



Malaysia

Malaysian crossings: Place and language in the worlding of modern Chinese literature

By CHEOW THIA CHAN

New York: Columbia University Press, 2023. Pp. 298, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

doi:10.1017/S0022463424000134

How do writers capture different languages, speech patterns, and dialects within the space of literature? *Malaysian Crossings* documents the place of Chinese-language writers in the multilingual heritage of colonial-era Malaya and Borneo. Meir Sternberg's 'translational mimesis' helps Chan understand how 'writers transpose multilingual social situations into monolingual literary discourse' (p. 101) and the 'new sociolinguistic forms' (p. 103)—such as transliteration, hybrid syntax and vocabulary—that arise when writers cross 'their own linguistic constituency' (p. 106). 'Linguistic hybridity' (p. 91) is thus the context and framework by which Chan intervenes in received notions of cosmopolitanism and minority.

Cosmopolitanism, for Chan, results from what writers do with their marginality. This marginal, or minority status, comes from having interloped on a place and therefore requires negotiating one's outsider status from within its 'local' terms. Cosmopolitanism, thus, is not necessarily found in writers' styles or backgrounds, but rather how they convert their being 'constitutive others' (p. 27) or their 'embedded "outsideness"' (p. 205) into universal relevance. While it's possible to find such cosmopolitan marginality in any society, Chan argues that his four Mahua, or Chinese-Malaysian, cases are special. First, Lin Cantian's non-southern-Chinese, or *waijiang ren*, status in Malaya does not impede him from transliterating the widely spoken Cantonese and Hokkien, as well as Malay, in his novel's written Chinese. Second, Han Suyin's knowledge of Chinese helps her promote an 'Asian English' (p. 108) inflected with 'idioms full of local color' (p. 95), thus transforming English from a colonial to vernacular medium. This idea of universality, or ethical aim of depicting society's 'creolized' or 'hybridized linguistic habits' (pp. 73, 89), takes a turn in the third and fourth cases. Wang Anyi decides to write about her father's birthplace in Malaya and elsewhere with a 'cosmopolitan Chinese literary vernacular' (p. 134), an 'abstract language' (p. 139) consisting of plain-spoken or '*baihua* vernacular' (p. 142), emptied of colloquialisms and what makes language particular. This ironically, Chan argues, encourages 'diversity without engaging in super-imposition or domestication' (p. 140). Similarly, Li Yongping's 'profound awareness of Borneo's place-based indigeneity' (p. 189) but also 'multiscalar literary relations' (p. 186) with other places like Taiwan lead him to strive for a 'pure Chinese form' (p. 166) of *zhongwen*, instead of locally inflected Chinese, or *huawen*.

Chan understands the *zhongwen/huawen* divide as a heuristic for outsider authors' creative play to clarify their 'place-based commitment' (p. 128), instead of an either-or option. Minority, for Chan, is not social difference, but a relation produced when a writer's personal journey runs counter to mainstream categories,

yielding terms like contrapuntal, off-centre, exemplarity, and drift, which Chan uses to structure each chapter. The Index supplements the book's arguments about place and language, and their key players, in a wonderfully textured way.

What if we took these four authors' earnest claims of cosmopolitan practice *not* by their word, but assessed their linguistic responses within twentieth-century history, for example, in the wake of anti-colonial nationalism and internationalism shared by migrant and indigenous groups? How did these writers view their sociolinguistic forms vis-à-vis such developments? Early on, Chan argues that Mahua literature's 'evolution in isolation' (p. 14) reflects a 'Galapagos paradox' (p. 22), whereby seemingly poor conditions for writing foster innovation in a 'covert globality' (p. 22) of the 'sinophone South' (p. 20). In other words, Chan uses Darwin's theory of evolution as an optimistic metaphor for linguistic cosmopolitanism. But what about its realities under the mutated form of Social Darwinism? Social Darwinism's claim of 'survival of the fittest' enthralled anti-colonial nationalists in late nineteenth-century Vietnam and Korea, for example, in their quest for national parity with Europe, notwithstanding its use to justify imperialism and racism. Did anti-colonial ideas and movements, radical and conservative alike, influence the way Mahua writers represented linguistic diversity? This 'Malaysian crossing' could be further explored, but in Chan's thesis, the answer would be: facing colonial bans and national assimilation, Chinese-language writing seems destined for short-circuited cosmopolitan reception because it is a colonial or national 'constitutive other'.

Chan's Darwinian take on literary creativity is inspired by Ng Kim Chew's reading of Mahua literature's 'peripherality' within a 'Literary Galapagos archipelago' (p. 10). Interestingly, from literary studies, Franco Moretti (*Distant Reading*, 2013) presents another use of Darwin, via Ernst Mayr's 'concept of "allopatric speciation" (allopatry = a homeland elsewhere)', to explain how in Europe, literary forms, resembling species, evolved by moving into 'new spaces' across 'an archipelago of distinct yet close national cultures' (p. 1). Whereas Moretti tracks the evolution of literary forms and genres 'triggered by European geography', Chan focuses on sociolinguistic forms across the 'local worlds of varied scales' (p. 133) in archipelagic Southeast Asia, mediated by written Chinese.

NICHOLAS Y.H. WONG

The University of Hong Kong

The Philippines

Imagining Manila: Literature, empire, and Orientalism

By TOM SYKES

London: Bloomsbury, 2021. Pp. 140. Notes, Bibliography, Index.

doi:10.1017/S0022463424000110

Tom Sykes' *Imagining Manila* looks at how Westerners have represented the city of Manila in fiction and literature. Using Edward Said's framework, Sykes shows how