

Brian Bernards, *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2016. 288 pp. ISBN 978-981-4722-34-6.

Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature by Dr. Brian Bernards, an Assistant Professor at the University of Southern California, is a welcome and valuable addition to current scholarship on Sinophone and Anglophone postcolonial literature and the literatures of Southeast Asia (SEA).

As its title suggests, the book examines the way the trope of “Nanyang” or the South Seas fulfils specific cultural and political ends as well as aesthetic purposes in the work of a variety of Sinophone writers from China, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Taiwan. Spanning the historical period of nineteenth-century Western colonialism and imperialism to the postcolonial period of national independence for many of these countries in the twentieth century, Bernards discusses mainly Sinophone fiction but also fictional work written in English and Thai. It is only through such a comparative approach that one can begin to do justice to this culturally multifarious and linguistically diverse region. By reading texts through the lens of the Nanyang, Bernards troubles standard and conventional accounts of nationalism and diasporic nationalism including the dominant paradigms of national literature and culture upheld by most countries in the region. Exploring instead what he calls the writers’ archipelagic imagination, Bernards grapples with the tricky and historically varied geopolitics of the region informed by Western colonialism, Chinese imperialism and local rule, arguing thus for a larger and richer role for localism, as well as for a deeper understanding of the complex and multiple influences on Sinophone writers. Movement, migration and border-crossing are foregrounded as the seas are seen not just in terms of trade routes but as key passageways for the spread and cross-pollination of languages, cultures and ideas.

The book offers chapters which are both wide-ranging and nuanced in argument. The first two chapters focus on modern Chinese writers’ relationship with the Nanyang in their work. In “Modern Chinese Impressions of the South Seas Other,” Bernards discusses how some of the Chinese writers who saw themselves as proponents of the New Literature movement following China’s 1911 national revolution and the May Fourth Movement in 1919 were inspired by travel abroad and time spent in the Nanyang or South Seas. Writers like Xu Zhimo and Xu Dishan, produced New Literature with “South seas color” which, while exoticising on some level, nevertheless also allowed for self-examination, useful comparison with continental China and Chinese literature, and significantly, the production of a more diverse or “discrepant” cosmopolitanism. In this reading, the Nanyang ceases to be just a backwater and underdeveloped

place with no culture of its own to offer. Bernards' analysis inflects mainstream standard accounts of Chinese modernism and opens up other possibilities, routes and lines of comparison not just the "China-West-Japan paradigm" (34) for understanding Sinophone New Literature and its sources of influence.

The book's second chapter continues the re-appraisal of Chinese New Literature through the Nanyang optic as it interrogates the diasporic ethno-nationalism that many writers saw as dominant among Overseas Chinese or Huaqiao nationalists in the Nanyang of the 1920s and 1930s. Writers like Ya Dafu and Lao She give the lie to the efficacy or desirability of ethno-nationalism as an anti-Western imperialism strategy. The Nanyang trope attains a "transcolonial signification that simultaneously addresses the emergent national contexts of China and Southeast Asia" (56). Through this chapter, Bernards also counters conventional historiography or the widely-accepted narrative by some Chinese historians who saw Chinese emigration to Southeast Asia from the early nineteenth century following the Opium Wars as a sign principally of China's weakness, a narrative which ignores the presence of Chinese merchants and businessmen as well as that of poorer Chinese labourers in the Nanyang as possibly constituting a kind of Chinese settler colonialism in the region, a point with profound implications for the subsequent struggles for national independence.

Writing the South Seas enlarges the perspective of Anglophone scholars like me who are hampered by their monolingualism and inability to read the literatures of the region written in languages other than English partially as a result of decades-long, state-directed national language policies and campaigns. In his chapter on Malaysian Sinophone literature, Bernards traces the work of Malaysian Chinese writers who left postcolonial independent Malaysia for Taiwan as a result of the former country's nativist and ethnocentric nationalism which privileged Malay citizens. These writers left only as it turns out for them to get caught in cultural debates in Taiwan about the rural-urban divide, the claims of indigeneity and cultural independence from China. The route to Taiwan taken by Malaysian Chinese writers like Ng Kim Chew is not something that figures commonly in Anglophone SEA literature or in related critical studies as writers in English train their gaze towards the metropolitan West and Western culture. Yet it constitutes so vitally to an understanding of race relations in Malaysia and the transnational cultural politics of the region.

In the book, I also appreciated the chapter on Singapore literature which usefully juxtaposes the work of Sinophone writers like Yeng Pway Ngon and Chia Joo Ming with that of Suchen Christine Lim. Lim is an established Anglophone writer whose knowledge of other Chinese vernaculars and experience of multilingual Malaya and Singapore nevertheless enables her to call upon the idea of Nanyang in distinctive ways, as Bernards shows. These Singapore writers refute the rigid and oversimplified multiracialism imposed by the post-colonial

Singapore state and its parochialism and the reductive depiction of Nanyang as only connoting Chinese chauvinism and communism. While the criticism about strict multiracialism is a familiar one, the ways in which Sinophone writers offered alternatives through the use of Chinese vernacular languages, for example, provide a salutary reminder of the richness of Singapore and the region's multilingual history. Because of Singapore's postcolonial history and its orientation towards the Anglo-American west as a result of its embrace of English as a first and working language, this multilingual context is easily overlooked by many Anglophone readers and seen as being of interest only to a small group of scholars and linguists. In this regard, it was sobering to read about how Sinophone texts dealt with the viscerally-felt loss of Chinese languages and cultures in the wake of the institutional entrenchment of English, and the keen sense of irrelevance and marginality Sinophone writers faced.

The chapter, "An Ecopoetics of the Borneo Rainforest," focuses on Sinophone writers from Malaysian Borneo who publish in Taiwan but who draw attention to the biodiversity of the forest in Borneo, the history of systemic exploitation of indigenous peoples and natural resources there, and the current ecological challenges faced by the island inhabitants. This is a chapter that would certainly appeal to postcolonial ecocriticism scholars committed to interrogating the cost to the planetary environment of our Anthropocene moment. At the same time, this chapter also underscores a point about how our literary landscape may profitably shift to deepen our understanding of transnational and transcultural connections. As Bernards writes, "In Sinophone Malaysian literature, Malaysia and Taiwan are no longer the margins of China and continental Chineseness, but rather island and peninsular centers of creolized Sinophone cultures formed from interactions with non-Sinophone cultures and native ecologies in a South Seas network" (135). The book's last chapter focuses on popular narratives in Thailand by Sinophone and Thai-language writers and similarly seeks to provide an alternative perspective about the assimilation of Chinese, specifically Teochew, immigrants and their descendants in Thailand, often widely heralded as a case of successful integration of Chinese migrants into a national culture in Southeast Asia. Bernards argues instead that processes of translanguaging creolisation in popular integration stories which see the use of spoken Thai in standard Chinese narratives and the use of spoken Teochew in Thai narratives suggest that an uncompromising binary between biculturalism and assimilation cannot hold.

Writing the South Seas throws into welcome relief the place of Chinese and Sinophone writers from a heterogeneous and diverse Southeast Asia, the influences on them and their position in societies more commonly thought of and discussed in terms of economics and trade. Bernards' book captures the complexity of the region with its different languages, plurality of Chinese vernacular languages, diversity of government and different colonial and imperial power structures at work. The archipelagic imagination that Bernards underlines

is particularly important for unlocking possibilities hitherto unexplored because of our adherence to nationalist paradigms, and metropole/colony and civilisational centre/backwater periphery models of thinking. This book is a timely and propitious reminder of the need for sensitive scholarship that re-embeds literature in the region and pays attention to intra-Southeast Asian links rather than just the single relationship between the countries of the Nanyang and Western metropolitan centres, perhaps especially as international prizes and the circulation of prestige these days tend precisely to highlight these routes at the expense of others. As Bernards himself writes in an interview with Philip Holden:

Perhaps for Southeast Asian studies, the greater implication of this type of study is that it raises the possibility of thinking about Southeast Asian literature not simply as an aggregate or sum of national literatures (most often in national or official languages) of the ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) countries, but as a network of relationships and as points of historical and political convergence where the nation-state certainly matters, but it matters precisely because the literature is not wholly contained by it, and the modes of writing about the nation (and the political stakes for doing so) often change when the national boundary is traversed.

Bernards sets his chosen texts in larger conversations with other places, moving beyond nationally-contextualised discussions of China, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. In this way, *Writing the South Seas* re-constellates the coordinates for critical literary analysis and opens up new opportunities for future scholarship including ways in which the Nanyang may continue to signify and re-signify in the cultural works of Southeast Asia.

Works Cited

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