

**Grace V.S. Chin, ed, *Translational Politics in Southeast Asian Literatures: Contesting Race, Gender, and Sexuality*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021. 207 pp. e-ISBN 9781000363326.**

Southeast Asia is known for its linguistic, cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity. It is a region well-used to the “crossings-over” of language. However, this diversity at times relies on the preservation of borders. As regards literature, the region’s writers, readers, and scholars are less likely to know the works of neighboring countries except for those translated into or written in English. For many Southeast Asian writers (and scholars) translation into or working in English can prove a passport to a vast, international literary market, claiming numerous readers, success, and recognition. Yet those works written in “national or native” (17) languages, are often excluded from this “global limelight” (2). Thus, translation as an act is far more complex than simply bringing words across from one language to another.

*Translational Politics in Southeast Asian Literatures* is a collection that looks at the political and cultural ramifications of literary translation. As the editor, Grace Chin, puts it, “[T]he act of translation is... a political one that also reveals the embedded structures of racial, gender, and sexual inequalities and biases within discourse” (7). The collection’s critical innovation is an analytical framework that goes beyond the “traditional function and terminology” (5) of translation. Instead, these critics draw from translation studies to deploy the metaphoric possibilities of translation as an idea, an act, an ontology. This is an exciting approach for the study of Southeast Asian literatures.

Translation, Chin argues, is far more than a linguistic transaction and engenders and reveals incredible political complexities. As a critical theme, “translational politics” offers a new perspective on the “tensions, contradictions, ambivalences, violence, ruptures, or gaps involved in the process of translation” (7) as well as enabling a recognition of the inherent creativity of translation, a form of “crossing over” that can breach not just languages and countries, but also historical periods and limits of religion and gender. This translational political theme allows the assembled critics to consider what is “lost,” “gained,” “erased,” or “rendered opaque” (7) in the act of moving between languages.

In the main, this collection is concerned with the so-called island states of the South China Sea: Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam, and the Philippines plus a brief detour to Cambodia. The creative texts under examination include novels, works for the stage, and cinema. While Malaysian and Singaporean perspectives dominate, there are also chapters looking at the nascent Khmer film industry, readings of novels out of Brunei and Eurasian reconfigurations of colonial texts in the Dutch East Indies. An essay about queer

politics in an unpublished Filipino mid-century manuscript rounds out the collection.

The first three chapters examine the ways in which historical narratives shape contemporary Malaysia and Singapore as well as queer, gendered, and indigenous identities. In her opening chapter, Angelia Poon compares two recent Malaysian and Singaporean Anglophone novels, Lydia Kwa's *This Place Called Absence* (2000) and Taw Tan Eng's *The Gift of Rain* (2007). A split narrative set in colonial Singapore and 1990s Canada, Kwa's novel portrays the lives of two Chinese prostitutes at the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as the distances within a mother-daughter relationship. Taw Tan Eng's book is set during the Japanese occupation of Malaya and modern Malaysia. It follows the life of a local boy recruited by a notorious Japanese spy. Both stories revolve around queer relationships. Poon deploys Halberstam's thinking around "queer time" and "queer space" to argue that "fictive (re)writing of the past in the contemporary moment" (23) is in itself an act of translation – one that enables a re-examination of "sedimented identity categories, like those of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality, thus effectively historicizing the present" (22). In "Performance and translation: Hang Li Po and the politics of history," Grace Chin examines representations of Hang Li Poh, the Princess-bride from China. Her close analysis of the Malay-language opera (or *bangasawan Puteri Li Po*, by Rahmah Bujang and the multilingual monodrama *Hang Li Poh - Melakan Princess* by Ann Lee, performed in 1998, considers how shifting narratives of Malay nationalism and relations with China, as well as "language" and "multilingualism" (57) play out in the female body.

Some of the essays focus on the transformative and adaptive powers of "translation," within a single culture or languages. Nazry Bahrawi maps the were-tiger, a figure originating from oral folklore, to interpret how tropes or ideals "translate" within Malay culture. Similarly, Daria Okhvat "translates" past cinematic images of Khmer femininity into the present, arguing that "culture can be seen as a process in which texts (or fragments) are translated into other texts" (83).

Translation becomes a form of ironic literary justice in the hands of Eurasian writers and editors in the late colonial period of the Dutch East Indies. In his chapter, "Gained in translation. The politics of localizing Western stories in late-colonial Indonesia," Tom Hoogervorst compares colonial-era novels originally written in English and Dutch with versions translated into Malay, the lingua franca of the local racially, ethnically, and religiously mixed community. He reveals a process in which local editors asserted their own creative powers over texts that emanated from the metropolitan centre, editing out or re-casting racist and religious stereotypes likely to offend local readers. Hoogervorst reflects on what these editorial interventions mean for contemporary claims that "racism in Western literature should be assessed by the standards of its time" (123). During the high period of colonialism, consumers in Asia did not accept racial inequities.

Judging racism in Western literature by the standards of the time is also to judge by a white or colonial perspective alone – an important point often elided in postcolonial discourses.

Kathrina Mohd Daud considers Bruneian fiction in the context of a “master discourse” of Islam which risks “flattening, homogenising narratives” (135) of local practices. In a similar vein, Kelly Yin Nga Tse’s chapter offers a careful parsing of the power dynamics that shape audience receptions of the film *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). She argues that the film serves “Asian American politics in America” (155). Ironically, this agenda results in the alarming “displacement of Singapore and the broader Southeast Asia” (155). This elision goes to writerly aspects of translation – what kind of reader is this for? What to leave in and what to leave out? How to keep faith with the writer and their intentions? And the reader and their expectations?

In the final chapter in the book, J Neil Garcia considers another existential problem of translation and language itself: what happens to the specificity of language when the context of that language is not “simple—which is to say not monolingual or monocultural—but rather, culturally hybrid, syncretic, and helplessly mixed?” (171). At the heart of this paper is the linguistic expression of sexual identities in the process of translation from a language “that doesn’t really mark gender” to one that does. In his analysis of the unpublished manuscript, *The Lion and the Faun*, a novel about the “homosexual experience” by Severino Montano and the poem “A Parable” by Rolando Tinio, Garcia unpicks the “immense slippage[s]” (179) that result and further complicate sexual identity.

There is no question that “translational politics” offers a rich, fascinating perspective on the lines of power embedded within literary crossings and transformations of Southeast Asia. What especially appeals in this collection is the critical inventiveness of the scholars as they riff off the idea of translation. Each chapter addresses the losses and gains of translation, as well as the discoveries and elisions. As such, this is a welcome addition to thinking about how to read literatures from the region.

There are however, disappointments. One cannot help but feel there are a few missed opportunities. For example, while the *Crazy Rich Asians* essay is well argued, this film and the original book are widely analysed in both scholarly and popular circles – if ever there was an example of a literary work well and truly within the global limelight, *Crazy Rich Asians* is it. I would have welcomed articles that champion overlooked literatures or a deeper engagement with some of the literary cultures touched on in the collection. The richness of Philippines literature is explored in only one chapter. But that’s a small criticism for a collection that addresses an important gap in the literary scholarship.

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