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Malaysian Crossings: Place and Language in the Worlding of Modern Chinese Literature

CHEOW THIA CHAN

New York: Columbia University Press, 2023.

Perspectives from Mahua Literature's Counterintuitively Privileged Position of Intermarginality

Chan Cheow Thia's incisively written *Malaysian Crossings* presents a literary historiography of understudied Malayan-Malaysian realities and identities from the 1930s to the 2000s at crucial nation-building, colonial to postcolonial, and world-Chinese literary thresholds. Navigating between the depiction of on-page worlds and off-page realities, the literary careers of and "relay of ideas" (p. 152) between the writers highlighted in this book invite a revised and more attentive understanding of the globalization and cosmopolitanism of modern Chinese literature from the counterintuitive vantage point of "nested marginality" (p. 78) or intermarginality. Drawing salient connections between sociohistorical and political circumstances, authorial and literary careers, as well as inter- and intra-national, ethnic, and racial (inter- and intra-Sinitic) tensions, Chan demonstrates the inventive ways that Mahua literature negotiates a uniquely advantageous position for itself within the modern Chinese literary sphere through acts of "worlding Chinese-language literature from the margins" (p. 149). These strategic negotiations or crossings across multiple spatiotemporal scales enable Mahua literature to not only take root but to thrive in the modern Chinese literary sphere despite its persistent minoritization in relation to China and other more prominent Sinophone literary spheres and Sinitic communities around the world.

Chan masterfully wields what he describes as Sinophone's "valuable function of conceptual and locational disambiguation by advocating for place-differences" (p. 18), clarifying Malaysia-Malaya's unique positionality and relationality as a part of and apart from the wider domains of Chinese literary and cultural studies. Emphasizing the hybrid sociocultural and linguistic realities of Malaya/Malaysia/Nanyang, Chan writes against the dominant currents of essentialist, exoticist, and overly deterministic generalizations about the region's Sinitic literature. Chan blurs the distinctions between author and character, as well as between fiction and reality, generatively blending the two to show how representation and authenticity cannot be presumed to go together. Each chapter attests to the fluidity and adaptive dynamism of Mahua literature and reflects the local and regional cultural ecologies that motivated but also, in some cases, hindered the development of Mahua literature. Chan deftly layers geographical, historical, linguistic, rhetorical, sociocultural, translational, and literary scales in his profiling of Mahua literary developments, and the literary actors that he spotlights in each chapter share a common flexibility and commitment to experimentation in their creative employment and deployment of Mahua literature's congru-

ences and divergences with the rest of the Sinitic literary sphere.

The first chapter of the book addresses the role and contributions of Lin Cantian (林參天) as a *waijiangren* (外江人; a member of a minoritized Sinitic group in Malaya that hails neither from Fujian nor from Guangdong) writing from the margins of an already marginalized raciolinguistic community. Lin's portrayal of "local Chinese societies' fragmentation into 'dialect groups' as representation of 'the heterogeneity of overseas Chinese communities'" (p. 27) in his 1936 semi-autobiographical novel *Thick Smoke* (濃煙 *Nongyan*) highlights the intra-ethnic diversity, topolectal tensions, and faction consciousness among Sinitic communities. Although social legibility and coherence may translate to cultural capital, the institutional and literary dissolving of heterogeneous Chinese societies into monolithic, homogeneous Mandarin-speaking communities to achieve legibility and coherence might also impoverish and stunt the potential of an otherwise eclectically plurivocal Sinophone South. Triangulating the concepts of "textualization," "translational mimesis," and "linguistic empathy" (p. 35), Chan encourages an appreciation of the linguistic hybridity in Lin's writing. Chan also elaborates on the possibilities and challenges faced by Lin when crafting a place-appropriate literary language for the masses that resonates with the locals while also appealing to more regionally and globally established Sinophone cultural centers.

Chan's second chapter, on Han Suyin (韓素音)—a Eurasian female author who wrote in English but served as an influential and key literary actor in Mahua literature—presents the Sinophone and Anglophone literary spheres of Malaya and Nanyang as mutually conversant and "abutting local literary ecologies" (p. 113). Drawing attention to Han's bifocal writing practice, Chan sheds light on Han's attempts to work across the Chinese–English divide and her preference for simultaneously developing national literature on the local and global scales. In so doing, Chan productively unmoors Han from the rigid parochialisms of language-based, locale-based affiliations and categorizations, instead repurposing them to further complicate and nuance Mahua's literary developments and complex positionalities. The historical and popular misrecognition of Han as a Chinese-language writer¹⁾ (p. 78) also invites the possibility of misrecognition as a valid globalizing strategy as opposed to the conventional pursuit of global recognition and legibility. Focusing on Han's interests in vernacularizing English and developing a multilingual national literature and "truly grassroot sensibility for Malayan literature" (p. 104), Chan draws from Han's novel *And the Rain My Drink* (1956) and her speeches as a public intellectual. It would have been interesting to see some preliminary connections and comparisons between Han's use of Malayan English and other literary deployments of Malayan Chinese and Manglish (Malaysian colloquial English) and consider the implications of this sociocultural and linguistic trajectory in relation to modern Chinese literature.

The third chapter juxtaposes the lineage-tracking literary engagements with Malaysia and Mahua literature as exemplified in the 1993 novella *Sadness of the Pacific* (傷心太平洋) by mainland

1) Chan credits Ma (1984) as a common bibliographic source that lists Han as a Mahua writer.

Chinese writer Wang Anyi (王安憶) in relation to Ng Kim Chew's (黃錦樹) theorizations on Mahua literature. By examining how Wang's translocal narrative "draws from two connected sociohistorical worlds that sustain global Chinese literary productions" (p. 119), Chan makes the compelling argument of co-constituted Mahua and China literary spaces (p. 119). Wang, as Chan argues, "does not depict diaspora as a hierarchy of locational significance but rather features typologies of Chinese migration in confluence" (p. 119), an intervention that Chan interprets as an indication of "Wang's authorial consciousness of a multicentered world at large" (p. 119). Chan's reading of *Sadness of the Pacific* "as a cross-generational palimpsest of Nanyang memories" (p. 131) posits "human mobility as a world-making activity . . . not just [through] spatial relocation but also [through] the temporal recurrence of translocal connections" (p. 122). Mobility and diaspora are capaciously reconfigured as ongoing constellational or archipelagic relations rather than restricted to the binaries of homeland vs. diaspora, center vs. periphery, local vs. foreign, and national vs. global. As such, the chapter invigorates, implicates, and complicates existing concepts of indigeneity, migration studies, émigré literature, and the genres of *guiqiao xiaoshuo* (歸僑小說; novels about or by returned overseas Chinese) and *xungen wenxue* (尋根文學; root-seeking literature). While the previous chapter emphasizes the "missed temporal intersections" and "underutilized opportunities for translingual literary integration in late colonial Malaya" (p. 113) that Han faced, this third chapter demonstrates Wang's prescience and inventiveness in circumventing and theorizing through these constraints. By "formulat[ing] for her fiction a kind of metalanguage from which all particularizations evolve" (p. 138), Wang uses "Nanyang's significance in mediating Chinese mobilities to deexceptionalize China for mainland literary production and the world Chinese literary space" (p. 142).

Chapter 4 of *Malaysian Crossings* focuses on Bornean diasporic, naturalized Taiwanese author Li Yongping's (李永平) two-volume novel *Where the Great River Ends* (大河盡頭 2008; 2010). Chan proposes that "a mapping of transperipheral relations can demonstrate the critical dynamic that conditions literary world-making across social locations at multiple scales and drives the meaning-making processes in the archipelagic Sinophone South" (p. 156). Chan argues that Li's heterolingual "off-center articulations" (p. 158) enable a harnessing of liminality (p. 157) that re-presents Li and his work as the "constitutive outsider[s]" (p. 157) of Mahua, Taiwan, as well as the larger world-Chinese literary arenas. It is not simply proximity, similarity, or legibility to a cultural center that is aspirational, but a consciously calculated proximity and awareness of one's cosmopolitan positionality in the multiple literary spaces that one may participate in and engage with. Rejecting the prescriptive nativism of Malaysia and taking inspiration from the indigenous writings and studies in Taiwan, Li foregrounds a denationalized Bornean indigeneity that remains unquestionably native as it is nonnational or transnational.

Chan's comprehensive examination of these Mahua writing practices does not merely highlight "unconventional authorial identities that emerge from efforts to forge place-appropriate

literary languages for portraying multilingual Southeast Asia” (p. 5) but also reveals how language-appropriateness for portraying an emergent and nascent locale, regionality, and place may also produce unconventional authorial identities and literary approaches. Chan mines the generative tensions produced by the imbricated conditions and pressures of Chineseness, nativism, nationalism, and diaspora and highlights the “condition of compounded liminality and imposed provinciality” (p. 20) that has encouraged “intermarginal relations” (p. 21) to form. Invoking the concept of global marginality, *Malaysian Crossings* is a reminder that no condition of centrality or marginality should be treated as a given, encouraging readers to think about the local as not always national and the global as more than transnational.

I am intrigued by Chan’s conceptualization of “Malaysian crossings” as the thematized phenomenon of the “Sinophone South [maintaining] imaginaries of being part of the world despite encountering general disregard by composing locally specific tales that manifest inventiveness rather than pursue approval by established cultural centers” (p. 22). What kind of inventiveness is manifest when approval from established cultural centers is disregarded? What can we make of the refusal to pursue approval, and is it synonymous with an inventive pursuit of disapproval? May a calculated distance, disassociation, difference from a cultural center also constitute a counterintuitive form of engagement?

Chan’s recurring use of oceanic metaphors and conceptualizing vocabulary such as drift, flow, and mooring also aligns well with the current trends in developing and applying maritime-oriented and oceanic epistemologies to Sinophone literature.²⁾ Rather than the institutionalized insularity of a monolingual national literature or the tendency to “peddle exoticism” (p. 155) or play native informant for the sake of recognition from the prestige-granting cultural metropolises, *Malaysian Crossings* foregrounds a necessary and relational modularity in the production and circulation of so-called minor literatures in the world literary circle.

Chan’s *Malaysian Crossings* responds to, references, extends, and expands on the works of Ng Kim Chew, Meir Sternberg, David Der-wei Wang, Chiu Kuei-fen, Carlos Rojas, Tee Kim Tong, and Tian Si, among others. The monograph will be of interest to Sinophone and modern Chinese literary scholars, as well as literary historians and linguists of Southeast Asia. The book is also relevant to those interested in the re-centering of literary translation’s role in literature, especially in relation to Overseas Chinese communities. It remains to be seen whether Mahua literature’s tenacity and resourcefulness in negotiating its own prestige, legibility, and recognition from a position of precarity not only defines but also comes to determine its place and role in both Sinophone and world literature. Chan’s *Malaysian Crossings* will, however, surely usher in more interest in Mahua literature and is a foundational text for graduate students of Asian studies.

2) See Volland (2022).

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Returning Southeast Asia's Past: Objects, Museums, and Restitution

LOUISE TYTHACOTT and PANGGAH ARDIYANSYAH, eds.

Singapore: NUS Press with the Southeast Asian Art Academic Programme, SOAS, University of London, 2021.

Illegal trafficking of antiquities and/or illicit trade in antiquities or cultural property, as well as human fossils, has been a global problem for centuries and a major source of concern and topic of debate among cultural heritage managers and scholars (see, for example, Manacorda 2009; and Campbell 2013). Large numbers of ethnographic objects, archeological artifacts, and artworks have been smuggled from their places of origin, creating a loss of cultural heritage and exacerbating international organizational conflicts. In responding to such problems during the era of decolonization that followed World War II, many countries demanded the repatriation or return of looted, illegally sold, stolen artifacts. The past decade also saw the establishment of committees to cope with the issue, such as UNESCO's Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to Its Countries of Origin or Its Restitution in Case of Illicit Appropriation. In Southeast Asia, many countries have lost items of tangible or material cultural heritage, leading to campaigns and requests for the return of the property. Several Southeast Asian countries were successful in having their antiquities repatriated. However, a new issue emerged afterward—how the returned antiquities were managed, preserved, and reinstated. *Returning Southeast Asia's Past* discusses the issue using case studies from Cambodia, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.

This edited volume is divided into three main parts and consists of ten chapters (apart from the Introduction chapter) featuring case studies centering around the acquisition, protection, and restitution of looted and stolen artifacts. It should be noted that the majority of cases (seven chapters) presented in this volume are from mainland Southeast Asia, while there are three