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In R. F. Kuang’s historical fantasy, *Babel: An Arcane History*, Oxford sinologist Professor Lovell teaches the protagonist Robin about silver-working, the magical art of finding “match-pairs” of words in different languages that appear in powerful silver bars: “Decades from now, the silver bars we use from Romance languages might no longer have any effect. No, if we want to innovate, then we must look to the East. We need languages that aren’t spoken in Europe.” An orphan from Canton, Robin is a young student in the university’s hallowed Royal Institute of Translation in the 1830s and deeply conflicted by Lovell’s insistence on the promising role of Chinese in the evolution of languages. Believing idealistically that cultural exchange should be mutually beneficial (“We take their languages, their ways of seeing and describing the world. We ought to give them something in return.”), Robin is firmly corrected by his mentor, who argues that “language is an infinite resource. And if we learn it, if we use it—who are we stealing from?”[1]

Kuang’s novel plays with the uneasy premise of language as both tool and commodity in the colonial project, one of the central tensions highlighted by Cheow Thia Chan in *Malaysian Crossings: Place and Language in the Worlding of Modern Chinese Literature*, a recently published monograph in Columbia University Press’s Global Chinese Culture series, edited by David Der-wei Wang. Chan’s expansive exploration of Mahua literature from the 1930s to the 2000s picks up the debate raised in *Babel*: if language is indeed something that can be “taken” places, does its seizure warrant reciprocity of some form, whether it be critical prestige, global recognition, or popular appreciation?

Chan’s refreshing study therefore aims to “bring due recognition” to Malaysian literature through his conceptualization of Malaysian crossings, which engages with three key frameworks: the world-Chinese literary space, the Sinophone South, and the literary Galápagos archipelago (the third as drawn from Malaysian writer-scholar Ng Kim Chew’s 黃錦樹 work) (p. 3). For Chan, Mahua
literature reaches back historically to colonial Malaya and extends to postcolonial independent Malaysia, constituting a richly multilingual, multiracial domain whose literary practices have been—and continue to be—shaped by its marginalized position in world literary studies. In his thoughtful, multilayered discussion of place and language in Mahua literature, Chan strategically deemphasizes the role of China as its literary center, choosing instead to reflect on several interrelated questions: “How do authors leverage the austerity of social and cultural capital to attain lasting creative outcomes in locations often forgotten by centers of cultural prestige? How do they also sustain their emotional belonging to a global literary ecology, and how do they strive to enrich it?” (pp. 11-12).

Organized chronologically, Malaysian Crossings focuses on four authors who represent “cosmopolitan junctures” of Mahua literary history and illustrates how, through locations and paths, travel and migration, “being mobile yet regionally confined in the Sinophone South can turn out to be a potent source of worldliness” (pp. 25, 23). Chan insists on the authorial agency of these figures, whom, as “constitutive others of the Mahua literary formation,” he uses to illustrate the three senses of worlding of modern Chinese literature at the heart of his study (p. 27). The first is defined by the author’s mediation between the local and the global, and Chan argues that “Mahua authors wield marginality not only to serve their creative purposes of connecting with different people and places but also to overcome a dearth of readership engagement” (p. 22). The second sense of worlding reveals the connective dynamic of the Sinophone South, whereby “margins interact with other margins—or even beget their own margins—in order to forge distinction among local literary communities in the world-Chinese literary context” (p. 24). Finally, the third sense of worlding refers to the center-margin dynamic at the root of the writers’ aesthetic innovations: “Adapting the hegemons’ tendency to invent differences and mutually exclusive essences, ‘Malaysian crossings’ provides an interpretive prism to track a politics of literary identity that defines a separation between centers and margins from the perspective of the latter rather than the former” (pp. 24-25). Chan contends that despite “keeping to and being kept at the periphery,” authors of Mahua literature maintain their separation while staying connected in the world-Chinese literary space (p. 25).

Chapter 1, Chan’s first case study, examines the “doubly local” immigrant writer Lin Cantian 林參天, a waijiang ren (referring to the minoritized group of non-Fujian and non-Guangdong migrants in Malaya), whose semi-autobiographical novel, Thick Smoke (Nongyan 濃煙), was written for readers in both Malaya and mainland China and published by Shanghai’s Literature Press in 1936. Chan proposes a contrapuntal, interlocal approach to reading the novel’s linguistic hybridity, modeling how “one should study a text whose foundational status is recognized outside its place of publication, and how a text’s representational strategies can be discrepantly received in different geographical contexts” (p. 35). According to Chan, the novel appealed to 1930s Chinese readers in its exotic depiction of the South Seas region of Nanyang (primarily Malaya and Singapore) in its engagement with traditional fiction and vernacular language (a “language of the masses”), whereas readers in Malaya were drawn to Thick Smoke for its experimentation with the creation of a “place-appropriate literary language for the Nanyang masses” (pp. 35, 48). Weaving aspects of Lin’s biography together with intellectual discussions in literary fields in Malaya and mainland China and incorporating close readings of multilingual scenes from the novel, Chan shows how Lin’s new literary form depicts a factional Mahua society that is based on dialect interaction, denying the myth of a unified overseas Chineseness.

In chapter 2, Chan discusses the “bifocal writing practice” of Eurasian anglophone author Han Suyin 韓素音, which moves “between close scru-
tiny of immediate Malayan realities and longer-range geopolitical prospects with global implications” in Han’s overarching project to “vernacularize English as an acceptable literary language for depicting Malaya” in the 1950s and 1960s (pp. 72-73). In 1952, Han moved to Malaya from Hong Kong with her husband, Leonard Comber, a colonial police officer, and worked as a doctor in Johor Bahru and Singapore before becoming a full-time writer and public intellectual. Chan draws connections between Han’s 1956 novel, *And the Rain My Drink*, and its unfinished sequel, “Freedom Shout Merdeka,” and passages from Han’s public speeches to highlight how the Mahua literary field shaped Han’s interventionist practices: “The peripheral literary formation provided inspiration for Han who aimed to transform the nature of English language from the colonial to the vernacular, and who imagined a multilingual national literature for Malaya” (p. 113). Chan credits Han with deftly navigating the Sinophone-Anglophone divide in her use of Malayan English, not “merely as a linguistic medium wielded by an idiosyncratic author, but also as an aesthetic tool for building grassroots collectivity” (p. 114).

The second half of Chan’s book turns to authors writing about the Malaysian region from afar in the 1990s and 2000s. Chapter 3 provides a reevaluation of mainland Chinese literary production by analyzing Wang Anyi’s 王安憶 1993 novella, *Sadness in the Pacific*, and her prose essays. Chan observes that Wang’s translocal writings, inspired by her father’s personal family history and her travels to Singapore and Malaysia in the early 1990s, have been overlooked by Singaporean and Malaysian readers who consider her a mainland author, as well as by mainland readers who are more interested in her famous works about Shanghai. Chan’s reading of *Sadness in the Pacific* sheds light on the little-studied trope of migration in Chinese literary studies as a form of root-seeking, depicting the complexity and diversity of homeland imaginaries amid a rich range of diasporic experiences, ultimately showing how Wang’s literary vernacular “embodies a universality without a center” (p. 140). Crossing the geographical boundaries of mainland China facilitates Wang’s formulation of an “inclusive” cosmopolitanism, whereby notions of alienation and displacement are linked to feelings of nativity and intimacy. In the chapter’s last half, Chan highlights the lasting impact of Wang’s work, tracing how Ng Kim Chew developed an anticipatory foundation for Sinophone studies based on Wang’s nonfiction ruminations about language shifts in Nanyang, Taiwan, and China.

The fourth chapter concludes with the work of Li Yongping 李永平, the Taiwanese author who was born on the Malaysian island of Borneo and moved to Taiwan in 1967. Chan focuses on Li’s two-part semi-autobiographical novel, *Where the Great River Ends*, which was published in 2008 and 2010. Through his analysis of the tropes of maps and indigeneity in Li’s depictions of Borneo from Taiwan, Chan contends that the “off-center articulations” in the chapter’s title refer to the “authorial discourses that negotiate tangent-like relations with a dominant social constituency, ranging from the nativist critics in Malaysia, to the mainstream literary community in Taiwan, to the reading public in China” (p. 158). The critical reception of Li’s work in Malaysia, Chan argues, is a testament to Li’s rejection of notions of place- or ethnicity-based authenticity and the “rigid Malaysian nationalist nativism” of Sarawak critics, such as Tian Si 田思 (p. 182). In deliberately choosing Taiwan as his literary subject, Li set himself apart from his Mahua writer colleagues, creating an open literary space inspired by a blend of Taiwan’s indigenous literature and migrant/diasporic Mahua literature. Chan’s discussion of Li’s literature and its reception in Taiwan in the 2000s acts as a powerful rebuttal to Pascale Casanova’s conceptualization of world literature as a nation-based struggle for cultural dominance (*The World Republic of Letters*, translated by M. B. DeBevoise [2004]), showing instead how the claim to literary
cosmopolitanism can be established through marginalized representations of indigeneity.

The book’s coda briefly mentions the work of contemporary Malaysian author Ho Sok Fong 賀淑芳, whose short story collection, *Lake Like a Mirror*, had the notable distinction of being published in English translation by two nonacademic presses (Granta in 2019; Two Lines Press in 2020). Chan presented a portion of Ho’s essay “On Mahua Literature” at a symposium on Nanyang culture hosted by Harvard in April 2023, and in particular, Ho’s interpretation of the “minor-ness” of Mahua literary language provides a writerly perspective on Chan’s academic project. Reflecting on the Malaysian literary market’s perceived lack of potential for commercial gain, due in part to the shrinking Chinese-speaking demographic in Malaysia, Ho writes, “Those who do write in Chinese are committed to exploiting its performative potential, and to using language to express the experience of marginalisation of all kinds, be it political, or social, or on the basis of sexuality, gender, or trauma.”[2] Even if this minor literature promises no material impact, as Ho claims (or, as Chan says, the authors recognize “the impossibility of being admitted into the core of any world literary formation”), there remain myriad ways to evaluate and appreciate its creative significance in the performance of worlding Chinese literature from the margins (p. 202). I wonder how to reconcile Mahua literature’s minor-ness with Lin’s optimistic prediction that “Nanyang literary arts would in time become unique and ‘radiate throughout the “world literary arena”’” (p. 39). If the recent growth of Mahua literary studies is a testament to the “survivalist spirit” of peripheralized regions in the margins, how do literary scholars gauge when a field has “come into its own” (pp. 197, 205)?

Another issue that *Malaysian Crossings* raises is the unavoidably crucial dimension of gender in shaping the global reception and recognition of writers. Chan’s book gives us subtle clues, such as his remark about the historical shifts in the male-dominated literary field, that “unlike her male predecessors, the purpose of Wang’s visit abroad was to trace her personal genealogy” (p. 118). But what are the implications of this seemingly inconsequential difference? Are readers to believe that none of the earlier “men of letters” had personal genealogies related to the Nanyang? On a related note, I was intrigued by the accompanying photos in the book, in particular, the more polished images of Han in her qipao dress on page 74 and page 109 and Wang on page 136 that depict them mid-performance in their writerly roles. The photograph of Han lecturing to a sea of mostly male students at Nanyang University in the 1950s on page 109 complicates her self-identification as merely an “observer, on the sidelines,” extending beyond Chan’s affirmation of Han’s public image, to suggest how performative aspects of her career may have been due as much to her own self-fashioning as to the press’s “popular misrecognition” or “misunderstanding” of her Chinese identity (pp. 80, 78).

For specialists of Mahua literature, *Malaysian Crossings* must be a welcome addition to the ever-growing field of Sinophone studies and should be required reading for graduate students working in Asian studies, especially those in Chinese-language literatures. Chan skillfully brings together existing scholarship on Mahua literature by such scholars as Brian Bernards, E. K. Tan, and Alison Groppe and engages in critical dialogue with the theoretical work of Ng Kim Chew, Kuei-fen Chiu, and many others. For a reader not already familiar with Malaysian Chinese literature like me, *Malaysian Crossings* makes a compelling case for the expansive potential of global Chinese cultural studies by pointing out productive ways of creative engagement beyond the predictable “invariably writing back against China” (p. 25).

Notes


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