Book Reviews

Brian Bernards


With the emergence of the Sinophone academia, there is no doubt that Bernards’ book adds a new vista to the field, especially with his reinterpretation of the “Nanyang” or “South Seas” narrative (or whatever literary trope the author prefers to use) in understanding Chinese literatures in modern Southeast Asia. In addition, his emphasis of the concept of creolization (inspired by his own knowledge of Francophone literature), an important literary quality in this archipelagic region, in place of the more commonly used “hybridity,” helps us reimagine this body of literature, past and present.

Bernards definitely inherited much from his mentor Shi Shu-mei, who invented the discipline of Sinophone articulations with a framework that originated within a postcolonial theoretical framework. For both Shi and Bernards, Sinophone and Nanyang are more than postcolonial frameworks that redefine the colonialism and post-colonialism of merely East-West interactions, but one with North-South dialogues (China as the North). However, in place of Shi’s model of intervention through decentralizing and giving a voice to the marginal, and highlighting the central and marginal power struggle, Bernards emphasizes the network relations between these places of literary production in the imagined “South Seas” (or post-Nanyang) Sinophone region, namely the historical Malaya, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, while carefully considering their multiple layers of historical and linguistic contextualization (see Preface and Introduction) since the early modern era up until the present. Obviously, Bernards does not deny that diaspora has occurred in the history of Chinese settlements, travel, and migration in this archipelago, but in his own words, he “draws attention to the creolizing processes behind the formation of multiple national cultures: it is just as capable of expressing Malaysianness, Singaporeanness, and Thainess as it is Chineseness” (9) through analyzing actual literature texts. Linking up texts employing the Nanyang concept is not
new, especially to an audience familiar with fields of Southeast Asian art (such as the notion of Nanyang style/school or Nanyang flavors) and world literature in Chinese (and Nanyang literature), yet Bernards’ work differs from these researches as he does not retell a narrative of a pendulum effect between China’s ancestral roots and localization, or one embedding loyalist discourses that trace Chinese influences, but sees “Nanyangness” as amalgamated rich layers including older and more recent imaginations linked to Zheng He’s voyages in imperial China, Islamization, part of the sea silk route, western colonizations, the Cold War realignment of international relations and so on, which he has termed “Sinophone creolization.” Creolization, which materializes as the post-colonial literary trope Nanyang, is crucial in understanding Bernards’ work, in which he argues that it “reframes the category of the ‘Chinese diaspora’ as a network of variable cultural relations in Southeast Asia (22).” He also situates his Nanyang creolization arguments away from the traditional use of “hybridity” and “multiculturalism”, whereby hybridity supposes the production of the third, multiculturalism “predicted on homogeneity” or “the impermeability between DIFFERENT ethnicities and cultures”, but creolization, as Bernards quotes Praudhu, “eschews primordial origins to recognize culture as an ongoing formation in the present” (Hybridity, 5-6).

In terms of scope, Bernards is successful in including Sinophone texts of fiction (including texts of the recent Singapore serial drama “The Little Nyona”) from Malaya, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand as case studies, especially the Thai Sinophone texts, which are not usually familiar to English and Chinese academic audience, given his innovative “network dialogal structure” between different “Sinophone Nanyang entities”. He has therefore focused on various themes, such as the case of Malaysian writings re-creolizing in Taiwan (Chapter 3), the ecopoetics of the Borneo Rainforest (Chapter 4), linguistic governance in postcolonial Singapore (Chapter 5), and Sino-Thai integration narratives (Chapter 6), the four interrelated but subtly different creolizing models of Nanyang narratives. His linguistic pre-knowledge and investments in actual fieldwork definitely contribute to the richness of this project. Noting that Chapter three and four have been much discussed in previous academic research, the reader would then be interested to know what he has to add while close-reading the literary texts through his creolization narratives. Chapter four sees an in-depth and honest discussion of linguistic literary governance in Singapore that serves as the context for Sinophone Singapore fiction, using the examples of Yeng Pway Ngon, Chia Joo Ming and Suchen Christine Lim. Through these three contrasting case studies, he innovatively puts together case studies traditionally credited to Singaporean Sinophone literature (Yeng and Chia) and Anglophone literature (Lim) respectively, in his attempt to