

BOOK REVIEW

Grace V. S. Chin (Ed.). *Translational Politics in Southeast Asian Literatures: Contesting Race, Gender, and Sexuality*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021.

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A part of Routledge’s expansive Contemporary Southeast Asia Series, this edited volume by Grace V. S. Chin attempts to define a regional field while at the same time widening its perceptual focus beyond culturally or linguistically specific imaginaries such as the Nanyang, the Nusantara, the Indo-Pacific, or the Malay world. The volume covers the interrelated concepts of race, gender, and sex, and gathers together both global conversations and local studies into a regional intra- and trans-Southeast Asian discourse. The volume includes contributors that self-identify as poets, novelists, translators, linguists, and comparatist scholars, with most being either multicultural scholars local to the region, or based or studying further afield in Hong Kong, Russia, and the Netherlands. Such a diverse range of scholarly professions, trans-disciplinary perspectives, and multilingual competencies speaks to the ambitious remit of the volume, but also highlights the uneven and sometimes precarious nature of bringing them all together under a central theoretical or conceptual frame.

The editor’s introduction usefully lays bare the origins of the volume’s journey from inception to completion, and the desire to field scholarship that transcends the national or language-bound container that can sometimes limit the production and dissemination of these studies laterally across the region. Having outlined the prior segregated fields of mainland and maritime Southeast Asia, and despite making a case for the “boundedness” of literary activity in the region, Chin lays bare the difficulty of following this principle into practice. Despite addressing some of the existing imbalances that accompany the scholarship of Southeast Asian literatures globally, the volume’s eight chapters cover only six of the eleven countries that comprise Southeast Asia,

including Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, and the Philippines.

The volume thus reflects, perhaps inevitably and despite all editorial efforts to counter this, the preponderance of scholarship on Anglophone productions within the geographical frame of “maritime Southeast Asia” (as opposed to “mainland Southeast Asia”), and the uneven representations caused by the relative dominance of Anglophone scholarship compared to its equivalent French, Dutch, and/or Spanish language scholarship, which continue to be produced in these European nations’ former colonies in Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam (formerly French Indochina), Indonesia (formerly Dutch East Indies), and the Philippines. More importantly, it also questions the extent to which locally produced scholarship in indigenous languages like Malay, Khmer, Tagalog, and commonly spoken minority languages like Mandarin, Cantonese, Tamil, to name but a few, can be adequately represented in these wider studies pertaining to world literature, without first needing to be translated into English.

Nevertheless, moving away from the issue of uneven scholarship production for the moment, the volume establishes many threads and commonalities that can be traced across the entirety of the region despite their vast local and historical differences; these include the many ongoing conflicts and tensions regarding decolonisation, furtive and frequently reactionary nation-building practices, assertive language policies, and the challenges of neoliberal globalisation, all of which serve to contextually glue the chapters together. Such contextual anchors help to focalise the many problematic representations of race, sex, and gender which, given the paternalistic-patriarchal regimes and histories of the region, are continually subjected to oppressive and regulatory forces. These are all important and relevant issues that the volume helpfully serves up to the non-specialist reader. Additionally, they also lay the groundwork for each chapter author’s subsequent intervention, through the critical praxis of “translating” their chosen texts in sometimes surprising and innovative ways.

Regarding its most significant contribution to the field, the volume offers new directions and ways of thinking about how translation can lead to a renewal of agency within literature. Working from what Doris Bachmann-Medick (2009) calls the “translational turn”, the volume posits language as a “negotiated ideological choice” (p. 3) that is inseparable from the politics of representation, thus, offering translational research as a critical and conceptual framework to foment new “metaphoric, syntactic and semantic meanings” (p. 5) via the circulation of these regional texts across cultures and history.

It must be said that the chapters apply quite disparate terminology in their analysis of the source material and provide very tenuous interpretations of what constitutes “translation” or “translational” by drawing from scholars as diverse as Susan Bassnett, Homi K. Bhabha, Catherine Belsey, and Peeter Torop. As a result, the process of cultural, linguistic or semantic translation serves at different times to elide, erase, add, conflate, or even underscore certain tensions or hierarchical relationships that were created during these colonial and postcolonial periods. Clearly, there is no one-size-fits-all methodology that could possibly cater to all these concerns. Thus, each chapter is given license to demarcate what specific translational concept or apparatus they might wish to use on their own terms. The transformative potential of this approach, which can provide agency but sometimes result in a fragmented or decentralised collection with no one centre holding it together, is the right approach for a study of this kind, and the resistance to any one central theoretical system or methodology should be applauded in this instance.

The decision to separate the volume into two equal sections entitled “Time” and “Culture”, rather than grouping them in a loose sequence based on geographical location or the aforementioned tropes of gender, sex, or race, also opens up different ways of critically comparing ideas and concepts from one chapter to another. The four chapters that make up the “Time” section helpfully demarcate the evolution between past and present, often by exploring the temporal shifts from the precolonial and colonial eras to current postcolonial realities, and offering up a direct comparison of two or more texts that serve as historical and cultural artefacts of their respective periods.

For example, by considering the construction of queer narratives in novels by Lydia Kwa and Tan Twan Eng, Angelia Poon considers how the past “translates” onto the present in order to question official historiographical accounts that might serve to reconstitute the past for their own ends. Making use of “queer time” (Halberstam 2005) to highlight the heteronormative assumptions that govern how we think of the past, Poon explores how these authors use metafictional writing techniques to better interrogate the subsequent imposition of dominant anti-homosexual ideologies and policies that have since become prevalent in postcolonial Singapore and Malaysia.

Likewise, in her own chapter, Chin draws on the notion of “performative translation” (Lindsay 2006) to contrast two fictional representations of the Hang Li Po figure in Rahmah Bujang’s Malay opera *Puteri Li Po* and Ann Lee’s multi-lingual monodrama *Hang Li Po – Melakan Princess*. Demonstrating how language choice and ethnic representation can function as a political but also a subversive tool, Chin spotlights changes between Chinese-Malay

relations within the context of Malaysian nation-building from the 1980s to 1990s, to better mediate the assimilationist discourse of a Chinese princess being subjected to a homogenising Malay identity. Whereas Rahmah’s version maintains clear racial and gender hierarchies via her depiction of interracial unity and heterosexual harmony, Lee’s code-switching heroine deconstructs the Hang Li Po myth by blurring “temporal, spatial and linguistic boundaries” (p. 56) through representing “multilingualism in one body” (p. 57).

As the chapter that hews most closely to the volume’s ideals, that is, in its attempt to progress beyond preconceived cultural, national, and linguistic containers or epistemologies, Nazry Bahrawi returns to indigenous art forms through his pan-Malay study on were-tigers, particularly as they appear in precolonial oral folklore and modern literary texts. By exploring translations within a single literary-linguistic culture across time and context, Bahrawi sees cultural translation as an interventionist practice that forgoes the coloniser/colonised binary, demonstrating the flexibility of these indigenous “were-texts” to adequately map themselves onto present concerns without having to fall back on universalist, Eurocentric conceptions of the world.

Similar to Bahrawi, and building from Peeter Torop’s (2003) concept of intralingual translation, Daria Okhvat considers how translation might occur through “a single language and cultural field” (p. 83) to document past influences onto the present. Taking two colonial era novels and comparing them to two films produced before and after the Khmer Rouge period, Okhvat demonstrates how the ideal Khmer female remains essentialised as a subject, burdened by the weight of Khmer female archetypes derived from the precolonial instructional text *Chhap for Women*, which encodes symbols and analogies from the source language onto its modern forms, and which recur across the two media.

Rounding out the second section of the volume on “Culture”, the last four chapters demarcate a variety of ideological and symbolic sites where identity is negotiated through different forms of translation. Often, these sites map directly onto local political concerns or objectives, but occasionally are also projected globally through the colonial matrices of power, that continue to dominate how the region is seen, and how it presents itself, to the world.

For instance, Tom G. Hoogervost considers Malay translations of *De Dubbele Moord*, *The Mystery of Dr. Fu-Manchu* and *My Chinese Marriage* by a series of Eurasian and Chinese authors, and notes how their rewritings help to de-Europeanise popular literature and subvert Sinophobic racial hierarchies by seizing agency over the source texts. In asserting the value of translation as an anti-hegemonic discourse in the context of late-

colonial Indonesia, Hoogervost sees translation as an asymmetric, political act, imbricated within the history of Western imperialism and its continued epistemic dominance, but also one that can enrich local access to knowledge through Malay-language publishing.

Kathrina Mohd Daud considers the cross-cultural “conversion for love” trope in two local Bruneian fictions, Narsiah Gapar’s Malay-language *Pengabdian* and Aisha Malik’s English-language *Jewel*. Despite their strikingly different language traditions and literary influences, and the fact that they were written three decades apart, they share a genealogy mediated through certain master narratives regarding Islam, which are exoticized by the West and characterised by two opposing forces—attraction and repulsion. While both texts indicate that faith trumps nationalism in the rhetoric of conversion, Daud shows that the local translational politics regarding Islam in these novels, while historically significant in the context of assimilating the country’s non-Muslim subjects, also enter conversations with other widely circulating global Muslim romance texts.

For Kelly Tse, cultural translation functions as a creative re-packaging that performs “new critical functions in contexts that are different from the original ones” (p. 154). Insofar as that translation simultaneously empowers Asian Americans in White America yet disempowers Singapore’s own ethnic minorities, Tse considers how the Hollywood adaptation of Kevin Kwan’s *Crazy Rich Asians* creates an “exclusionary logic” that empties out Singapore’s locality and multicultural identity, and that further interrogations of trans-Pacific accounts of “Asianness” in the film continue to be predicated upon the glorification of American individualist culture and its ideology of consumer capitalism.

To finish off the volume, J. Neil C. Garcia introduces Bhabha’s theory of cultural hybridity and considers interlinguality in Severino Montano’s unpublished novel *The Lion and the Faun* and Rolando Tinio’s poem *A Parable*. Garcia elaborates on how Western sexological norms, with its essentialist gender and sexuality concepts, became imbricated in local as well as Anglophone Filipino writing but also, paradoxically, created a rallying LGBT identity and a rich discursive foundation for local scholars to build upon. Drawing attention to the pejorative term *bakla*, taken at first to signify an effeminate male but sliding across other distinctive terms like transgender and homosexual, Garcia notes how the replacement of the *bakla/tunay na lalake* pairing for the plain signifier of “homosexual” constitutes a problematic mis/translation of local culture through the English language.

To conclude: despite the inherent Eurocentric biases that come packaged with the many discourses that these individual chapter authors use, and with Asia-focused literary market trends skewing heavily towards India, China, and Japan (not to mention literatures aimed at the extensive Asian diasporic populations situated in the Anglosphere), the volume largely succeeds in introducing readers to important, pioneering work from writers within the region. For every Kevin Kwan and Tan Twan Eng that is included, there is either a globally neglected writer of national importance (like Severino Montano or Rahmah Bujang) or an emergent local talent (like Eka Kurniawan or Aisha Malik) that is considered with the same critical depth. While the volume wears its limitations on its sleeve, I do believe that the original aim of the project to encompass the full eclecticism of Southeast Asian cultures, nations, and traditions, is worth persevering with, and that a much longer, expansive reader volume, featuring literary contributions from all the diverse regions of Southeast Asia, would be a welcome addition to the field.

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