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## <Book Review>

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**Brian Bernards. *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2015.**

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Whether it is an experience of trauma, trial, relief, or even joy, the memory or forgetting of these experiences will occur differently. An event is not simply stored as a memory, and a memory is not simply reiterated as a memoir. Tru testifies in his own words where he stands in the process of writing the memoir and retelling his story—“we each had our own sorrow”—or again later when leaving the ship *Việt Nam Thương Tin*, “our memories remain locked in our own minds” (p. 164). While these statements follow particular events in his story, they reflect a consistent adherence to the privacy, specificity, and intangibility of an individual’s sorrow and memory of it. In a way, it is similar to the untranslatable, that which slips through words, from one language to another, from one interlocutor to another, that which, for what it is worth, should be left intact.

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***Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature***

BRIAN BERNARDS

Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2015.

**Wrought from Water: “Nanyang” as Transoceanic Imaginary of the South Seas**

This book is one of expanse. Of waterways, currents, borders shifting over time with the sheer influx of people, the aspirations that propelled their journeys, settlements evolving into communities and cultures, the slow, hesitant returns to places of origin, the fertile rain forests not only of their imaginations but of an entire ecological system—all these serve as the scaffold to the recent book by Brian Bernards, *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature*.

*Writing the South Seas* is not only a remarkable inventory of the discursive productions articulating the Nanyang as a literary trope but inescapably a work on travel theory which resonates with recent retrievals of travel writings under a new critical lens. For a long time, travelogues were relegated to the category of “subliterary.” They were adjudged mediocre for not being on a par with so-called serious literature. Their style and intent cut across disciplinary fields that defied easy categorization into conventional genres. But it is basically this discursive ambivalence that renders these narratives a fertile source of sociocultural extrapolations. Orientalism, for instance, as it is invoked in this book underlies a production of knowledge of the South Seas as an imagined geography by imperial China. Such a construct was circulated by earlier explorers and perpetuated through various time periods.

Moreover, the theme of movement as it is indelibly captured in the Nanyang imaginary is further engaged in *Writing the South Seas* for its variations—upward mobility, return voyages, extended passages—against the multifaceted circumstances that spurred them. Hence, what permeates this entire volume is a maritime vocabulary representing not only the physical passages of people across the seas but, more important, the consequent traversals occurring in the realm of culture, language, and literature as Chinese immigrants adapt to a new environment. The result is a rich tapestry of writings that embody the experiential gamut of Chinese immigrants physically uprooted from their place of ancestry but unflinching re-visioning a world amidst the changes.

It is here that Bernard's work achieves a veritable contribution to the growing work on Southeast Asian postcolonial literatures as he surveys the spectrum of writings that materialized from a century (1850s–1940s) of voyaging to the South Seas of almost 20 million Chinese, mostly from cities in Southern China such as Amoy, Swatow, and Hainan Island. This was a crucial historical time of colonial and national upheavals that coincided with the opening of strategic oceanic pathways for maritime exploration and mercantile goals. For many others, the arduous crossing was simply in pursuit of a dream of a brighter future.

The key destinations were Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, and Thailand, where earlier heavy Chinese influence could be traced. Looking at the map that opens the book reveals at once the extent of the outward movement from China into the South Seas. The thickest passage can be glimpsed where the waters are most unimpeded, the direction effortless, perhaps borne by the current winds, guided by the nightly constellation, driven by the utter need to discover a new frontier. This was how new vistas were opened: the life-changing passage, the perseverance, and, most of all, the steadfast imagining.

To chart the scholarly command undergirding Bernard's work is akin to the perils and triumphs of navigating the seas: one can get lost in its immensity. But Bernard, in this feat of a book, systematically provides his readers with anchors in appreciating the complex cultural and literary configurations by which Nanyang, as a literary trope, has been discursively inscribed into the future lives of Chinese voyagers, emigrants, and settlers. At the outset, Bernard disabuses his readers of the use of "Southeast Asia" as it has recently been made fashionable. Arguing that many of today's geographical delineations are creations of Western hegemony, Bernard insists on a far-reaching view of how the waters, in their fluid state, make the notion of geography more malleable.

Yet it is not as if the South Seas—the itinerary, the place of destination—was an altogether uninhabited region for China. It had been imagined as the "fantastical realm of 'southern barbarians' in the patriarchal worldview of imperial China" (p. 30). Also, its etymology as a maritime zone locates it as "outside of civilization" (p. 15). But how the transformative passage of the Chinese forged the South Seas into the literary trope of the "Nanyang" demands a closer look at the process of displacement, encounters, and exchanges, the inadvertent commingling of cultures. Bernard,

in illuminating the book's conceptual framework, lays out terms such as "hybridity," "diaspora," and "multiculturalism" to highlight how these may fall short of capturing the dynamism intrinsic in the Nanyang imaginary. Drawing from the various thinkers on creolization such as Benedict Anderson, Nancy Morejón, Supriya Nair, and Edouard Glissant, Bernards argues that "creolization" is the most apt as it encompasses the ongoing phases of encounters and changes among cultures toward the creation of a distinct one. In brief, "it is the unceasing process of transformation" (p. 22).

Each chapter of the book embodies the textured imagining from which Chinese sojourners have wrought Nanyang. Chapter 1 foregrounds the New Literature arising from the dichotomous sentiment of the southbound writers against Western imperialism and Chinese feudalism as configured in the China-Western-Japan tripartite. As a takeoff from the massive 1919 May Fourth student movement, Chinese writers left for distant voyages in pursuit of the "enlightenment ideal via the South Seas itinerary" (p. 53). Writing in the vernacular but looking to the modern world for inspiration through their travels, the writers who experienced Southeast Asia in their itinerary were captivated by the region's tropical contrast. The "South Seas color" teeming in the New Literature reflects a heightened perception of tropical peoples and cultures. However, much of these views did not fully depart from the patriarchal Chinese views of the "feminized" and "erotic" other. This "Nanyang orientalism" muddles the cosmopolitanism pervading the times. Foundational writers of the New Literature were Xu Zhimo (1897–1931) and Xu Dishan (1893–1941).

From the search for the "enlightenment ideal," Chapter 2 focuses on the theme of "national salvation." The South Seas as a literary trope was at best an intellectual prism for the southbound writers to appraise their nationalist fervor hostile to Western incursion and imperial China's feudalistic beliefs. Those who inspired such a stringent reflective stance among the writers were the Nanyang Hauaia (South Seas Chinese) who were acknowledged as the region's true "hands-on architects of its modernity and cultivators of its wealth" (p. 55). The works of the southbound writers that came out of their travels during the decade of the 1920s–30s were viewed as "writing back to China" while simultaneously creating a niche in the local Sinophone literary scene in Malaya and Singapore. Two of the pioneering writers of the era were Lao She (1899–1966) and Yu Dafu (1896–1945). Lao She produced canonical novels that celebrate multiethnic, multi-linguistic colonial environs, while Yu Dafu, known as an uncompromising literary critic, was recognized for his role in encouraging the articulation of a homeland Nanyang among creole communities.

Chapter 3 scrutinizes the deepening process of creolization among the Sinophone Malaysian writers as they found themselves at a crucial postwar, postcolonial turn. To defy nativist conceptions of Malaysianness, Sinophone Malaysian writers adapted a "transnational" mode in addressing their predicament. Taiwan became a cultural haven for these writers' "Nanyang diaspora" as it revitalized their Chinese origins. Sinophone Malaysian critics of this time—Ng Kim Chew, Tee Kim Tong (Zhang Jinzhong), Lim Kien Ket (Lin Jianguo)—wrote from Taiwan with a vigorous revisionist aim about the Sinophone Malaysian literary history. As racial tensions peaked in Malay-

sia with the 1969 Kuala Lumpur ethnic riots, a surge of Malaysian students found their way to Taiwan. Writers during this time found not only a refuge in Taiwan but also an accommodating sanctuary that was bound in a symbiotic relationship with the local literary scene.

The lush rain forests of Borneo become a site for the enquiry into cultural identity as manifested in the extensive works of Li Yongpin (1947–). Chapter 4 draws from the critical framework of postcolonial ecocriticism to take stock of the effects of decades of colonial, neo-imperialist, and multinational exploitation of the Bornean environs that led to the displacement of indigenous communities. The ecopoetics of two other writers, namely, Pan Yutong (1937–) and Chang Kuei-hsing (1956–)—the latter described by Bernards as “Sinophone literature’s foremost architect of the Borneo rainforest” (p. 124)—successfully couple aesthetic elements with political efficacy. In the sensuous setting of the loamy marshland, many of the characters found in Chang’s novels are embroiled in narratives of love, alliances and betrayal, and victimization.

Chapter 5 delves into the literary transformations of the term “Nanyang” within Singapore’s multiethnic and multilingual population. What distinguishes Singapore’s national literature is how it is defined as the “sum total of its literatures in the official languages of English, standard Chinese (based on spoken Mandarin), Malay, and Tamil” (p. 137). This upholds the nation’s individual racial groups while recognizing their literary origins, and simultaneously instilling a transnational spirit to its literary yield. Attendant to this is the nation’s policy of multiracialism and meritocracy, which overrules the nativist tendencies inherent in such demographics and levels the playing field among socioeconomic sectors. The works of the Sinophone authors Yeng Pway Ngan and Chia Joo and the Anglophone novelist Suchen Christen Lim, however, engage in-depth neat national categories of self-representation to revisit the heritage historically entrenched in a maritime Southeast Asia (p. 140).

A successful story of Chinese integration in Thailand is the focus of Chapter 6. However, this “successful story” is not without its intricacies. Framing the integration are measures of assimilation and accommodation that the Thai monarchy imposed to stem the growing economic influence of the Chinese migrant population in Thailand. A majority of these voyagers came to Siam (then Thailand) as early as the eighteenth century as rice traders. But with a Western-educated monarch, King Vajiravudh, ever watchful of his constituents, and fired by the anti-Semitic sentiment in Europe, policy measures such as the Nationality Act diffused the highly visible Chinese Other. Chinese names, for instance, had to be registered using Thai appellations. More repressive political moves strengthened the direction for a “Thai for Thais” conviction (p. 171) that included the closure of Sinophone schools and ban of Teochew opera performances (p. 172). The literature spawned during this period, such as the writings of the Sinophone Thai author Fang Siruo (Phonlachat Kitaworanat, 1931–99), drew on multiple spaces from which struggles and identities were continually redefined against concerns such as censorship and disenfranchisement.

The book concludes with a reference to a 2008 television serial drama titled *The Little Nyonya*

that riveted a sizeable portion of the Singaporean population. The drama reawakened the Nanyang imagination in an engaging platform—audiovisual. The Nanyang imagination was enlivened, given a voice. With the serial drama successfully reaching millions of people, Bernards notes that the “aesthetic possibilities” of the “Nanyang imagination” may exponentially increase if represented in film and theater, music, and the arts as a contrast to the “written word” of literature that has been the concern of this book.

Bernards proposes future studies on the Philippines and Indonesia, which in his view best represent the archipelagic spirit of Southeast Asia. While these countries have been referred to tangentially in individual chapters, there is definitely much more to explore in the Chinese reimagining of Philippine literature, for instance. There have been pockets of studies on contemporary Filipino-Chinese literary writings; but a scholarly undertaking with the breadth and depth of *Writing the South Seas*, outlining the range of assimilation, resistance, and integration of Chinese immigrants into the local community, will open up new areas of historical and literary relations that have eluded official narratives.

Lastly, the 2017 celebration of the 50 years of the founding of ASEAN is a historic milestone. The region’s growing presence in the global geopolitical arena has spurred the establishment of formal studies of the region so as to encourage a deeper knowledge among neighboring states. As a reservoir of people’s memories and aspirations, literature has been at the core of these studies. In this regard, Bernards’s *Writing the South Seas* has broken through a critical threshold. It provides readers with a more progressive view of what may now comprise postcolonial Southeast Asian literatures. While some of the titles mentioned in the book have been visible on a standard Southeast Asian literature syllabus, they often stand as discrete titles lacking the wide-range contextualization found in Bernards’s work. This is to state that readers can now come to the writings with the knowledge that the novels, essays, plays, and poems were produced not only in a distinct place and time; it was the seas that enabled the thoughts, the images, the words. And however the southbound writers imagined their destination, the waters, in calmness and rancor and, most important, in the crossings they allowed, blurred geographies, renewed identities, and moored the voyagers to a new homeland.

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