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Inhalt

Nachrufe

Peter Pantzer (1942–2025) – ein persönlicher Nachruf (<i>Harald MEYER</i>)	3
Michael Weiers (1937–2025) (<i>Stefan GEORG</i>)	9
Britta-Maria Gruber (1955–2025) (<i>Ishayabu LANDA und Ralph KAUZ</i>)	13
Klaus Sagaster (1933–2025) (<i>Peter SCHWIEGER</i>)	15

Artikel

<i>Robert F. WITTKAMP</i>	19
How to Commence a Cosmogony: Chinese Encyclopedias, the Making of the <i>Nihon shoki</i> , and Japanese Source Criticism	
<i>Benjamin Jeremias SCHMIDT</i>	55
Die Rolle der Infrajustiz in der Konfliktregulierung des frühneuzeitlichen Japan: Eine exemplarische Untersuchung anhand von Quellen des Dorfes Ōsone	
<i>Dorothee SCHAAB-HANKE</i>	97
Wie weit kam Christian Wolff mit seiner <i>Mengzi</i> -Lektüre? Zu jenem „anderen Philosophen von großem Ruhm“	
<i>Harald MEYER</i>	137
Gesamtdarstellungen und Fragmente der Literaturgeschichte Japans: Ein historischer Rückblick sowie ideen- und geistesgeschichtlicher Ausblick	
<i>Harald MEYER</i>	171
Fragmente der Literaturgeschichte Japans I: Anfänge der Moderne in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts	
<i>Markus BÖTEFÜR</i>	213
Vom Duellanten zum Völkerkundler: Franz Wilhelm Junghuhn auf Sumatra	
<i>Hartmut WALRAVENS</i>	231
Anton Schieffner as Albrecht Weber's Correspondent	

<i>Hartmut WALRAVENS</i>	239
Der Kunsthistoriker Osvald Sirén (1879–1966) in Korrespondenz mit deutschen Kollegen (1930–1949)	
<i>Michael KNÜPPEL</i>	263
Die Dunganen von Miljanfan	
<i>Agus R. SARJONO</i>	271
Latest Developments in Indonesian Literature: The Birth of the Essay Poetry Generation	
<i>Berthold DAMSHÄUSER</i>	285
<i>Angkatan Puisi Esai: A Sui Generis Literary Generation in Indonesia</i>	

Übersetzung

<i>Denny JA</i>	293
„Und Minah wurde doch entthauptet“: Ein Essay-Gedicht. Aus dem Indonesischen und mit einer Vorbemerkung von <i>Berthold DAMSHÄUSER</i>	

Rezensionen

Liu Wenqing. <i>Vermischte Gesänge: Eine Studie zu Li Qiaos Gedichtzyklus</i> . Gossenberg: Ostasien, 2025 (Volker KLÖPSCH)	315
Bei der Lektüre von Liu Wenqings Studie <i>Vermischte Gesänge</i> notiert (Manfred DAHMER)	322
Nurlan Kenzheakhmet. <i>European-Chinese Imperial Maps and Gazetteers Related to the Kazakh (Qazaq) Khanate and Its Adjacent Regions from the 16th to 19th Centuries</i> . Gossenberg: Ostasien, 2023 (Hartmut WALRAVENS)	324
Wolfgang Schwentker. <i>Geschichte Japans</i> . München: C.H. Beck, 2022 (Markus BÖTEFÜR)	329
Kuwayama Yukiko 桑山裕喜子. <i>Ki (氣), Fühlen und Empfinden: Eine linguistische Phänomenologie vorprädikativer Erfahrungsformen</i> . Baden-Baden: Karl Alber, 2023 (Hendrik GROTH)	331
Sung Un Gang. <i>The Making of Modern Subjects: Public Discourses on Korean Female Spectators in the Early Twentieth Century</i> . Bielefeld: Transcript, 2024 (Alexandra FUHR)	336
IM Hyug Baeg 임혁백 und KU Jae Hoe 구재희. <i>Mongering North Korean Democracy for Inter-Korean Peace: Democratization in North Korea and Inter-Korean Peace</i> . Seoul: Korea University Press, 2015 (Lea FEHRENBACH)	339

Angkatan Puisi Esai: A *Sui Generis* Literary Generation in Indonesia

Berthold DAMSHÄUSER

When the Indonesian poet Agus R. Sarjono invited me to contribute to his book project titled *Angkatan Puisi Esai* (Essay Poetry Generation),¹ I accepted without hesitation. This project is closely connected to *Puisi Esai* (Essay Poetry), a genre whose development I have followed attentively and with great interest since its emergence in 2012. One reason for this engagement was my role as editor of the Indonesian literary journal *Jurnal Sajak*, which – beginning with the issue 2012.3 – included a dedicated *Puisi Esai* column aimed at disseminating and promoting this new poetic form.

As I explained in my 2015 essay titled “Puisi Esai: Ke Mana Sanggup Ia Berkembang?” (Essay Poetry: How Far Can It Develop?),² republished in Volume IV of the mentioned *Angkatan Puisi Esai* book series, I was by no means enthusiastic about the introduction of a column devoted to what was then called a new literary genre. The first essay poem I read – naturally by Denny JA, the inventor of this genre – struck me as insufficiently poetic and didn’t align at all with the ideals I had laid out in the editorial of *Jurnal Sajak* 2011.2 titled *Merindukan Puisi yang Bukan Prosa: Merindukan Sajak* (Yearning for Poetry That Is Not Prose, Yearning for Verse),³ where I described the kind of poetry I loved and hoped our poetry magazin *Jurnal Sajak* would advocate for: a “work of linguistic art” crafted by true language artists.

Yet, as made clear in that 2015 essay, I eventually came to a positive assessment of the essay poetry phenomenon and advocated for its recognition as a distinct literary genre. I even translated Denny JA’s essay poem “Sapu Tangan Fang Yin” (Fang Yin’s Handkerchief) into German and published it in *Orientierungen* as an effort to introduce essay poetry to a German-speaking audience.⁴

Another factor – at least indirectly – connecting me with essay poetry was my involvement in *TIM 8*,⁵ which in 2015 published the book *33 Tokoh Sastra Indo-*

1 This contribution presents an English rendition – supplemented with new explanatory footnotes of Damshäuser 2024.

2 Damshäuser 2015a; English translation: Damshäuser 2021.

3 Damshäuser 2011.

4 Damshäuser 2014.

5 *TIM 8*: Team of eight editors and jurors.

nesia Paling Berpengaruh (33 Most Influential Figures in Indonesian Literature).⁶ Denny JA was named one of those 33 figures due to his invention of essay poetry and, in particular, his success in disseminating it. The furious response from parts of the Indonesian literary public – especially those referred to as “literary activists” – is unforgettable. I myself became the target of intense hostility and was labeled on social media as a “murderer of Indonesian literature,” with warnings not to return to Indonesia. One of the most baffling comments came from a second-class Indonesian poet married to a German woman, who wrote on Facebook: “That garbage book [33 Figures] deserves to be burned, and its editors should be thrown into Auschwitz.”⁷

In retrospect, the polemic and commotion of 2015 around essay poetry and the “33 Figures” book seem absurd and even ridiculous, but they will nonetheless remain part of Indonesian literary history. In that sense, one could say that I, too, have earned a footnote in that history – thanks to essay poetry. And now, nine years later, in 2024, I once again find myself involved with essay poetry – this time in relation to a series of books titled *Angkatan Puisi Esai* (Essay Poetry Generation), especially its third volume.

Will these books – which can be understood as asserting the existence of an *Essay Poetry Generation* – once again spark fierce controversy in the Indonesian literary scene? That’s entirely possible, though perhaps not to the same extent of intensity and irrationality as the polemic of 2015. This time, there may be less debate about whether essay poem qualifies as a literary genre. Denying that has become increasingly difficult, especially since the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (The Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language) now includes *Puisi Esai* as an official term, and since hundreds of writers have consistently produced works they define as essay poems.

Still, in light of the formalization of an *Essay Poetry Generation*, it is likely that Denny JA’s role as the patron of the idea and its mission will again be criticized, with some claiming that his financial support is the only reason for the genre’s success and its literary activities. Many people ignore the fact that a bad or nonsensical idea wouldn’t last long, no matter how well-funded – and that the essay poem has now become firmly established and no longer needs promotion. Nevertheless, the anger (and despair) of certain literary circles in Indonesia is likely to persist. This is hardly surprising – after all, it’s difficult to accept that someone who is not a

6 Rahman 2014.

7 See Damshäuser 2015b.

purely literary figure, much less a pure poet, could wield such a significant influence on modern Indonesian literature, especially contemporary poetry.

As for the idea and proclamation of an *Essay Poetry Generation*, my attitude remains informed by fundamental skepticism. Ever since my university studies in literature (German and Indonesian), I've often questioned the categorization of literature into eras or movements – or, as is common in Indonesia, into *Angkatan* (generations). Take the term *Angkatan 1945*⁸ for example. To me, it has never conveyed a sufficient meaning. I've always told my students at the University of Bonn that Indonesian literature between 1945 and 1966 was marked by a deep conflict between the concepts of *Humanisme Universal* (Universal Humanism) and *Realisme Sosialis* (Socialist Realism)⁹ – something that the term *Angkatan 45* fails to express, and in fact obscures.

Moreover, there's a more fundamental thought behind my reluctance to categorize literary works into eras, schools, or generations. What truly matters in literature is always the individual work, along with the questions of its form and content – its quality, and what it is capable of conveying to the reader. Everything else is secondary and primarily the domain of literary and historical studies.

This outlook also explains why I welcome the fact that in contemporary German literature, the concept of “literary generations” has lost much of its relevance and almost no longer plays a role. This is due to various factors, including increased cultural and social pluralism, individualization, globalization, media transformation, and developments in literary studies – especially the emphasis on intertextuality, hybridity, and poststructuralist approaches – all of which have rendered generational labels increasingly problematic.

Still, I understand that the urge to categorize is human. It remains reasonable and useful to use the concept of a “literary generation” – especially if we rely on the definition in the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (The Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language), which reads: *Kelompok sastrawan yang bertindak sebagai kesatuan yang berpengaruh pada masa tertentu dan secara umum menganut prinsip yang sama untuk mendasari karya sastra* (a group of writers who act as a unit with

8 *Angkatan 1945* (Generation of 1945) designates a cohort of Indonesian authors who began publishing around the proclamation of Indonesian independence in 1945.

9 *Humanisme Universal* (Universal Humanism) and *Realisme Sosialis* (Socialist Realism) were opposing literary-ideological currents in Indonesia during the 1950s and early 1960s; members of the *Angkatan 1945* split into these camps, mirroring the wider conflict between liberal and communist intellectuals over the function of literature in society.

influence at a given time and generally share the same principles underpinning their literary work). Based on that definition, there is no doubt that the idea of an *Essay Poetry Generation* is a perfectly valid concept in the context of contemporary Indonesian literature – far more legitimate, in fact, than previous generations identified only by year.

What is especially significant and worth noting: the *Essay Poetry Generation*, born in Indonesia, is truly a *sui generis* generation – a uniquely singular movement, even by international and historical standards. To my knowledge, no literary generation or movement anywhere in the world has ever been named after a literary genre – a case that is in all likelihood unprecedented. And in the limited context of Indonesia, this is the first time a literary movement has evolved into a generation that has managed to transcend national borders, reaching Malaysia, Brunei Darussalam, Thailand, and Singapore – as convincingly documented by Agus R. Sarjono in his justification of the *Essay Poetry Generation*'s existence.¹⁰

Back in 2012, when I responded with strong skepticism to the inclusion of the *Puisi Esai* column in *Jurnal Sajak*, I never imagined the phenomenal development this idea would undergo. No one could have foreseen it. And now one might ask: in the history of literature, has any genre initiated by a single individual ever experienced such explosive growth? It seems... never.

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10 See Sarjono's essay in the present issue of *Orientierungen*.

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