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Poetry and prose as resource in the teaching of Asean geography

Yee Sze Onn

Paper presented at the conference organised by the Department of Curriculum Studies, University of Hong Kong and International Geographical Union Commission on Geographical Education at Hong Kong from 6-10 Aug 1990.

## **ABSTRACT**

In teaching the geography of ASEAN, the method of instruction most commonly used is to deal with each country in a systematic manner. The purpose of this paper is to suggest a method of teaching that links geography with poetry and prose. Examples of poems and literary passages are provided to illustrate how these can be integrated with geography lessons to kindle interest in learning, sensitize pupils to environmental and social issues and enhance the teaching of ASEAN geography.

**POETRY AND PROSE AS RESOURCE IN THE TEACHING  
OF ASEAN GEOGRAPHY**  
Sze-Onn Yee

**INTRODUCTION**

ASEAN or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations is a broad based grouping of six countries - Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Brunei Darussalam - formed in 1967 to accelerate economic, social and cultural development and to promote regional co-operation, peace and stability.

Geographically ASEAN constitutes the peninsula and the archipelago parts of historical southeast Asia. It comprises a heterogeneous region in terms of culture, language, religion, ethnicity, history and traditions.

The geography of the region constitutes an important part of the syllabus for the subject in secondary schools in the countries of ASEAN. Its teaching has tended to follow the traditional approach in which the geography of each country is systematically dealt with starting with its location, relief, climate, vegetation in that order and ending with transportation and trade.

This approach tends to emphasize the acquisition of factual information from prescribed textbooks and is unlikely to arouse interest in learning more about the countries beyond that necessary for the passing of examinations. In an attempt to depart from this mode this paper explores the use of a method that links geography with something that is not normally associated with it - namely literature. It makes bold to suggest that poetry and prose can be a means of kindling interest in learning the geography of ASEAN lands. Finally, it draws attention to the vast pool of literary resources that can be tapped to enrich the teaching of the region.

**RATIONALE**

Part of a teacher's challenge is to make learning meaningful, interesting and relevant to the lives of children. It is only too well known to us that

children will not learn unless the learning experience is enjoyable, and the contents of lessons are relevant to their needs and interests. Literature, with its uniquely creative use of language, in particular, in the use of vivid imagery and the special rhythms of speech, can be fully exploited to achieve precisely this goal. Moreover, literature can create a greater awareness of and sensitivity to the environment - whether physical or social. In this way, it can be seen that both the cognitive and the affective dimensions are being developed.

By way of an example, a geography lesson on fishing in Peninsular Malaysia can be introduced by using the following two poems - Three Beserah\* Fishermen and Dungun\* Fishermen.

### ***THREE BESERAH FISHERMEN***

*three small souls in a frail old sampan  
in the bowl of the sea.  
between the teeth of the waves,  
between the sea and the home  
there was no choice  
against the big winds  
and the capricious sea.*

*the wind has no heart -  
nor the sky nor the sea,  
and the heart was for words of prayer;  
time between the stretches of a red imagination  
was a promise of hope,  
for the heart knows its logic  
and the pains of the whipping winds.*

*what of the wives, sons and daughters,  
the tomorrow, the eye of the day,  
the rice and the fish, the school fees?  
on land how heavy the soul is loaded;  
to survive was as hard as to die.  
to go down into the bottom of sea-dish,  
the bare dish:  
to jump and swim into time and hope?*

\* Dungun and Beserah are two fishing settlements on the east coast of Peninsular Malays

*the early morning nets, the boats,  
the friends, the gregariousness,  
and the sea-saw  
on the fulcrum of the shore.  
harsh land pushed them  
into the uncertain sea  
deep into eclipsing death*

*in Time and its People  
- Muhammad Haji Salleh*

### ***DUNGUN FISHERMEN***

*in sight of the purple ocean  
and the delicate guardian storks  
of their fragile perahus*

*a circle of sun-brown fishermen  
mend nets on the sand,  
disentangling sea-weeds*

*from their beach-made nets.  
the heavy sun absorbs  
language, the afternoon is quiet.*

*patiently they pull threads  
across fish-holes and knot them in revenge  
feeling the rhythm of their internal sea.*

*against the thick skies  
the fertilised trengganu oceans,  
they are dessicated toys.*

*the waves are their adversary,  
office-mate and paymaster,  
life-giver and graveyard of unreturned neighbours.*

*in Time and its People  
- Muhammed Haji Salleh*

In these two poems, the poet evokes sympathy for the lives of those who eke out an existence from the sea. For instance, the dilemma of the fishermen, their anxiety and fears clearly emerge in the following lines :

*What of the wives, sons and daughters,  
the tomorrow, the eye of the day,  
the rice and the fish, the school fees?  
on land how heavy the soul is loaded;  
to survive was as hard as to die.'*

The last line underlines the considerable grit needed to survive as a fisherman. In *Dungun Fishermen* the poem again focuses on the lives of fishermen and their frailty when they are pitted against the forces of nature in their struggle for existence.

*....against the thick skies  
the fertilised trengganu oceans  
they are dessicated toys.*

*the waves are their adversary  
office-mate and paymaster  
life-giver and graveyard of  
unreturned neighbours.*

Empathy for the padi(rice) farmer is depicted in a poem by Masuri a Singaporean Malay poet :

*This rice I eat  
Was once hopeful padi,  
Its stalks solemnly laden, bowing their heads,  
Continually swayed by the blowing breeze.*

*This grain of rice I chew -  
I am swallowing it down my wet throat;  
So from flowing blood  
In my body an action terminates.*

*Gusty wind and equatorial sun  
scorch the body of the peasant in the field;  
Heat, rain I eat is a mixture of them all.*

*This good deed I receive  
Is a common gift, like many branches growing together:  
This rice is the product of labour*

*Returned to those who deserve it.  
So what I eat is not originally from rice  
But from sweat, blood constantly flowing;  
So what I swallow is not originally from padi,  
But from the sinews, the pulse of all peasants.*

*(Masuri S. N. This Rice I Eat)*

The poet speaks of the 'gusty wind and equatorial sun which scorches the body of the peasant as he toils in the field.' The imagery used helps to convey a picture of rice farming and the conditions in which work is done and arouses feelings for the farmer. The final verse is especially poignant. While the preceding poems tell of the hardship of fishermen and padi farmers, Wong Yoon Wah's 'The Tin Mine' and 'The Deserted Mine' touch on a different aspect of ASEAN geography, - tin mining.

### ***THE TIN MINE***

*With the sand and gravel  
we travel  
in the gurgling brook  
from the peak  
to the plain.*

*On the way  
exhausted  
we slump  
panting  
on the river bed.*

*The clear currents  
wash our bodies  
showing off  
their whiteness.  
But later  
we are tanned once more  
by the equatorial sun.*

*Village women  
stalking our brook  
busily winkle us out.  
For cash*

*they will sell us  
to the scorching flame.*

*Fearing the furnace  
we hide  
between manganese,  
sand  
and gravel.*

*But relentlessly the women  
sift  
each pile of mud  
till they find us  
crouching cowardly  
beneath the dulang\*  
a handful of white rice .....  
Unhusked  
we shiver  
in the winnowing tray.*

*Wong Yoon Wah*

### ***THE DESERTED MINE***

*When I walk out of the mud  
the earth leaves behind  
a few lakes  
rippling  
with black waves  
which stare sadly at the sky.*

*Reluctantly  
wild orchids  
and ferns  
grow  
on mound  
after mound  
of barren  
sand banks.*

*Wong Yoon Wah*

\* Dulang : Lit (Malay) a circular woven tray, usually made from split bamboo, traditionally used in Peninsular Malaysia to sift river sand for tin.

In the first of these two poems, the poet describes the deposition of tin on river beds in the opening lines:

*With the sand and gravel  
we travel  
in the gurgling brook*

*from the peak  
to the plain*

*on the way  
exhausted  
we slump  
panting  
on the river bed*

The ore hidden in a mixture of sand and gravel is then mined by :

*Village women  
stalking our brook  
busily winkle us out  
For cash  
they will sell us  
to the scorching flame.*

When the ore has been removed the environment is altered. The effects of mining on the land are summed up in the closing lines of The Deserted Mine.

*Reluctantly  
wild orchids  
and farms  
grow  
on mound  
after mound  
of barren  
sand banks.*

By incorporating such poems, lessons on economic geography are made more human and appealing. Learning geographical facts is more than

an academic experience - it has become a human experience.

In teaching the geography of regions, passages from literary works/novels are of value particularly because of the way in which they portray the influence of geographical features of an area on the lives of its inhabitants. Combined with other forms of description either textual, statistical or visual, such passages take on a greater meaning than the prose itself can convey. As Margaret Anderson has stated in her introduction to 'Splendour of the Earth' "... no deadly accurate, purely technical description can bring vividly to life a mountain, a great river, or even a climate, can make it our own to love and remember, as an imaginative description by a great writer can do."

The following passage for example, provides a vivid description of a Malaysian rainforest.

*"... But come down from the mountain peak and walk alone along a forest path. Though it is mid-day it is very dark and very sombre. The sun cannot pierce the dense foliage of the branches of the giant trees, and so heavily do shadows lie upon shadows, that the very green seems almost black. The sheltered air is fresh and cool and there is an almost perfect stillness. Underfoot, except where the path is trodden bare, is a matting of dead leaves and of sweet damp moss. The daily passage of the Malays keeps back the encroachment of brambles and forest creepers. To the right and left of the path the forest appears to be almost impenetrable. The trees grow so thickly together that you are closed in by a small but unbroken circle of tree trunks. Between the trees, there are tangled masses of bushes, briars and saplings. Rattans and creepers of every kind crawl along the ground and among the trees, sometimes hanging in heavy festoons and sometimes tense with the pressure that they exert. So thick and strong is the mass of creepers that when a wood-cutter hacked through a tree-trunk, it is often kept upright by the ligaments that bind it to the surrounding trees.\**

*(Moore, 1956, 14-15)*

\* Donald Moore (edited). Where Monsoons Meet, George, C. Harrap, 1956. pp. 14-15.

The above passage highlights some of the salient features of the Malaysian rainforest. It helps to focus attention on the luxuriance of the forest, the profusion of species and the stillness of the air within it. The climbers and lianas that form a significant characteristic of the rainforest are clearly described in the last few lines. A discussion on the climate, composition and characteristics of the rainforest can then follow. From this, students should be able to get an impression of a rainforest even though they might have no opportunity to visit an actual one. A recording of sounds such as the incessant hum of insects can be used to create the effect of being in a forest and help to enhance interest.

Such personal accounts help to conjure up vivid images and give a sense of reality to landscapes that technical descriptions, statistics and maps can never effectively achieve as it is real phenomena and real places that are described.

Literary descriptions such as the above may be used in teaching simply to illustrate details of a landscape or to stimulate inquiry. In the case of the latter, questions could be set relating to the features mentioned as a basis for a lesson based on inquiry.

Mention has been made of the role of geography in developing the affective. To promote empathy and understanding and to raise social consciousness, the geography teacher can turn to the literary works of Shahnnon Ahmad, who is recognized as Malaysia's leading contemporary novelist. In No Harvest but a Thorn Shahnnon Ahmad highlights the plight of an isolated family in the remote mountain village of Banggul Derdap resolutely struggling to farm their rice against overwhelming natural odds.

The theme of social change lies behind the novel Rope of Ash by the same author. Like the former, the novel is set in the fictional village of Banggul Derdap with its fields, houses and mosque - features of a typical Malaysian rural landscape. In the background of the novel are the rhythms of the annual planting and replanting, growth and harvest of the rice crop.

Social concern, social change, rural poverty and indebtedness, these are

the recurring themes in many of the novels of ASEAN authors and poets. These too lie at the heart of Gonzalez's work. In Hunger in Barok, Gonzalez describes the struggle of the Kaingineros (shifting cultivators) against natural adversity - reminiscent of Shahnnon Ahmad's work. This sad refrain is heard again in 'A Season of Grace' which tells the story of a couple called Doro and Sabel who leave the overpopulated Tara Poro in order to carve out a 'kaingin'\* of their own in the jungle border lands of the Philippines. More specifically, the novel deals with pioneer settlers of the rural hinterland, harvesting, fighting the rats for the rice, mosquitoes, being exploited by the landlord, showing hospitality towards strangers and looking after offspring. The fears and hopes of the settlers as they begin each search for a kaingin are echoed in Sabel's thoughts.

*'... Before the sun had risen a palm's length above the swamps they would reach Bakawan; Sabel knew. They would get to the landing - place in no time at all. A little strip of swampland, and the the trail would take them to the interior. She wondered whether mosquitoes would plague them all the way. She wondered whether sickness lay ahead and she stroked Porton fondly to keep her fear to herself.'*

*(Gonzalez, 1975)*

The theme of poverty, land tenancy and indebtedness is echoed in Ho Min-Fong's Rice without Rain - a novel set in Thailand of the seventies. The plot centres around Jinda, a courageous young Thai girl whose village in the arid Maekung Valley of North-eastern Thailand like others suffers from exorbitant land rent which leaves farmers poverty-stricken, indebted and landless.

In contrast to these themes, Mochtar Lubis's Twilight in Djakarta reveals the dark currents of poverty corruption and vice which run beneath the surface of one of the largest cities of the Third World. It provides a penetrating analysis of man's constant struggle against social

\* Kaingin refers to the area cleared for the planting of rice and corn and secondary crops like sweet potato and yam.

inequality and injustice, the plight of the urban poor and the squalor in which they live. This is vividly described in the following lines.

*'Along the wall near the railway, in the ruins of a former half-torn-down train-stop shelter, the city vagrants had their shanties. Old choral baskets had been piled up to serve as walls; worn-out, shredded pandanus mats were laid on the earth for floors. The roofs of these shanties were made of blackened and rusty pieces of old cans, patched together with bits of old cardboard.'*

*(Lubis, 1983, p. 126)*

Throughout these novels, the recurring theme is social poverty, hunger and quiet stoicism in the face of adversity. Used with care, these novels could be powerful tools to develop empathy and concern and sensitize pupils to social and environmental issues. However caution must be exercised in the choice and use of these passages lest they lead to negative views and feelings of pessimism.

## CONCLUSION

The poems and passages cited in the preceding paragraphs are but a few examples of poems and literary passages that teachers can effectively use to stimulate interest and to create effect in geography lessons. Their value as resource lies not only in the vivid description of places and people but in the way in which they show how people are influenced by and respond to the physical elements in their various settings. Through the years, the teacher should build up an anthology of poems and extracts which can be used to enhance his teaching and enrich the learning experience of children. The wealth of literary works as resources in teaching the geography of ASEAN is as yet untapped.

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