

Book Review

More than a Linguistic Enclave [Review of the book *Translating Chinese in Malaysia: The Rise of a New Cultural and Linguistic Enclave*, edited by Riccardo Moratto & Lay Hoon Ang].

London: Routledge, 2024, 180pp. ISBN 9781032875293 (HC)

Phin-Keong Voon*

To cite this book review: Phin-Keong Voon (2025). More than a Linguistic Enclave [Review of the book *Translating Chinese in Malaysia: The Rise of a New Cultural and Linguistic Enclave*, edited by Riccardo Moratto & Lay Hoon Ang]. *Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies* 14(1): 87 – 90. [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202506_14\(1\).0006](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202506_14(1).0006)

To link to this book review: [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202506_14\(1\).0006](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202506_14(1).0006)

In the true spirit of the multiethnic nature of Malaysia, its academic community is aware of the need to make available literary works in Chinese or Malay into the Chinese, English or Malay languages. In recent years, courses on translating studies have been introduced in local universities to promote translation work. In essence, translation is a means by which written works in a particular language may be made accessible to those who are not familiar with this language. It is thus an effective way to widen the audience of great literary works in different languages.

It is said that translation is a multidisciplinary field of study and, like cartography, is both a science and an art. While the translator has to strive for linguistic accuracy to remain faithful to the original text, he must also understand the cultural nuances and the spatio-temporal context in which the text was created. Ideally, the translated product may evoke feelings or images that are meaningful in the contemporary context. Translation is more than substituting the right word of one language to another. It is not, as many among the uninitiated would like to believe, that a text may be translated by machines through artificial intelligence. Among the specialists, there are translation theories that advocate different approaches and methodologies. An online check reveals that the communicative, linguistic, literary, semiotic, and sociolinguistic approaches are the most common.

In Malaysia, the translation of Chinese classics into the Malay language has a history dating back to the 1890s. Among the early translators were educated Peranakan (Straits) Chinese. A pioneer in the translation of Chinese classics into Malay was Kim-Boon Chan (陈锦文), a Peranakan who was proficient in Chinese, English, and Malay. According to Lan Lin and Wei Huang in their paper published in the 2021 issue of the *Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies*, Chan's major accomplishment was the translation of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* that was published in 30 volumes between 1892 and 1896. He also translated the equally famous novels *Water Margin* in 1902 and *Journey to the West* in 1913. Another translator was Boon-Keng Lim (林文庆), the distinguished Peranakan scholar and the first president of Xiamen University, China. He translated and published Qu Yuan's (屈原) *The Li Sao: An Elegy on Encountering Sorrows* in 1929.

Years later, the translation of Tang poems made its quiet appearance when the efforts of Chee-Cheong Too (杜志昌) appeared in 1998. Earlier on in 1991, the first translation of Tang poems was pioneered by two Singaporean professionals. In 2006 similar works appeared in Hong Kong and the Philippines. Dr. Too was a Hong Kong University medical doctor but his interests included composing classical music for ancient poems. Thirty years later in 2013, a second volume of translated Tang poems was published by Phin-Keong Voon (文平强), an academic geographer with interests in Malaysian Chinese Studies.

A common motive among translators is to enable those who have no knowledge of Chinese to be able to read and enjoy the classics or other Chinese literary works, and to instil traditional values through their translations. In the early 20th century, translated versions of the classics were treated as a means of enlightenment to promote social reform and the modernisation process.

This new publication entitled *Translating Chinese in Malaysia* is the joint editorial effort of Lay-Hoon Ang and Riccardo Moratto. This is not the usual translation work *per se* that is concerned with the linguistic transformation of an original written work to another language. It is of a different genre from those of earlier attempts that were concerned with the translation of specific Chinese classical texts. It is instead the crystallisation of the joint efforts by a group of Malaysian scholars to embark on a discourse on the translation of Chinese in Malaysia. This is a commendable and praiseworthy attempt to open up a new field of academic research. It not only adds to the modest corpus of works on translation in the country but also helps to put Malaysian translation studies on the map.

This publication is the joint effort of Lay Hoon Ang and her co-workers. Dr. Ang, who plays a pivotal role by serving as a co-editor and overall co-ordinator of the project, is a senior academic of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). The publication involves the collaboration of nine local scholars from UPM, the universities of Malaya (UM), and Tunku Abdul Rahman (UTAR) and a foreign scholar attached to the Shanghai International Studies University.

The book consists of eight research papers. Three of the papers include a comprehensive review

of translation studies in Chinese in Malaysia; the sociolinguistic aspects of Chinese translation; and the use of grammar-translation method in teaching and learning. Three others are concerned with the translation of Chinese novels into English; and the remaining two are on the translation of Malay *pantuns* (poems) into Chinese and that of rendering the Chinese classic *Hong Luo Meng* into Malay.

The introduction by the co-editors Moratto and Ang is a review of the literature and confirms that Chinese translation studies in Malaysia has not received the attention that it deserves. The second focuses on the translation of Chinese street food to highlight the sociolinguistic perspective as a viable means in translation to uncover the intricate connections between translation and society, and highlights the methodological challenges and field investigation methods in translation studies.

Among Florence Kuek's four papers, the first is a study of the Malay translation of the Chinese classic *Honglou Meng* or *Dream of the Red Chamber*. It examines the context of the translation of this much-loved classic by drawing upon Bourdieu's Theory of Social Practice and Latour's Actor-Network Theory focuses on the concepts of field and capital in the translation. The second is an analysis of the translation of Li Zishu's *The Age of Goodbyes*. This study breaks new ground by exploring the metafictionality of the novel in translation. It examines YZ Chin's English version of Li's award-winning novel through the notions of translation as memory and postmemory to relive original meanings, memories, and identities in target texts. A third paper looks at feminist translation strategies of the award-winning novel by Sok-Fong Ho. It draws attention to the translation by Natascha Bruce who employed the feminist translation approach to identify and critique the tangle of concepts that relegate both women and translation to the bottom of the social and literary ladder. It also refers to the translation strategies that safeguard women's interests and elevate them in society, by highlighting women's lives, ideas and feelings with sensitivity. The last study applies the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) to examine the translator's skills of simultaneously mirroring the source language, Chinese, and capturing the same intensity in English.

Tee Boon Chuan's study reviews the Chinese translation of Malay *pantuns* from three perspectives on its selection, translation, and poetry appreciation. He found that the discourse was focused more on the poetic appreciation of the original Malay poems than on the translated version. Lastly, Chew Fong Peng's study experiments with the grammar-translation method to teach the children stories in the Malay language through activities of reading and watching cartoons as a means of learning material in the classroom.

This publication breaks new ground in embarking on a discourse on the different dimensions in the analysis of translated works and their methodologies. Yet, as the subtitle confirms, this work is opening up a special "enclave," albeit "new" and enterprising. Efforts to develop translation into a more popular and appealing area of linguistic study requires the active participation of young scholars and the support of a wider audience. In view of the gathering recognition of Malaysian

Chinese literature by local writers as well as those resident in Singapore, China and the territories of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao, there are potentials for recognised works to be translated into English or Malay. Similarly, more acclaimed literary works in Malay or other Southeast Asian languages, not forgetting those in the English language, may be rendered into Chinese. Attempts to realise these twin approaches will work towards the gradual advancement of a new genre of “translation literature” in Malaysia. As a relatively new academic discipline, the scope of translation studies for future expansion is substantial and it awaits more attention to contribute to its growth. If this trend is continued and expanded, it is possible that translation studies may be developed into a niche specialisation to enrich the academic programmes of local universities.

This delightful volume appears at an opportune moment when fresh ideas and inspiration are needed to boost translation studies among Malaysian researchers. The editorial team and the contributors are to be congratulated for the timely publication of a volume that will certainly raise translation studies in this country into a more conspicuous level of academic standing.

* Dr. Phin-Keong Voon [文平强] is Chua Chee Hui Professor in Malaysian Chinese Studies, New Era University College, Kajang, Malaysia. Email: phinkeong.voon@newera.edu.my