

Ge Song offers a meticulous analysis of two Malay translations, made at the beginning of the twentieth century, of a Chinese literary classic: the *Sanguo yanyi*. It is part of a field well explored in France by Claudine Salmon, to whom Ge Song often refers. These translations are quite particular, as they involve observing the literary and social stakes behind the translation of Chinese texts into Malay for an Indies Chinese readership. Indeed, the *Peranakan* (the descendants of Chinese migrants) of the Dutch East Indies had been separated for many generations from the country of their ancestors and from their ancestral language, at least in written form. The translators, Lie In Eng and Tjie Tjin Koeij, were speakers of Minnanhua Chinese and Vehicular Malay. They had a grasp of Chinese literature and history, which was not the case for most of their compatriots in the diaspora. The two complete translations of *Sam Kok*—as *San Guo* is transliterated in Minnanhua—appeared between 1910 and 1913 in Batavia. Lie’s translation was published in serial form from 1910 to 1912 in a weekly newspaper and then in fascicles from 1912: 65 fascicles totalling 5,308 pages. While lacking a preface, it contains comments and illustrations. Tjie’s translation came out between 1910 and 1913, in 62 fascicles and 4,655 pages. It had a preface and a cautionary note translated from the 1644 Chinese edition of Mao Lun and Mao Zonggang, with illustrations borrowed from Chinese editions if not commissioned from a Chinese graphic artist in Batavia. The media strategies of both translations had a significant impact on their distribution. Tjie’s translation, which preceded his competitor’s by a short time, was advertised in the Chinese-Malay press; Lie’s translation appeared directly as a serial in the weekly newspaper *Sin Po*. This journalistic medium had a definite advantage, as all the readers of the newspaper became readers of the novel.

Lie In Eng and Tjie Tjin Koeij were both known for their translations of other Chinese novels. They are the real protagonists of Ge Song’s work, which foregrounds their translation strategies and the competition between them. The author does not hide her preference for the translation and the paratext of Tjie Tjin Koeij. Yet both translators did more than simply translate a great classic novel; their work had pedagogical intentions towards *Peranakan* who could no longer read the Chinese editions. They provided a commentary of the historical and cultural circumstances of their readers. Here it would help to recall, more than the author of this brilliant study does, the origins of the Chinese novel itself. Rooted in “entertaining and edifying” storytelling, the invention of the Chinese novel (*xiao shuo*) predates the appearance of this literary genre.
in Europe. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the endeavors of booksellers and publishers yielded more extensive stories from earlier collections of folk tales. The authors of these novels are often putative—consider Luo Guanzhong (fourteenth century) for the *Sanguo yanyi*—and cannot be distinguished from the editors of specific editions.

The author’s literary analysis of the translation from Chinese to Malay focuses mainly on the poems and commentaries that punctuate the narrative of the novel. Indeed, in the classical Chinese novel, all sorts of notes and comments are scattered throughout the main narrative by virtue of the editors who prepare the text for publication. Such comments (*pingdian*) often appear in the form of poems, consequently increasing the literary value of the edition. As Ge Song demonstrates, translators have struggled to find compositional forms in the Malay poetic tradition to express these complex forms of Chinese poetry. Any translator of Chinese poetry, in any language, is faced with the immense difficulty of rendering both the prosodic and visual aspects of Chinese poetic writing as well as the morphological properties of the Chinese language, which famously lend themselves to untranslatable wordplay. The use of the Malay traditions of *syair* or *pantun* was therefore partly insufficient, so that we often come across the free combination of these two forms for a single poem. Eventually, these dynamics of translation saw a growing level of expertise and more daring inventions to ensure commercial success. The addition of notes and commentaries also served to remedy the acknowledged shortcomings of the translation. These notes complemented those that the Chinese editors had themselves introduced to yet earlier versions of the text. In short, a large critical apparatus came to accompany the narrative and became inseparable from it. In addition to the author’s name, the names of commentators became crucial to critical editions of novels. Both translators of *Sanguo yanyi* in Malay were concerned about the difficulty that might be encountered by Peranakan readers no longer familiar with the Chinese culture in which these novels had originated. The book shows in great detail how Lie In Eng and Tjie Tjin Koeij attempted to do so.

As for the cultural dynamics of translations, the monograph prioritizes social and kinship appellatives. The nomenclature of Chinese kinship reflects a set of hierarchical relationships embedded in Confucian values, but Ge Song does not explain the extent to which this system corresponded to the early twentieth-century Peranakan kinship system. It seems that the two translators make different choices in this regard, which they do not explicitly justify: one simply gives the pronunciation of the terms in *Minnanhua*, the other sometimes tries to provide a Malay equivalent. The transcription of Chinese kinship terms in *Minnanhua* would have accommodated Peranakan readers more or
less accustomed to this nomenclature, while the approximate Malay equivalents may have benefitted non-Peranakan readers. At the level of moral values, such as the wulun (the five principles) and other formalized attitudes rooted in Confucianism, the translators grappled with the extent they could push the commentary on ethical, religious, and philosophical traditions. This is an important issue in the arena of the translations, since these moral concepts govern the choices and commitment of the characters in the novel.

Ge Song calls attention to the social context in which the publication of great Chinese novels translated into Malay took on a special meaning for the Peranakan. Since the fourteenth century, the Chinese population of the archipelago has oscillated between rapid assimilation—including the adoption of Islam, language and other aspects of local cultures—and a desire to return to the (supposed) roots of Chinese culture, including the teachings of Confucius. The Malay translations of the Confucian classics and the biography of the doctrine’s founder had the same purpose as the great Chinese novels: to bring the Peranakan people back in touch with the prestigious culture of their ancestors. Throughout the nineteenth century, a renewed interest in China’s recent affairs developed in urban Peranakan communities. At the same time, China also showed an interest in the Chinese of the Dutch East Indies. Educational initiatives—through the creation of Chinese schools—revived the Chinese language and culture within the Peranakan communities. In this context, Chinese fictional literature provided a set of past references to reflect on present events. As a result, some remarkable characters from Sam Kok became icons displayed in temples alongside representations of ancestors or deities. The development of a Sino-Malay press also contributed greatly to the renewal of the Chinese identity among the Peranakan. The newspaper Sin Po, which published the translation of Lie In Eng, allows us to study the usage of the Malay expression bangsa Tionghoa, “the Chinese nation”, whose genesis Ge Song attempts to trace. Recalling Benedict Anderson’s approach to the origin of nationalisms, she underlines the major role of the diffusion of ideas through print—literary as well as news media—in the construction of a glorious Chinese past to which the Peranakan could relate. Ge Song’s meticulous study shows the extent to which a translation enterprise has moved beyond language and contributed to a lively imagination of national identities.

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