

BOOK REVIEW

## Ecologies of Translation in East and South East Asia, 1600–1900

Edited by Li Guo, Patricia Sieber & Peter Kornicki. Amsterdam University Press, 2022. 326 pages. Hardback, €117.00, ISBN: 9789463729550. Ebook, €116.99, ISBN: 9789048554119.

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This welcome book introduces translation of vernacular languages in the context of the multi- and bilingualism of East Asia and South East Asia during the period between 1600 and 1900. The volume is edited by Li Guo, Patricia Sieber, and Peter Kornicki and contains ten chapters, including an introduction.

South Asia and Africa are known for their many examples of multilingualism. This volume turns to the multilingual situations in East Asia and South East Asia and shows how they were addressed in translation. The book is written in English, the global lingua franca even in translation studies.

The introduction places the book in the reality that translation studies remains Euro- and Western-centric, pointing to different forms of translation in the sinographic spheres of East Asia and Southeast Asia. The editors begin by revisiting the three concepts of translations from Roman Jakobson (intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic) to suggest that in the East Asian context these distinctions may be inadequate. Jakobson seemed to believe that languages are countable and that language borders can be clearly cut, although this is not always the case. As is evident from many vernacular examples in the regions under study here, language borders are often unclear. This volume thus challenges this aspect of Jakobson's definitions of translation, adding to similar concerns previously raised by Jacques Derrida (1985).

The first chapter, "On not Being Shallow" by Patricia Sieber, demonstrates how the commented versions of the songbook *Huajian ji* opened a space for literary innovation. *Huajian ji* combines literary and vernacularised Sinitic and textualised topolects. The versions that Sieber chose to analyse contained comments. *Huajian ji*'s multiple annotated versions circulated in the late seventeenth to early eighteenth century. They helped people understand the text. It was not uncommon to add comments in translations in East Asia. They were often used to explain cultural differences or to clarify meanings. Vernacular languages are regional and spoken, and therefore different from classical Chinese, making the text multilingual. This analysis reminds me of Kwame Anthony Appiah's "Thick Translation" (1993). Sieber concludes that these inserted comments written in a mixed register played the role of translational medium in the *Huajian ji*.

Sieber also writes that Chinese elites made a clear separation between vernacular and written forms to create a standard language, which helped processes nation- and identity- building. Japan underwent a similar process during its modernisation in the *Meiji* period, creating a Japanese national identity and a standard language (*kokugo*).

This links to another interesting chapter, "Linguistic Transformation and Cultural Reconstruction", by Xiaolu Ma. Ma writes about relay translation: from Russian to Japanese and then to Chinese. Ma writes that in the *Meiji* period Japanese authors were amongst those who participated in the *genbun-itchi* movement to make written and spoken Japanese match. Ma explains that Japanese

language reform affected the Chinese national language movement and the Chinese vernacular language movement to some extent. Regardless, authors and translators in Japan created new Japanese styles and forms through translations. Futabatei Shimei was one of those who translated Russian literature into Japanese. His translation style was literal and his translations therefore displayed new styles of Japanese writing. Ma argued that it was thus challenging for the Chinese translator, Wu Tao, to translate Futabatei's Japanese. Ma noted that the audience had both positive and negative attitudes towards Tao's translations.

Ma explains that the Chinese learned about Western culture and literature via Japanese texts during the late Qing period. Japanese texts were also the medium between the West and Korea during some periods. Relay Translation, especially in the context of East Asia, is an essential subject for future translation studies research.

A strength of the book is its scholarly in-depth research on particular translations. In other ways too, this volume is extremely valuable. Yet, I felt that in some chapters the link with contemporary translation studies developed in the introduction could have been stronger.

It missed opportunities to explain the gaps/incompatibilities between the current developments of "international" translation studies and translation research by area studies scholars. Such gaps are, for example, indicated by Yui Yuan's chapter "Speaking the Sinitic", which discusses how Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728) was promoting 譯学 (translation study) at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

Unfortunately, researchers not writing in English will not be read much internationally. In Japan, my area of research interest, scholars who work on Chinese and/or Korean and/or Japanese translation studies often do not publish in English. There is a strong risk of bias in anglophone translation studies. If the contemporary translation studies community is serious about becoming truly international or global, it will need to carefully consider what has been written about translation and underlying theories and methodologies in different parts of the world. I hope this volume will contribute to a meaningful dialogue between different groups of scholars working on translation.

## References

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- Derrida, Jacques** (1985). "Des Tours de Babel." In *Difference in Translation*, ed. J. F. Graham, pp. 165–207. New York: Cornell University Press.