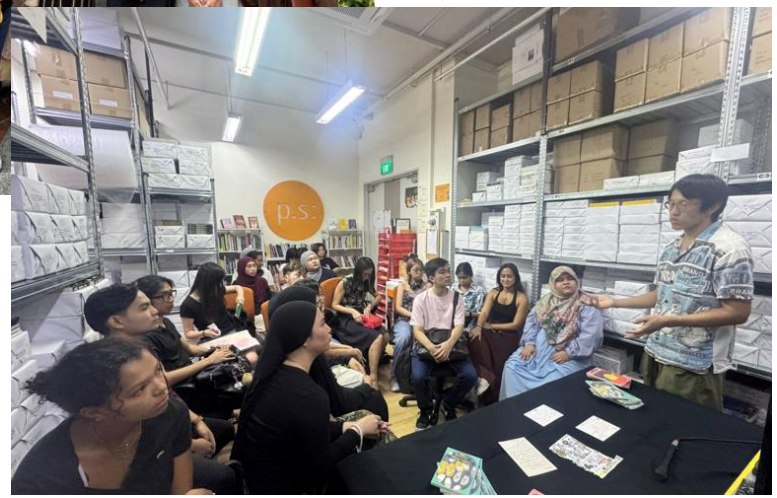
Comparative Conversation 2

- Touristic exoticism is a concept generally applied to minor cultures from a western perspective
  - The attraction and fascination of the exotic occurs because of the gap of cultural difference
- What happens then the spiritual or cultural practice in question doesn't belong to another cultural group, but to ourselves, as modern individuals?
- In "House of Aunts" by Zen Cho, Chinese Pontianak aunties have a progressive educational outlook when their niece falls in love with a boy at school
- In *Man Tiger*, the spirit tiger that lives in Margio is the ethical core of justice in an immoral society



Cultural Exchange Field Trip





Bookstore Ethnography Assignment

Research Activity 1: Case Study of Texts

Choose two Southeast Asian texts from the bookstores you visit. Compare and contrast their significance within the literary marketplace, considering how marketing strategies and publisher influences shape their presentation. Discuss the how their paratexts construct the author's identities and how these elements impact readers' perceptions and the cultural significance of their works in the broader literary landscape.

Research Activity 2: Bookstore Ethnography

Select one bookstore and conduct an ethnographic analysis of the layout and positioning of Southeast Asian Literature. Consider how the organisation reflects the literary marketplace, including marketing strategies, publisher influences, and author identities. Analyse how these elements contribute to the visibility and reception of Southeast Asian Literature within the broader context of Brunei and Singapore's literary landscapes.

Highlights from Student Presentations

Positioning of SEA Literature

Where?

- Tucked near the backed corner
- Exists BUT not a commercial priority
- Small physical collection
- Lower market demand OR limited publister push

Marketing strategy

Publishers may be more focused on digital discoverability rather than in-store visibility

Publishing strategies

New Arrivals

how other media can affect how books are sold

New York Times Bestsellers

Design cover, display

Compare + Contrast: sig. Within literary marketplace

This is what inequality looks like

- 2 editions of cover designs
- Social commentary through the use of an anthology of essays
- Risk of political self-censorship
- Clear educational purposes

Nine Yard Sarees

- Singular edition of cover design
- Social nitpicking through fictional literature
- Anxiety of authorship lies in handling sensitive representations
- Adapted to dramatic reading

Thank You

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