

**Translational Politics in Southeast Asian Literatures:
Contesting Race, Gender, and Sexuality**

GRACE V.S. CHIN (Ed.)
London, Routledge, 2021
212 pp., £39.99 (Paperback)
ISBN: 9780367470234

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Grace V. S. Chin's edited volume *Translational Politics in Southeast Asian Literatures: Contesting Race, Gender, and Sexuality* offers a timely and ambitious intervention in Southeast Asian literary studies by proposing "translational politics" as a critical framework for analysing the intersections of literature, identity, and power (3). Moving beyond conventional understandings of translation as a purely linguistic operation, the collection positions translation as a broader cultural, political, and epistemological process through which meanings are negotiated across contexts. In doing so, the volume aligns with the wider "translational turn" in the humanities, which expands translation into a cross-disciplinary mode of analysis encompassing symbolic, ideological, and representational transformations (Bachmann-Medick, 2009, 2016).

I argue that the book successfully theorises this shift. In translation studies, "translation" typically refers to the transfer of meaning across languages, whereas the "translational" signals a broader condition of movement, transformation, and mediation that exceeds strictly linguistic processes. In her reading of Homi Bhabha, the translation theorist Susan Bassnett (2013) interprets migration as "a translational phenomenon – a state in which meaning is constantly remade through encounters with other cultures" (342). Such "cultural translation" has contributed to the widespread use of translation as a metaphor in migrant writing, where cultural and geographical transitions involve varying degrees of (non-)translatability (Bassnett, 2013, p. 342). Since the 1990s, scholars in translation studies have developed new theories, paradigms, and approaches that challenge the limits of traditional translation frameworks. These developments attest to the crucial role of translation in a plurivocal world, where cross-cultural, multilingual, transnational, and diasporic interactions generate heterogeneity and hybridity, as well as new terrains of thought, perception, and experience in globalised societies.

Against this backdrop, the meaning of translation has expanded into a broader translational framework that functions as both a conceptual and analytical lens. Within the volume, some chapters retain translation in its conventional, linguistically grounded sense, while others adopt a more expansive, metaphorical understanding of the translational. This plurality of approaches does not necessarily indicate conceptual inconsistency; rather, it reflects the flexibility and scope of translational politics as a critical framework. The following section therefore reviews the chapters individually in light of this conceptual distinction.

The book is organised into different thematic sections, each addressing a different aspect of translational politics. One of the strengths of the work is its emphasis on the transformative power of translation, not just as a linguistic process but as a political act that can alter perceptions and realities. The author of each chapter skillfully demonstrates how translation operates as a site of contestation where cultural meanings are negotiated and redefined.

Chapter 1 (1–21), written by Grace V. S. Chin, introduces the volume’s central framework of “translational politics” and argues for the critical role of translation in interrogating race, gender, and sexuality across national and linguistic boundaries. Importantly, this chapter lays the conceptual groundwork for understanding the translational not merely as linguistic transfer but as a broader mode of cultural and political mediation. While the distinction between translation and the translational is not fully systematised, the introduction nonetheless establishes a flexible framework that enables subsequent chapters to operate across both domains.

In Chapter 2 (22–41), Angelia Poon examines Lydia Kwa and Tan Twan Eng’s representation of queer desire through the rewriting of the past. By conceptualising such fictional (re)construction as an “act of translation” (23), the chapter productively extends translation beyond language into the realm of historical and cultural reinterpretation. Here, the translational emerges as a condition in which meaning is continually remade through “amalgamation of multicultural influences” in creative tension with each other (23). Rather than diluting the concept, this expansion demonstrates how translation can function as a critical lens for analysing identity formation in postcolonial contexts.

A similar extension is evident in Chapter 3 (42–65), where Chin’s analysis of the revisions of Hang Li Po foregrounds the translation of historical narratives as a means of reconfiguring racial and gender identities in postcolonial Malaysia. While these acts move beyond conventional definitions of translation, they exemplify how the translational operates as a productive analytical framework for understanding the circulation and transformation of meaning across time and discourse. In Chapter 4 (66–81), Nazry Bahrawi’s discussion of the harimau jadian trope further reinforces this approach by situating cultural mythology within the practice of “cultural translation,” thereby illustrating how symbolic and narrative forms evolve across literary and socio-cultural contexts (68).

Chapter 5 (82–99), Daria Okhvat’s study of Khmer representations of women through “intra-lingual translation,” returns to a more linguistically grounded understanding of translation while simultaneously demonstrating its cultural implications (83). By focusing on how meaning is rearticulated within the same language, the chapter bridges the gap between translation as a specific practice and the translational as a broader interpretive process. This dual engagement strengthens the conceptual coherence of the volume. Similarly, Chapter 6 (100–131), Hoogervorst’s analysis of Malay translations as acts of anti-colonial resistance, foregrounds translation in its more conventional sense while demonstrating its political force as “a politicised act of anti-colonial resistance” (14). Here, translation operates as a concrete, agentive practice through which colonial epistemologies are contested, thereby exemplifying how linguistic

translation can carry significant ideological and cultural weight.

In Chapters 7 (132–150) and 8 (151–170), the scope of translation is extended further to encompass cultural adaptation and global media circulation. The localisation of the “conversion for love” trope in Bruneian novels and the critique of *Crazy Rich Asians* as an appropriative form of cultural translation both illustrate how meanings are reshaped across transnational contexts (134). While these chapters move toward a more metaphorical understanding of translation, this shift does not necessarily undermine conceptual clarity; rather, it highlights the versatility of the translational as a framework for analysing cultural flows and negotiations in a globalised world.

This trajectory culminates in the final chapter (171–192), where J. Garcia's assertion that “*translational it all is*” pushes the concept to its theoretical limit (171). While such a claim risks overextension, it also underscores the central premise of the volume: that translation, when understood in its expanded translational sense, provides a powerful lens for examining the complex interplay between “oral” and “textual,” “traditional” and “modern,” “Western” and “postcolonial”—conceptual histories (172).

This compelling volume offers a groundbreaking approach to Southeast Asian literary studies by using translation as a conceptual lens to interrogate the intertwined politics of race, gender, and sexuality across diverse national and linguistic contexts. Featuring multilingual, multi-genre, and cross-cultural analyses, the book challenges dominant narratives and calls for a more inclusive, dialogic, and transnational understanding of Southeast Asian identities and literatures. While the book promotes multilingualism and translational analysis, most contributors still analyse literature from within their own linguistic and national domains, reinforcing the very boundaries they critique. Yet these language boundaries aside, this book is essential reading for anyone interested in Southeast Asian literature, translation studies, or the politics of identity and representation.

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