

“Belatedly, Asia’s Literary Scene Comes of Age”: Celebratory English Discourse and the Translation of Asian Literature¹

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Abstract

On 8 November 2007, the *International Herald Tribune* (IHT) triumphantly announced that “belatedly,” the Asian literary scene had “come of age.” There were two reasons for this belated success. The first was that an increasing number of literary works by Asian authors are now appearing in English or in English translations. The other was that major British and, especially, American publishing companies are now establishing branch companies in this region.

This paper will examine the discourse of the IHT article to suggest how celebratory English language constructs a particular view of literary success – success in terms of a dominant international English. This analysis will be framed within a wider context of Postcolonial Translation Studies.

Keywords

Asia, literature, English, postcolonial, Man Asian Literary Prize, discourse analysis

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Introduction

European Colonialism rapidly diminished as a political force following the end of the Second World War and the consolidation of many new national entities. The power of the "First World" over the "Third World," however, took new economic forms, which some scholars have characterised as "neo-imperialism." For linguistics, part of this continuing dominance has been expressed through the use of English, as a major resource language of international politics, economic trade, tourism, mass media and education. English is, of course, not the only European language to function in this way. French (under the discriminative term "Francophonie"), Spanish and Portuguese, also remain important throughout large parts of Africa, and Middle and Southern America. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin write in their classic text, *The Empire Writes Back*, "More than three-quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism" (1). And this "shaping" applies to literature as much as it does to language.

In this paper I am interested in the discourse analysis of a November 2007 article in the *International Herald Tribune* which links literary success with writing and being published in English. I describe this view of English, following Alastair Pennycook, as colonial and "celebratory" (*Critical Applied Linguistics* 59).

English and World Publishing

One preliminary way of understanding the power of English as a factor in international publishing is to examine the figures collected by UNESCO since the last quarter of the last century, under the general rubric of "Index Translationum." These figures are, no doubt, imperfect, as not all publishers of translations would have their details recorded on the database, but for our purposes they will have to suffice. The data gives us a rich resource for the understanding of the comparative importance in translation terms of various languages and authors.

Of the top fifty authors translated into other languages, almost half are English and American. The top ten authors are respectively: Walt Disney Productions, Agatha Christie, Jules Verne, Vladimir Lenin, William Shakespeare, Enid Blyton, Barbara Cartland, Danielle Steele, Hans Christian Anderson and Stephen King. These names indicate categories which will continue to reappear throughout all the UNESCO lists: popular authors, sometimes for adults, often for children; classical authors; and political writers. If we scan further through the list, we may add two further categories: religious writers (the Bible, Old and New Testaments; and Rudolf Steiner); and comics (Rene Goscinny, the author of the Asterix series).

As we will see, what I am loosely calling the Third World translates extensively from the works of the First World. But the First World also translates extensively between itself. The top ten countries doing translation are Germany ((229,755 items recorded), Spain (194,965), France (148,988), Japan (104,153), USSR (to 1991: 92,764), Netherlands (80,305), Poland (60,826), Denmark (60,499),

Italy (53,309) and Brazil (49,697). These, naturally, are also the top target languages into which translations are made.

But the top languages out of which translations are made do not completely follow this order. Significantly, almost four times as many translations are made from English (942,087) as from French (176,129) and German (160,573). The figures then follow for Russian (92,003), Italian (52,030), Spanish (40,440), Swedish (29,488), Latin (15,896) – an interesting addition, Danish (15,426) and Dutch (15,084).

When we examine the figures for Indonesia, we see that the top ten source languages are: English (2,568), Arabic (530), French (184), Dutch (164), German (117), Japanese (26), Spanish (17), Russian (15), Farsi (13) and Ancient Greek (13). Not surprisingly, the major authors translated are drawn almost exclusively from the first two languages: Walt Disney Productions (53), Enid Blyton (48), Agatha Christie (28), Al-Ghazzali (21), Yusuf Al-Qaradawi (21), Maudi (20), Benito S. Vergara (18), Marcel Marlier (17), Karl May (15) and Murtaza Mutahhari (14).

English speaking nations, however, barely make it to the list of nations translating out of Indonesian: Japan (55), Netherlands (55), Germany (34), the United States of America (23), Australia (15), France (14), Spain (12), Singapore (9), USSR (to 1991: 7), and Switzerland (5). Although Indonesia is interested in Islamic teachings from the Middle East (and Pakistan, especially Maulana Abu'l a'la Maududi), the interest is apparently not returned. The top ten authors translated out of Indonesian are Pramoedya Ananta Toer (74), Mochtar Lubis (10), Mangunwijaya (7), Ahmad Tohari (7), Rendra (5), Ajip Rosidi (5), Mohammad Hatta (5), Putu Wijaya (4), Tan Malaka (3), and, again, Pramoedya (3). Some of these are obviously political figures but we may also assume that the interest in Pramoedya, Lubis, and Rendra is also provoked in part because of their political stances (the “Buru quartet,” *Twilight in Jakarta*, *The Struggle of the Naga Tribe*, and *State of Emergency* are all critical of the Indonesian government).

The top ten publishers who publish translated works in Indonesia include some religious presses but are mainly secular companies: Gramedia (254), Erlangga (180), Cypress (157), Gramedia Pustaka Utama (143), BPK Gunung Mulia (136), PT Gramedia (97), Gema Insani Press (83), Kanisius (79), Arcan (75) and Binarupa Aksara (73).

Three of these companies belong to the one conglomerate, Gramedia, which also manages a range of bookstores in Jakarta and throughout Indonesia. My students in the course “Dinamika Budaya dalam Penerjemahan” (Cultural Dynamics and Translation), at the University of Indonesia, paid a visit to the local, Depok, Gramedia Bookshop on November 15, 2007. We counted 4 stands (each 4 shelves high) of “Sastera” (Literature), holding various works of “high literature” and linguistics. There were 2 stands of “Novel” (largely teen literature), 7 stands of “Novel Indonesia” (Novels in Indonesian), and three stands of “Novel Terjemahan” (Translated Literature). The major works of translated literature included novels by

Danielle Steel, Conan Doyle, John Grisham, C.S. Lewis, Nora Roberts, and Sidney Sheldon. All of these are published by the Gramedia conglomerate. One complete stand was devoted to translations of works in the Harlequin series. There was a separate display area for works by Agatha Christie, and an extensive range of comics translated from Japanese (many of which are also published by Gramedia). Despite the provision of a special section for "translated novels" (which were, in fact, adult works of a popular kind – teen lit and chick lit being the province of "novels"), translated works featured in all of the other stands as well (Pearl Buck, for example, was shelved as an Indonesian author.)

All translated works featured the English title of the book prominently on the cover. This also applied to works translated from authors of other languages (Marguerite Duras' *Detruire, Dit-elle*, for example, was entitled *Destroy, She Said*, and then, in smaller letters, *Hancurkan, Katanya*. The translation is, in fact, from the English, not the French.) Japanese comics also had English titles, though these were not part of the original para-text. Such is the prestige of English and English translations, that some works now written in Indonesian by Indonesian authors also carry prominent titles in English. The name of the translator was also never mentioned on the cover of any category of book.

Richard Jacquemond has argued about "the problems of translating across power differentials as follows (here I follow Douglas Robinson's summary of his work; Robinson 31-32):

1. A dominated culture will invariably translate far more of the hegemonic culture than the latter will of the former.
2. When the hegemonic culture does translate works produced by the dominated culture, those works will be perceived and presented as difficult, mysterious, inscrutable, esoteric and in need of a small cadre of intellectuals to interpret them, while a dominated culture will translate a hegemonic culture's works accessibly for the masses.
3. A hegemonic culture will only translate those works by authors in a dominated culture that fit the former's preconceived notions of the latter.
4. Authors in a dominated culture who dream of reaching a large audience will tend to write for translation into a hegemonic language, and this will require some degree of compliance with stereotypes.

I have already suggested that, in the Indonesian context, the first hypothesis needs to be modified in various ways. The First World spends a lot of time translating from itself, or more precisely from English. But it is true that Indonesia translates a massive quantity of material by English – and Arabic – authors, the first

being economically dominant, the second religiously dominant. Very little is translated back into the languages of the First World (although Japan, which may be considered economically dominant, is a major translator).

The latter part of the second hypothesis is demonstrably true. The first part may not be. Overall, works translated into Dutch, for example, include cook books, tourist guides and political commentaries. There are small groups of Dutch and other intellectuals at major universities working on traditional Indonesian literatures, but they are scarcely a significant part of the whole. Nevertheless, all the Indonesian writers who were translated belong to high Indonesian literature (and would be shelved at the Gramedia Bookshop as “Sastera,” Literature, not “Sastera Indonesia”).

The third hypothesis may be true, if there has been a picture abroad of Indonesia as a politically repressive state. Pramoedya is undoubtedly perceived overseas as a major fighter for democratic freedoms (“a second Solzhenitsyn” as it is often said).

The fourth hypothesis remains to be proven and is beyond the scope of my present discussion.

Celebratory English

In describing the new changes which took place in Translation Studies in the 1990s, Susan Bassnett used the term “the cultural turn” to suggest a shift of emphasis away from purely linguistic approaches to a concern with “the text embodied in its network of both source and target cultural signs.” The cultural turn offers, she suggested:

a way of understanding how complex manipulative textual processes take place: how a text is selected for translation, for example, what role the translator plays in that selection, what role an editor, publisher, patron plays, what criteria determine the strategies that will be employed by the translator, how a text might be received in the target. For a translation always takes place in a continuum, never in a void, and there are all kinds of textual and extra-textual constraints upon the translator. These constraints or manipulatory processes involved in the transfer of texts have become the primary focus of work in translation studies, and in order to study these processes, translation studies has changed its course and has become both broader and deeper. (433)

Later in the same essay, Bassnett makes the crucial comment: “Translation, of course, is a primary method of imposing meaning while concealing the power relations that lie behind the production of that meaning” (445).³

Pennycook uses the term “a colonial celebratory” position to describe the attitude that “trumpets the benefits of English over other languages in terms of both its intrinsic (the nature of the language) and extrinsic (the function of the language)

³ Hatim and Munday define “the cultural turn” as “a metaphor that has been adopted by Cultural Studies oriented translation theorists to refer to the analysis of translation in its cultural, political and ideological context” (102).

qualities." He suggests that "these celebrations of the spread of English, its qualities and characteristics, have a long and colonial history and form part of... the *adherence of discourses*... the ways in which particular discourses adhere to English... [This position] remains highly influential" (56).

Clearly, the English-language nations engage in what Venuti describes as "unequal cultural exchanges" with "their cultural others" (*The Translator's Invisibility* 20). Not only are the volumes of translation into and out of English disproportionate; they signal a clear message about the dominance of English not only beyond Europe but also within Europe itself (Venuti, *Rethinking Translation* 12-17). In keeping with an awareness of the political and ideological dimensions of the use of language that is also an aspect of Critical Applied Linguistics, Pennycook cites Yukio Tsuda's comment (via Phillipson, "Voice in Global English" 274) that the Diffusion of English paradigm, which sees the spread of English throughout the world as inevitable and highly beneficial, is in fact:

an uncritical endorsement of capitalism. Its science and technology, a modernization ideology, monolingualism as a norm, ideological globalization and internationalization, transnationalization, the Americanization and homogenization of world culture, linguistic, culture and media imperialism. (58)

Greenlees' article participates in this colonial celebration of the power of English and the privilege which its use can provide. In the rest of this paper I wish to suggest some of the ways in which this is done.

Colonial Celebratory Strategies

The article refers throughout to an undefined "Asia," whose literary experience is assumed to be identical and knowable, a small scale illustration of Edward Said's remarkable work *Orientalism*.

It begins with a fairly long biography of author Xu Xi and includes the biographies of two other authors who have succeeded by being published or not in English in Britain or America. Biography forms the first discursive strategy used.

Xu was a success in local terms. She succeeded in 1994 in having her first novel, in English, published in Hong Kong. However: "She soon discovered that being published in English by a small printing house in her hometown Hong Kong did not ensure the interest of the handful of companies based in the United States and Britain that dominate global English-language publishing."

Implicit in this quotation are two further discourse strategies that marginalise "Asian literature." One is condescension towards the Asian experience. Xu Xi, we are told in the next paragraphs, even moved to New York, in the hope that, somehow, proximity to international publishers might help open their doors. "Publishers in New York and London were encouraging," she said. "But they basically didn't know what to do with an Asian writer." New York and London are New York and London, international centres; Hong Kong is a "hometown," like

hundreds of small towns scattered across the United States, where hopeful writers bide their time, hoping to break into the big-time.

Xu Xi's work had been noticed in Asia: "Her gritty tales of the lives of Hong Kongers, free of the stereotypes in many of the Western accounts of the former British colony, had long been hailed by scholars, dissected in creative writing classes and popular with Hong Kong and Chinese American readers." (Creative Writings classes are, of course, an originally American invention.) But this reception did not count.

"But," the next paragraph pointedly begins, "when she and four other authors were named as finalists for the Man Asian Literary Prize, international publishers suddenly took notice." In this paragraph, the Prize is described as one which "recognizes Asian novels unpublished in English." The Prize has, however, already been mentioned earlier in the article. It is (paragraph 5): "Asia's first literary prize of real international standing." And with Xu Xi's nomination for this literary award for writing in English, "Belatedly, Asia's literary scene comes of age."

The other, third, discourse strategy is the rendering of the Asian experience not just of lesser value to the English but actually invisible. Jose Dalisay, a Filipino author, whose biography is presented at the end of the article, notes, "most aspiring Asian novelists can look forward to the demoralizing combination of anonymity and financial hardship...." Dalisay has also been nominated for the Man Asian Literary Prize, "and did get calls from international publishers after his darkly comic book 'Soledad's Sister' made the shortlist. But" – note ominous use again of this conjunction – "he does not expect to be able to turn writing into a full-time living any time soon."

The invisibility of Asian authors, readerships, publishers and literary awards – all of which are, of course extensive, is most evident in the words of Peter Gordon, "the editor of the *Asian Review of Books* and a Hong-Kong-based publisher. Gordon is quoted as having said: "Until recently you would have been hard-pressed to identify what I call a literary industry in Asia.... But there are indications the industry has developed and now exists. There comes a moment where a number of distinct points gel into what you call an industry." Gordon may be hard-pressed "to identify a literary industry in Asia," but this is not because one does not exist. Either Gordon cannot see it (it is "invisible") or, simply, although located in Hong Kong, he cannot read Chinese.

The biographies construct a fourth strategy: the contrast between struggling but invisible Asian Authors, and Europeans who can comment authoritatively on the Asian literary scene and moreover offer access to international publishing. They are the ones who decide whether the Asian literary scene is "of age" or whether it is still presumably immature and gauche.

Another figure on the European side of the dichotomy is Jo Lusby, "the Beijing-based general manager of Penguin China." Lusby finds China "a market [which] we believe is underserved.... It's a very exciting market for us." Penguin,

we are told, have recorded a "sales growth of 200 percent a year." What they are publishing are "English-language titles... and translations of popular children's stories." Although the article does not state what the English-language titles are, it does indicate, however, that: "At the end of this year, Penguin will also launch Chinese translations of classic English literature under the Penguin logo in a deal with a state-owned publisher. It plans to bring out 30 new titles in this series a year."

It is likely that Penguin will publish some English language translations of Chinese authors. Specific mention is made of Jiang Rong, "a 61-year-old retired Chinese academic," who, coincidentally, is also short-listed for the Man Asian Literary Prize. Jiang's book, "which Lusby described as a sharp departure from the bitter memoirs of early Communist rule that have come out of China in recent years, will be released in English in March." It has already sold "two million copies in its legitimate edition and an estimated four million pirated copies" (the denigration strategy and invisibility combined together in one sentence). The decision to publish Jiang's book in English "could pay off handsomely," not necessarily for Jiang, although this may be implied, but "for Penguin." (Xu Xi's agent, Marysia Juszczakiewicz, describes one of her own authors, Feng Tang, as "the Nick Hornby of China." We must wait a while until Hornby is described as "the Feng Tang of England.")

Another international company, PanMacmillan, "In April... launched Picador Asia with the aim of acquiring three to four titles a year related to East Asia." The number seems very small and this needs to be recognised.

Lusby's praise of Jiang's departure from conventional Chinese literary themes is also reflected in the earlier paragraph stating:

International publishers and literary agents say they are seeking many more works in Asia to bring to English-language audiences. They are also looking for new voices and genres that go beyond what publishers call 'scar' or 'misery' literature – about life in poverty under repressive regimes – and capture the rapid social and economic transformation of the new Asia.

"Scar" and "misery" literature, "about life in poverty under repressive regimes" (and especially the life of women under repressive patriarchal regimes, one might add) are precisely the sort of literature that is translated in accordance with Jacquemond's third hypothesis: "A hegemonic culture will only translate those works by authors in a dominated culture that fit the former's preconceived notions of the latter." Many of the works in this genre were, nevertheless, originally written in English, beginning perhaps with Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* (translated into Indonesian in 2003 by Gramedia, with a print run so far of 15,000 copies) and working through to Amy Tan's *The Hundred Secret Senses* (Gramedia, 2006). Whereas as Tan's book has so far only had a print run of 5,000 copies, Arthur Golden's more sensational *Memoirs of a Geisha* had reached 44,000 copies in early 2006. Gramedia's work is both orientalisising and self-orientalisising.

This expert commentary, by Europeans, on the shortcomings of Asian literature and its belated success, contains, then, an interesting twist, which in pop psychology is known as “blame the victim,” the fifth and final strategy which I wish to discuss here. Asian authors translated into English have been selected because they have met Orientalist stereotypes, and even themselves sometimes deliberately sought to do so (Jacquemond’s hypothesis four); now, however, they must adopt a different literary “repertoire” (the term is Even-Zohar’s, “Polysystems Studies” 39-41; Aveling, “Two Approaches to the Positioning of Translated Texts” 10) if they are to gain recognition on an international scale. This strategy of blaming Asian authors and societies for their own shortcomings compared to the more affluent and literate (in English) West also runs consistently through the article.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show the overwhelming dominance of the English language and English language translations in the international market, including Indonesia, one part of “Asia.” Through an analysis of an article in the *International Herald Tribune*, “Belatedly, Asia’s Literary Scene Comes of Age,” I have also suggested some discursive strategies which support the colonial celebration of English. Beyond the use of the all-inclusive term “Asia” itself, these include (1) the construction of biographies which indicate that meaningful (international) success comes through writing in English and, even more so, being published by major American and British publishers; (2) the rendering of Asian experience as ultimately immature, illiterate, poor, dishonest, authoritarian and repressive; (3) the invisibility of other Asian authors, readerships, publishers and literary awards; (4) the use of authoritative Western commentators as the ultimate judge of Asian literature, which is now considered to have “come of age,” belatedly, through the nomination of Xu Xi for the Man Asian Literary Prize, “Asia’s first literary prize of real international standing”; and (5) the blaming of Asian writers for their production of stereotypical repertoires of “scar” and “misery” literature, the long time staple of British and American publishing novels about Asia.

Venuti insists that “any attempt to make translation visible today is necessarily a political gesture” (*Rethinking Translation* 10-11). In a narrow sense, the marginal status of translation in our universities “discloses and contests the nationalist ideology” implicit in our “pedagogical practices and disciplinary divisions which depend on translated texts” (Venuti, *Rethinking Translation* 10). In a broader sense the making visible of translation “can gain considerable interpretive and political power if it is extended to other institutionalized cultural practices, like the publishing and reviewing of translated texts, to other dimensions of translation, like theoretical statements and discursive strategies, and to other ideological determinations, like class, gender and race” (Venuti, *Rethinking Translation* 10). Making English visible, as the first language of literature and as a powerful language of translation, is also a political gesture.

My students at the University of Indonesia laughed when I read Greenlees' article to them. They had heard it all before and believed none of it. Domination, as Foucault insisted, implies resistance. The forms of resistance required include the recognition of the literary experiences and languages of each of the independent nations of the Asian continent; translation between these nations; and, in our universities, clearing a space for honest and open dialogue, in which "the two worlds symbolized and conveyed by two tongues," or multiple tongues, are, and are not, in conflict (Aveling, "The Coloniser and the Colonised" 167). We do indeed need to see discourse in its multicultural and multidisciplinary contexts, as the theme of this conference suggests.

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