

Book Review

Becoming Poets: the Asian English Experience

Agnes Lam. Peter Lang, 2014. 337 pp. ISBN 978-3034314862

Reviewed by:

Peter Wingrove

Centre for Applied English Studies, The University of Hong Kong

As English has become a global lingua franca, so too has it become a global medium of literary expression. In *Becoming Poets: The Asian English Experience* Lam connects the fields of linguistic studies and literary criticism by analysing the developmental experiences of 50 poets writing in English in Asia. Lam conducts the research through interviews, and frames the analysis within her five-stage model, which covers the poets' emergence of English literacy, secretive writing, publishing as an initiation into a community, awareness of self-identity as a writer, and mentoring. Whilst the stated aim of the research project is to investigate how Asian learners of English become published poets, the inclusion of native English speakers writing in Asia is inevitable as the analysis considers the growth of communities of writers.

Chapter 1 introduces the structure of the book, the five-stage model, the methodology, and the main themes of the book. The methodology is clearly explained, covering the process of identifying poets, conducting interviews, analysing transcripts, and selecting poems for analysis. Chapter 2, perhaps the strongest chapter, explores the complexity of defining Asian poets and covers key themes in this area. The chapter discusses conceptualisations of Asian writing in English, and categorizes the types of Asian poets. Lam relates this discussion to the issues of identity and membership within literary communities, which lays a foundation for further exploration of these ideas in the later chapters. This section is particularly useful for those compiling poetry anthologies. Chapters 3 to 7 each explore a region in detail, from the youngest English language poetry community to the oldest: Macao, Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines, and India. Each chapter starts with an introduction to the region and the poets. This is followed by interview data in the format of the five-stage model. Chapter 8 is a concluding chapter in which Lam refines her five-stage model. One valuable conclusion drawn concerns the factors that foster poetic development in multilingual and bilingual societies.

Outside of the five-stage model, chapters 3 to 7 explore key themes related to poetic development. These include discussions on community and the use of languages, and a thematic analysis of a poetry corpus. The sections on the use of English explore the issues poets face when choosing English for literary expression, covering authenticity, ownership of the language, the type of English, and the utility of the English language. In the community sections Lam explores the poets' identification with local, Asian, and worldwide communities. The use of English as a medium of literary expression is central to this understanding as it has implications for possible readership and

community engagement. In the thematic analysis sections, one consideration that emerges is the relevance of the postcolonial label as applied to Asian literature in English. An argument is developed through each chapter that this label may no longer be appropriate and in the concluding chapter Lam suggests cosmopolitanism is a more suitable approach to Asian poetry in English. These sections are particularly relevant to those interested in World Englishes.

Lam's *Becoming Poets* employs a systematic interview methodology to an important and interesting area of research. The five-stage model that guides the interviews is successful in gathering a substantial amount of data on the development of Asian poets writing in English, particularly in relation to their use of English and participation in local and international language communities. This focus makes the book particularly relevant to AJAL's readership. However, whilst Lam's interview model is well suited to her context and research question, discussions on the craft of writing are framed around the use of English in predominantly bilingual or multilingual writers, so may be of less interest to those researching monolingual poets or poets who do not write in English. Furthermore, many of the poets interviewed also write other literary genres, which are not fully accounted for. As Lam states in the concluding chapter, it would be interesting to see how the model applies to other genres or writers in other contexts.

It should be noted that *Becoming Poets* is about poets not their poems (the book does not include any poetry) so it is not directly relevant for those interested in reading poetry. However, those interested in World Englishes, interview research methodology, creative literacy development, and anthology compilation, will find this book rich with detail and thoroughly researched. It should also be noted that chapters 3 to 7 each contain a short section, *Advice to Young Poets*. These sections may be useful to any young writers beginning their journey, or teachers who may be mentoring creative writers.

About the reviewer

Peter Wingrove is a PhD student at the Centre for Applied English Studies, The University of Hong Kong.