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## Human Rights and the Arts: Perspectives on Global Asia

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**HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE ARTS: Perspectives on Global Asia. *Global Encounters: Studies in Comparative Political Theory*. Edited by Susan J. Henders and Lily Cho. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014. xi, 262 pp. (Figures.) US\$90.78, cloth. ISBN 978-0-7391-8473-8.**

*Human Rights and the Arts* is a valuable and welcome contribution to the growing scholarship on human rights issues and debates in Asia. Its major contributions are threefold. First, it enables us to understand how culture and local context play a role in understandings and struggles for human rights in different Asian societies while avoiding the often static discussions on culture found in many works on Asian values. Second, it draws our attention to the central place of art (poetry, literature, visual art, film, performances, etc.) in human rights struggles, and how such works, more easily than legal and political texts, can sensitize and engage people on human rights issues. And third, it alerts us to the fluid nature of geographic boundaries and cultures as it discusses Asia as a global site where local and global values merge and where people elsewhere (including the Asian diaspora) engage with human rights issues in Asia.

The volume consists of an introductory chapter that outlines the book's aim and approach, and a range of chapters dealing with specific artists/authors and countries grouped under different headings such as freedoms and democracies; war and atrocity; livelihoods, place and ecologies; minorities, nations, states, and empires; and migrations, transnationalisms, universalisms. In the introduction the editors situate the book in relation to other academic discussions on how local contexts and culture shape human rights debates and practices. The editors draw our attention to earlier, often essentialized and static, descriptions of culture and alert us to the fact that such descriptions hide power hierarchies, contestations, and changes within societies and over time, as well as ignore how contacts with other cultures and the emergence of new values shape local societies. Their conceptualization of context, which includes aspects such as embodied and everyday experiences, spiritual and religious dimensions, ecologies and places, and cultures and nations, provides a basis for a deeper understanding of how different individuals and communities discuss and speak out against human rights violations of different kinds. The editors argue well for why art is a powerful tool to discuss and engage with human rights in Asia, although many of the works discussed don't explicitly talk about human rights and the artists in question wouldn't conceive of themselves as human rights activists. Art elicits emotional responses and feelings of empathy and solidarity that enable people to engage with human rights in a more personal, immediate, and bottom-up way. To express oneself through art can furthermore often be the only way to make trauma and human rights violations visible in contexts and societies where it is too painful or too dangerous to speak openly.

The artists and authors discussed in the volume come from many

different Asian countries, including China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and India, and they depict and deal with different types of injustices and atrocities in works that range from poetry, fiction, visual art, and film, to drama and performances. We are introduced to both internationally well-known artists and writers such as Ai Weiwei and Michael Ondaatje as well as less well-known artists from the region. Among the artists discussed in the volume, Ai Weiwei is probably the most well-known and outspoken on human rights issues. Alice Ming Wai Jim discusses the cultural and political context that has triggered Ai Weiwei's activism and why art can be such a powerful tool in a repressive society like China. She also draws attention to Ai Weiwei's skilful use of different digital technologies such as social media and film, which opens up new possibilities for both art and human rights activism in Asia today. Alicia Turner's chapter on the Burmese artist U Htein Lin and his work shows how religious beliefs imbue human rights struggles in the country and alerts us to the danger of a narrow universalist human rights interpretation. The different and complex ways depictions of war and civil war find their way into literature are dealt with in the chapters by Van Nguyen-Marshall (Vietnam) and Arun Nedra Rodrigo (Sri Lanka). The latter also addresses the impact of ethnic and diaspora identities in writings about the civil war, and the complex and contested international circulation of both rights discourses and literary works. One of the more original sections in the book addresses literary works that deal with ecology and place, people's relations to nature, and traditional ways of living under threat. The three chapters on works from Tibet (Françoise Robin), Indonesia (Mary M. Young), and Bangladesh (Afsan Chowdhury) show how local views on nature imbue people's identities and struggle for livelihood and rights, that these understandings may challenge both local states' development agendas and global human rights discourses, as well as pave the way for new understandings of environmental rights and global responsibilities. Four chapters in the book deal with literature and film that address discrimination based on ethnicity in different Asian countries (Jooyeon Rhee, Arun P. Mukherjee, Susan J. Henders) and of citizens of Asian origin in North America (Theodore W. Goossen). The final section deals with issues of migration, transnationalism, and universalism, addressing the intersection of diasporic experiences and human rights struggles in a chapter on South Asian diasporic poets (Sailaja Krishnamurti) and the impact of global power and universal human rights on workers, women, and other citizens in Indonesia (Michael Bodden). The latter chapter raises many important and difficult issues such as whether global human rights discourses can challenge unequal power relations in a world dominated by global capital, and whether art really can provide an avenue to challenge inequalities and create real solidarity both nationally and globally.

This volume shows not only that art can be a powerful tool for artists and activists to depict human rights violations and call for justice and

recognition, especially important in non-democratic countries, but that art can be an excellent window for students and scholars who want to understand how human rights norms, contestations, and problems are experienced by individual citizens in Asia. One would hope that this volume would inspire further studies that probe deeper into different forms of art, the relationship between art and activism in different Asian countries, and the reception of these art works in Asia.

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**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF EAST ASIAN CAPITALISM. *Research Papers and Policy Studies*, 46. Edited by Hong Yung Lee. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2014. vii, 291 pp. (Tables, figures.) US\$25.00, paper. ISBN 978-1-55729-108-0.**

*A Comparative Study of East Asian Capitalism* provides excellently written case studies detailing important economic aspects of East Asia (defined as Japan, China, and South Korea). It asserts that as the memory of each country's different historical, economic, and political paths to the present has gradually begun to fade, so the mutual benefits of cooperation and the convergence of strategies for economic development have come to the fore. Therefore, according to the editor of the volume it is necessary to recognize a distinct form of capitalism in this part of the world, whilst acknowledging the differences at the national level.

The book is divided into four parts: the introduction offers an overview of the economic development of Japan, China, and South Korea; part 2 focuses on financial and labour reforms in all three countries; part 3 examines corporate governance (again covering all three countries); and part 4 looks at networks (strangely, only in South Korea and Japan). The level of detail displayed and thorough coverage of the historic subtleties of economic development in each country must be applauded. The book provides an extremely useful insight and factual repository into the micro-mechanisms of many aspects of capitalism across East Asia. This would prove indispensable to any scholar looking at specific changes or attempting to build a theoretical framework based on this book in conjunction with other sources. With its key strength being micro-analysis, it is parts 2 and 3 that are most useful. Part 4 lacks an analysis of networks in China and offers a useful, factual, but less culturally analytical view of networks. This is especially pertinent as networks are highlighted as one of the features uniting East Asian capitalism, despite the useful recognition that they operate differently in each of the three countries examined. Certain chapters may be useful for advanced undergraduates, but the specialist nature of this book makes it more applicable to postgraduates and scholars of China.