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SHORT STORIES FROM
THE ASIAN PACIFIC RIM



REFLECTIONS IN FICTION

EDITED BY SHARON JEROSKI

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Nelson Canada

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Introduction

Tapestries is a collection of contemporary short stories from the Asia Pacific. These stories (some in translation, some written in English) are drawn from an incredible diversity of peoples, languages, cultures, and religions. While I chose specific selections for their appeal to young adults and their exploration of several key themes that emerged from my reading, I also tried to reflect some of the diversity of the region.

The short story is a relatively recent genre in most Asian countries, but it quickly has become one of the most popular literary forms. Some of the authors in this collection have established international reputations—for example, the work of the Japanese writers Akutagawa and Shiga is widely available in English translations. Others, like Srinawak of Thailand and Notosusanto of Indonesia, are known mostly within their own countries.

Stories develop from the experiences, images, and ideas of a writer and are set in a particular place and time. However, authors do not write stories to impart factual information about a culture, a setting, or an event. Rather, their stories invite us to revisit and extend our own experiences through our encounters with their characters and the events and emotions that touch their lives. Readers experience stories by making connections to their own lives. Those who come to know and enjoy fiction from many cultures are rewarded by a deepened understanding of the beliefs and values taken for granted in their own culture and an expanded awareness of the multicultural world that surrounds them.

I like the stories in Tapestries. I feel a special sympathy for those writers, like Toer of Indonesia and many writers living in the People's Republic of China, who, for political reasons, may have difficulty reaching an audience in their own countries.

Not all stories met my initial expectations—formed from my experiences with Western literature—about how stories “should” be developed or how characters “should” behave. Reading them has expanded my appreciation of the wonderful variations literature can take. I am grateful for the efforts of the translators, editors, and publishers who make the world's literature available beyond the cultures and languages in which it originates.

Sharon Jeroski

A Note on Pronunciation

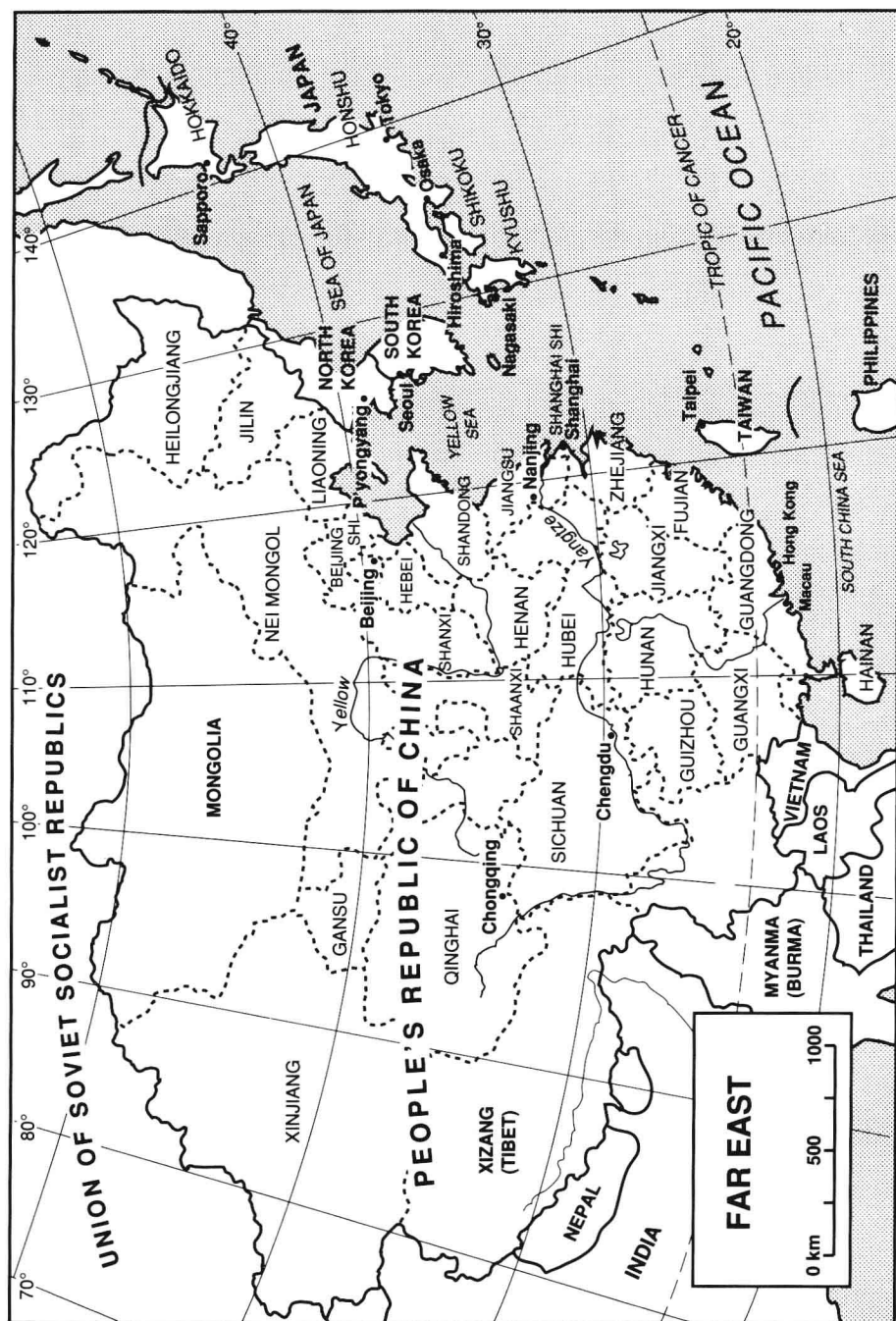
In *Tapestries*, the system used to romanize non-English words varies from story to story. As so many different languages are represented, no attempt has been made to impose a single standard. In many cases, the words and names are spelled more or less phonetically according to English pronunciation, often with every vowel sounded. (For example, the first name of Japanese author Akutagawa Ryunosuke can be pronounced “Ri-u-no-su-kay.”) For other names and words, an approximate pronunciation is provided in square brackets directly after the word appears in the text. Note especially the following vowel sounds.

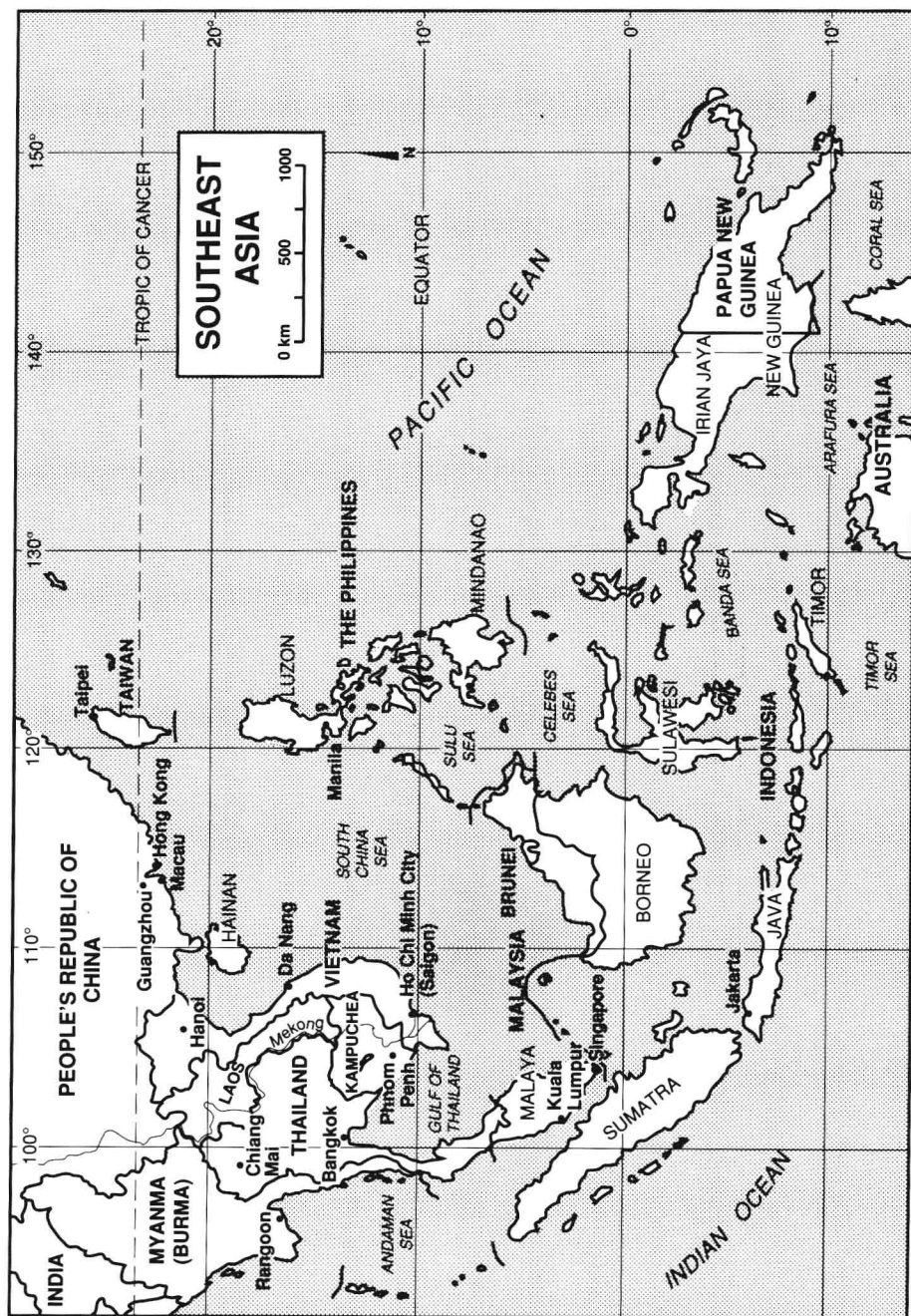
- “a” is pronounced “ah” or “au” as in *automatic*
- “ae” or “eh” is pronounced as a short e sound, as in *bet*
- “ai” is pronounced as a long i sound, as in *Thailand* and *Taiwan*
- “ao” is pronounced “ow” as in *how* or *Chairman Mao*
- “i” is pronounced as a long e sound, as in *machine*
- “u” or “oo” is often pronounced as in *put* or *foot*
- “ui” or “uy” is pronounced somewhat like “oi” but with more of an “oo” sound

Consultants and Reviewers

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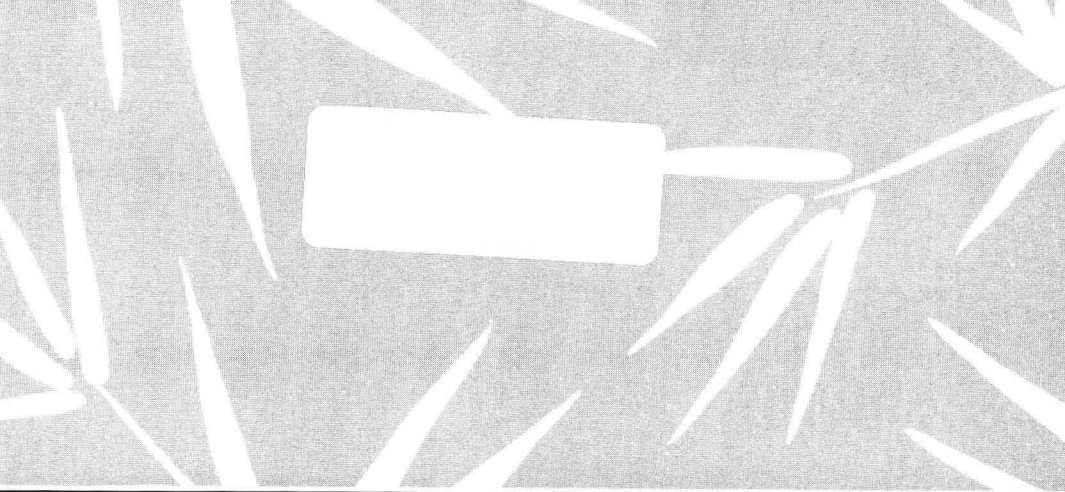


ONE GOOD TURN

"THE SOUL SO REVEALED..."

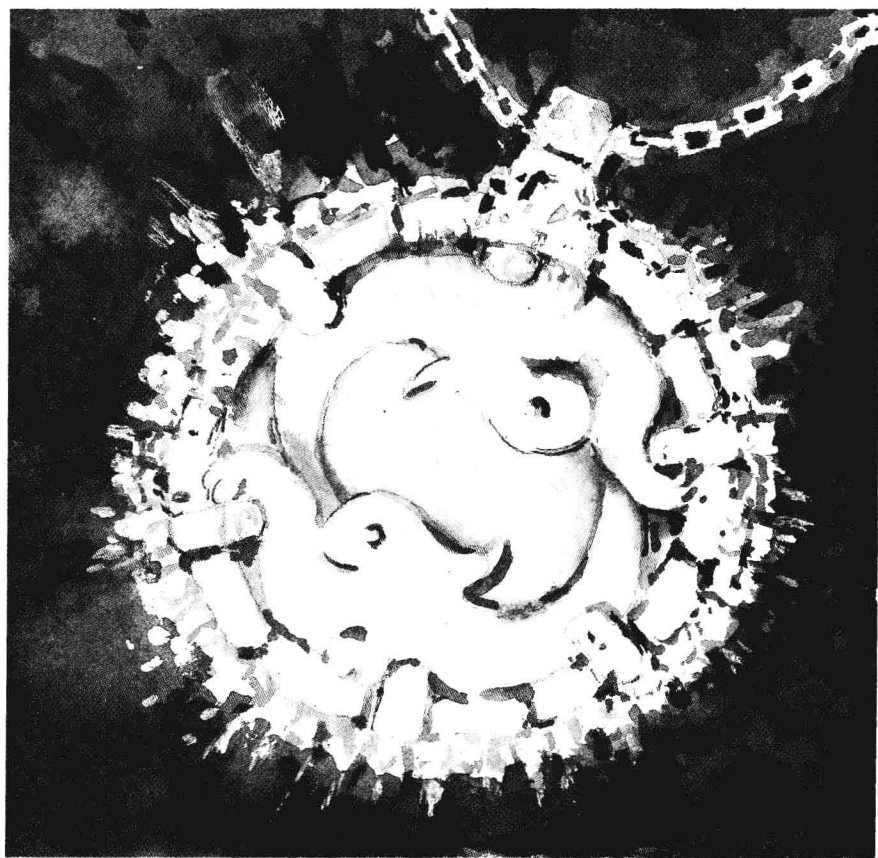
A street market in Manila,
The Philippines





The Jade Pendant


BY CATHERINE LIM



Catherine LIM, a native of Singapore and a graduate of the University of Malaya, writes in English and lists Jane Austen, James Thurber, and Alan Paton among the authors she most enjoys.

Her stories frequently deal with the increasingly materialistic society of Singapore which has brought economic and social discrimination to the elderly and the poor. Although she avoids direct moralizing, her sympathies obviously lie with the less fortunate, whom she portrays as often able to overcome wealth and snobbery with cunning. She presents her characters in realistic situations, using natural dialogue, often the variety of English known as "ESM"—the English of Singapore and Malaysia. Her first collection of stories was published in 1978.

"The Jade Pendant" is set in contemporary Singapore, an independent city-state of 2.6 million people.

 **T**he Jade Pendant¹ had gathered round it a number of myths, some of which were quite absurd, such as the one that it was worth half-a-million dollars, but the reality was astonishing enough to raise gasps of admiration and envy. The jewel, as big as the palm of a child's hand, consisted of a thick, circular piece of intricately carved jade of the most brilliant and lucid green, surrounded by innumerable diamonds arranged in floral designs. It was to be worn on a chain round the neck, but the sheer weight of the jewel, not to mention the extreme folly of risking loss or theft, had caused it to be little disturbed in its place in the bank vaults. Mrs. Khoo had worn it only twice—once at a banquet given by a sultan—the jewel had been specially flown, under strict security, to the royal town where it made quite a stir, even at a function that glittered with fabulous jewels—and again at the wedding of her nephew. Since then, it had lain safely in the bank vaults, for the myriad weddings and other functions that Mrs. Khoo had subsequently attended were considered too insignificant to justify the presence of this jewel, the like of which nobody had ever seen. But its absence on the broad perfumed bosom of Mrs. Khoo was as likely to provoke comments as its presence: "Ah, you're not wearing the Jade Pendant! That's a disappointment to me, for I had hoped to see it. I've heard so much about it."

To make up for the loss of pleasure that would have been afforded by the sight of the Jade Pendant, Mrs. Khoo would talk about its history—how it had come down to her from her mother who had got it from her own mother, and if its origin was traced far enough, it could be ascertained that the first possessor was a concubine of a Vietnamese emperor of the seventeenth

century. Its continuing connections with royalty must be something predestined, for, confided Mrs. Khoo, her mother had once told her that the wife of a sultan who had seen it had actually sent emissaries to begin the task of negotiation and purchase. It was an extremely difficult thing to do, but the persistent royal lady was at last turned down.

The engrossing question had been: to whom would Mrs. Khoo leave the jewel when she died—her daughter-in-law or her daughter? Mrs. Khoo had actually long settled the matter in favour of her daughter. There was nothing she would not do for Lian Kim, her favourite child. Moreover, she would not wait for her death to hand over the jewel—when Lian Kim got married, the gift would be made. The bride would wear the Jade Pendant at the wedding dinner, for every one of the guests to see.

When Lian Kim was home for the holidays with her fiancé, she had insisted on her mother taking the jewel out of the bank for him to see. He was an Art student whom she had met in London, and the wonder on his face and the long whistle of admiration and incredulity as he looked at the Jade Pendant that Lian Kim had laughingly placed on his artist's begrimed sweater, was a small but definite step towards the mollification of his future mother-in-law whose chagrin, when her daughter wrote to her of being engaged to a foreigner, was great indeed. How vexing, she had thought to herself and later said to her husband, although she would not have dared to say the same to her daughter. How vexing to have a daughter married to a foreigner, and a poor one at that. But there was nothing to be done, once the young people of today made up their minds.

Her vexation was increased that day by a very humiliating incident. She had just shown the Jade Pendant to Lian Kim and Ron, and was getting ready to put it back in its case of red velvet, when she heard Ah Soh sweeping outside the room. Upon impulse, she called Ah Soh into the room to view the jewel, thinking afterwards, in the generosity of her heart, that even a humble widowed relative who made cakes and puddings for sale in the streets, could be given the pleasure of looking at the jewel. Ah Soh was all gratitude. She left her broom outside, tiptoed in with a great show of respect and awe, and raised her hands in shrill wonderment even before the box was opened to reveal its treasure. She exclaimed, she praised, she was breathless with the effort of pleasing a rich relative who allowed her and her daughter to live in a room at the back of the great house, to eat the food left on the great table, to benefit by the sale of old clothes, beer bottles, and newspapers.

Unfortunately, Ah Soh's daughter, a simple-minded girl of Lian Kim's

age, had ambled in then, looking for her mother; and on seeing the jewel had crowed with childish delight, and actually snatched it up and pranced round the room, shrilly parading it on her chest. The terror of her mother, who had quickly glanced up to see the look of violent disgust and displeasure on the face of Mrs. Khoo, was itself terrifying to behold. She shrieked at the girl, snatched the jewel back, laid it reverently back in its case, and began scolding her erring daughter as vehemently as she could. The insulted pride of the lady, whose countenance had taken on a look of extreme hauteur, was to be mollified by no less than a severe thrashing of the offender, which Ah Soh immediately executed, secret anger against her rich relative lending great strength to her thin scrawny arms. The girl, who looked no more than a child though she was over twenty, whimpered and would have been thrashed sick had not Mrs. Khoo intervened by saying stiffly, "That will do, Ah Soh. Do you want to kill the child?"

"Better for her to be killed than to insult you in this way!" sobbed Ah Soh.

Mrs. Khoo, who found the incident too disgusting to be mentioned to her husband or daughter, soon forgot it. She spent the three weeks of her daughter's vacation home in pleasing the young couple as much as she could. She got the servants to cook all kinds of delicacies, and Ah Soh, anxious to pacify her further, helped as much as she could, endlessly. Whenever she could spare the time from her mah-jong², Mrs. Khoo entertained them, not sparing any expense. Mr. Khoo, who doted on his youngest daughter, was even willing to take time off from his gambling and his racehorses to take the couple round and introduce them proudly to his wide circle of friends. Lian Kim and Ron were to be married by the end of the year. "A sad occasion for the mother, ha! ha! Do you know why?" Mr. Khoo would laugh heartily, his round florid face wreathed in smiles. "Because the Jade Pendant will be made over from mother to daughter. Ah, these women and their jewels—" he would then whisper conspiratorially into the ears of his friend, revelling in the look of amazement on the face of the listener.

It would never have occurred to any of their friends to ask Mr. or Mrs. Khoo whether they were thinking of selling the Jade Pendant—it would have been an insult too great to be borne. Yet the possibility had occurred to Mrs. Khoo; and the realization, after some time, that it *would* have to be sold brought a spasm of terror to the lady as she paced about in her room, thinking what a sad state of affairs the family was in financially. The money and the property that had come down to them from their parents and grandparents—

almost all dissipated! Mr. Khoo and his gambling and his horses and entertaining, the expensive education of her two sons and her daughter abroad—they were forever writing home for more money.

The immediate worry was the expense of Lian Kim's wedding. It could not, must not, be on a scale less than the wedding of her elder brother two years ago, or the wedding of the nephew, for that would be a severe loss of family face. Mrs. Khoo made a quick calculation of the cost of the wedding dress and trousseau, specially ordered from a French house of fashion, the furnishings for the new flat in London to be rented by the couple after their marriage, the wedding dinner for at least five hundred people in the Imperial Hotel—where was she to get the money from? She uttered little cries of agitation and wrung her hands in vexation, as she walked about in her room. She had on one occasion represented the difficulties to her husband, but he had only laughed, pinched her cheek, and said, "Now, now, you are always worrying. We are okay, okay, and you go and get whatever you like, old girl." She had not dared to speak of her difficulties to Lian Kim—she could not bear to spoil the happiness of her beloved child.

Once she was tempted to approach Ah Soh to borrow some money—she had heard whispers of the immense sum of money that Ah Soh had slowly accumulated over forty years, money she had saved from her sale of cakes and puddings, and from extreme frugality: Ah Soh made her own cigarettes by rolling the tobacco salvaged from thrown-away cigarette ends in little square pieces of paper, and her simple-minded daughter wore only the cast-off clothes of Lian Kim and other relatives. But Mrs. Khoo had quickly rejected the idea. What, degrade herself by seeking help from a relative who was no better than a servant? Mrs. Khoo's inherent dislike of Ah Soh was increased by her suspicion that behind all that effusive humility and deference was a shrewdness and alertness that saw everything that was going on, and she even fancied that the little frightened-looking eyes in the thin pallid face sometimes laughed at her. After Lian Kim's wedding I shall no longer tolerate her in the house, thought Mrs. Khoo resentfully. She and that imbecile daughter she dotes on so much can pack up and leave.

The thought of the wedding which should have given so much pleasure to her fond mother's heart distressed her, for again and again she wondered where the money was to come from. Their two houses were already mortgaged; the shares would fetch but little. No matter how hard she tried to avoid it, the conclusion she inevitably reached was: the Jade Pendant had to go. The impact of so awesome a decision caused Mrs. Khoo to have a violent