CHAPTER 2

Global English in Asian Fiction: Some Thoughts on Writing Contemporary Fiction from and of Asia in English

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So here I am, an English language fiction writer who happens to be from Asia, Hong Kong specifically, who is of Chinese-Indonesian ethnicity, and who, despite my U.S. passport (for which I exchanged my former Indonesian one) still writes fiction of my birth city, one that is hard to leave behind entirely. Of course, I am also eternally a “resident” of Hong Kong, where I have the right of “permanent abode” if permanence can indeed be ascribed to this former British colony that is now a Special Administrative Region of China, at least until the year 2046. So if you are somewhat like me, culturally and politically confused, with an ambivalent sense of identity, writing contemporary fiction from and of Asia in English, questions do arise for the practice of your art for which real and satisfactory answers are difficult to come by. One particularly troublesome one is the presumption that our lingua franca, English, is in fact a kind of “global language” that transcends culture, race, nationality, country, the “authentic” language of place, allowing you, the writer, to write fiction of that culture, race, etc., that “authentically” voices the human condition. This chapter offers a few thoughts from my perspective as such a “global fiction writer.”

There are three principal questions that inform this investigation. First, does a global language for literature, meaning English, really exist? Second, in examining representative contemporary examples of fiction from Asia in English, how should we define the sensibility of such work? Hong Kong’s
attempt to define a “native” English-language literature provides an example. But is there a guiding perspective common to such fiction that diverges from or dovetails into contemporary English language fiction as practiced elsewhere, especially in nations where English is the primary language of its literature? Finally, if this fiction is in English, can we really call it “Asian” fiction or even “fiction from Asia,” or is it something else entirely, a kind of “global fiction” perhaps? The overriding concern in all these questions regarding such literature is whether or not it can achieve universality, an effect that contemporary literature, at least in the Western tradition, is presumed to embrace, and that writers of fiction seek to create on their particular canvases depicting the human condition.

**Beginning First of All with the Idea of a “Global Language,” Is This, in Fact, an Oxymoron?**

Can language really be uprooted from its cultural and national origins in literature? Literature is supposed to tap into the soul of our common humanity. As writers, and certainly in teaching creative writing at the master of fine arts (MFA) level, we presume this, perhaps overly so, and expect the next generations of writers will embrace this same perspective. In fiction particularly, we read for the specific stories of person, place, or thing, to enter into an alternate universe and sensibility, to gain perspective from the large or intimate canvases of society an author selects for display. While prose does not always have the deep emotional power of poetry, literary prose is a close cousin. Consequently, when we think of the great novels or stories of nations, we expect them to deliver something of the soul of those national cultures. Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy are those writers who represent “Russia” in the study of literature, just as Flaubert or Maupassant have become “France.” In the nations for which English is the mother tongue, Charles Dickens is as English as Mark Twain is American; Henry James, on the other hand, straddled the old and new worlds in his sensibility, but is indisputably a writer who could use no other language but English in his work. Hailing from what is still referred to as the “Far East,” despite the contemporary, politically correct preference for “Asia,” Cao Xueqin, the author of the classic novel *Dreams of Red Chambers*, is undeniably Chinese. The literary tradition assumes fiction from various nations to be written in the native tongue, the national language, and yet to resonate universally as good fiction is supposed to do. The only barrier would be how well or badly the translator has rendered the original prose.

What then should we call English, in the context of a language for fiction from Asia? Even if that language is entirely recognizable as