

Chan Kim Boon: A Pioneer Translator of Classical Chinese Novels into Baba Malay

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Abstract

Chan Kim Boon's contribution to literary developments in colonial Singapore and his place in the larger social and cultural history of colonial Southeast Asia, especially in the Straits Settlements, has remained largely unrecognised. At the turn of the century, when the English-educated Straits Chinese business elite under the leadership of Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang embarked upon a programme of social reform of Peranakan society, Chan Kim Boon, equally well-versed in English, Chinese and Malay, undertook the task of translating classical Chinese novels into Baba Malay in order to provide socially and politically edifying reading material for a Peranakan readership. This massive undertaking, covering 16 years and 72 volumes of labour, won him a position of high esteem and respect among his fellow Peranakan contemporaries, as well as Republican Chinese elites with ties to Singapore, such as Qiu Fengjia. His relative obscurity today may be attributable to the decline of Baba Malay itself with the spread of English and Chinese education in the 20th century. This paper will examine his life and work at the intersection of three different socio-cultural milieus which constituted part of the cosmopolitan mosaic of then colonial Singapore.

Keywords: Chan Kim Boon, Baba-Malay language, Chinese-Malay translation, Peranakan Society

Introduction

Chan Kim Boon (曾锦文) was a well-educated Peranakan Chinese from Penang (1851–1920) who was best known for his translations of classical Chinese novels into Baba Malay. However, his place in the larger social and cultural history of colonial southeast Asia, especially in the Straits Settlements, remains largely unknown. In this paper, we shall examine his life and

work as located at the intersection of the three different socio-cultural milieus to which he belonged: the Peranakan Baba Malay family culture, the late Qing reform-minded literati culture, and the cosmopolitan English-speaking Straits Chinese business and professional elite culture centred in Singapore. Closely associated with other Peranakan leading social reformers in Singapore such as Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang, he had the advantage of a much stronger command of the Chinese language, having spent six years in Fuzhou at the Fujian Naval Academy, where he was exposed to the Reform movement then sweeping through China. Given the social ills afflicting Peranakan society in Malaya at the time, Chan Kim Boon decided to contribute to the social reform of his community by translating Chinese classical novels such as the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* into Baba Malay, hoping thereby to inculcate Chinese values and virtues into his readers who, he felt, had lost the ability to read those novels in Chinese.

Literature Review

The first mention of Chan Kim Boon and his translations first appeared in English papers by his contemporaries such as Arnold Wright and H. A. Cartwright (1908) and Song Ong Siang (1923). Academic treatment of his work in English began with Claudine Salmon's seminal *Literary Migrations: Traditional Chinese Fiction in Asia (17-20th Centuries)* (1987). Her work has subsequently been carried further by later studies of Baba translation literature in Malaysia, including those completed by Tan (1981), Proudfoot (1993), Yoong and Zainab (2002, 2004) and Khor (2009).

The English language literature on Chan Kim Boon, however, has taken no notice of the wealth of research that has since appeared in the Chinese language. Generally, the literature about Chan in English has placed him within the general context of Baba Malay translations in the country with a primary focus on Peranakan culture and society without an in-depth consideration of his life and work as a translator. Apart from a similar reference to Chan's work in a general overview of Baba translations, such as those by Huang Huimin (2004) and Mo Jiali (1999, 2001), research work on Chan Kim Boon in Chinese has increased considerably with monographs devoted to his life and his works beginning in the 1960s with works by Ma Zu (1961), Wen Zichuan (1970), Yang Guiyi (2014), Chen Ganglong and Zhang Yu'an (2017), and others.

Furthermore, the research literature in Chinese have explored Chan's years in China by focusing on his relationship with the Fujian Naval College and the Beiyang Fleet, such as in publications by Lin Qingyuan (1986), Lin Chongyong (1986), Shen Chuanjing (1987), Shen Yan (2007) and the paper by Ma Youyuan (2012). The Fujian Naval College was the premier naval college established by the late Qing government as part of its drive to import modern technical expertise to China while retaining Chinese cultural identity. Education was bilingual, and several leading Chinese pioneer translators, including Yan Fu, had studied there.

This paper will draw on both sets of literature, the Malaysian literature highlighting Chan's Peranakan background and the more recent literature from Chinese sources highlighting his ties to China, while at the same time exploring the multiple socio-cultural contexts during his twenty years of labour in the translation of classical Chinese novels into Baba Malay. This discussion of Chan's life and works in the context of his multicultural background and his motivation to translate from Chinese into Baba Malay will also attempt to explain the absence of a long-term recognition of his work.

Peranakan Society and Chan Kim Boon's Life and Social Background

Chan Kim Boon, whose family originated from Houguan, Fujian, was born to a Peranakan family in Penang, Malaya in 1851. He was the son of Chan Yong Chuan, a merchant in Padang, Sumatra, who later moved to Penang. The family spoke the Hokkien (Fujian) dialect and Malay language, but he was educated in English at the Penang Free School. In addition, he received private tuition in classical Chinese at home.

In 1866, at the age of 15, he returned to China to enroll at the Fujian Naval College and remained there until 1871. There is some ambiguity as to whether he did enrol in the College as a student. In fact, Chan's name was not on the list of graduates but on the List of Foreign Teachers of the Naval College, stating that he started teaching since 1866 (Shen, 2007). It is likely that Chan had intended to study at the Naval School, but he became a tutor in mathematics instead because of his proficiency in English (Ma, 2012).

His stay in Fujian coincided with the first phase of China's attempt at Westernisation or the Self-Strengthening Movement, from the early 1860s to the mid-1890s, and it must have made a deep impression on his young mind. With the idea of developing a modern shipbuilding industry and consolidating China's coastal defence system during the period of the Self-Strengthening Movement, Zuo Zongtang, the then Governor-General of Fujian and Zhejiang Province, proposed that China build its own battleships and establish a naval yard in Fuzhou in 1866. In 1867, the Fuzhou Naval College was officially established next to the naval yard. With a modern curriculum and bilingual education, the College aimed to train qualified personnel. As a typical example of modern education, it trained a group of outstanding shipbuilding experts and naval captains (Shi, 2019).

He also seemed to have left a deep impression as a teacher. When former students of his, Liu Buchan, Lin Yongsheng, and others, who had become senior naval officers of the Beiyang Fleet, visited Singapore in 1894, they paid Chan Kim Boon a visit and knelt and kowtowed to show their gratitude to their teacher.

In January 1872 he returned to Penang after six years in Fujian. He left Penang for Singapore shortly thereafter in the same year and made Singapore his home until his death 48 years later in 1920. In his will, he asked to be buried in the Batu Gantong Cemetery. Batu Gantong was his birthplace in Penang and was used as his pen name in his publications.

In Singapore, he developed a career as a bookkeeper and cashier at the legal company Aitken & Rodyk, one of the top law firms in Singapore, for 45 years. From 1891 to 1913, however, he emerged as a major translator of Chinese classical novels into Baba Malay, by making use of his leisure hours for the work. He translated five Chinese classical novels into Baba-Malay, encompassing altogether 72 volumes. It was truly a labour of love.

Throughout his entire working career, he also took an active part in the activities of the Chinese literati society in Singapore. He was a member of the Celestial Reasoning Association that was founded in 1882. The association aimed to help members improve their English, encourage learning, and cultivate taste, and was located in the residence of Zuo Binglong, the Chinese Consul who was also the president of the association. Members of the association were either elite scholars or wealthy businessmen within the Chinese community. In 1889, in honour of the marriage and succession of Emperor Guangxu to the throne of China, an official dinner was hosted by Zuo Binglong for principal Chinese merchants and his friends from the Celestial Reasoning Association. Addresses were presented by representatives from the Chinese community and from the Celestial Reasoning Association, in which Chan Kim Boon did deliver as a member of the latter (Song, 1923).

In 1896, Lim Boon Keng founded the Chinese Philomathic Society which Chan Kim Boon joined as a member (Salmon, 1987). The Chinese Philomathic Society was a Baba association devoted to the study of English literature, Western music, and the Chinese language. Chan was also a member of Ee Hoe Hean Club founded in Singapore in 1895 by Lee Cheng Yan, Tan Jiak Kim, and Lim Boon Keng (Huang, Y. H., 1985), which functioned essentially as a social and business club for the leading Hokkien business and professional elites in Singapore (Zeng, 1996).

Chan Kim Boon was thus firmly entrenched in the English as well as the Chinese-educated business and intellectual elite circles in Singapore, both by virtue of his Peranakan ancestry and his ties with China. At the turn of the century, Singapore was the cultural capital of the Straits Settlements. Its wealthy business and professional elites, led by English-educated Peranakan men such as Lim Boon Keng and Song Ong Siang, were actively engaged in China's reform movement as well as in the reform of local Chinese society. They also showed a keen interest in translations as an instrument of cultural reform.

In his publications, Chan Kim Boon acknowledged the assistance of three men, Cheah Choo Yew, Tan Kheam Hock, and Chia Ann Siang, all of whom were wealthy members of the Peranakan community. Chia Ann Siang, born in Malacca in 1832, was an extremely wealthy man and landowner (Song, 1923). Tan Kheam Hock, born in Penang in 1862, who held the monopoly of the opium and spirit farms, became a labour contractor and later a Justice of the Peace, was on the committee of the Straits Chinese British Association, and a member of various boards (Song, 1923). These leading businessmen in the Peranakan community would probably have helped Chan, himself having to raise seven children on an employee's salary, to

defray the cost of his publications. The fact that men of distinction such as Chia Ann Siang and Tan Kheam Hock were willing to be seen as the Assistant of Batu Gantong (Salmon, 1987) is an indication of the value they attributed to his work.

Reform of Peranakan Society through Translation

What led Chan Kim Boon to embark on his translation project? One volume of his *Sam Kok* was sold at one Strait dollar, which was quite a high price at that time. It took four years for the 30-volume *Sam Kok* to be published completely during which he had to bear certain expenses. He once claimed that what he demanded of his translation work was only to break even. It certainly did not make him into a successful businessman, like many of his other fellow Peranakans.

Chan Kim Boon's motivations were quite complex. His translation career began when he took over Tan Beng Teck's unfinished translation work, after being prompted by Cheah Ann Siang and Cheah Choo Yew, two wealthy Peranakan friends. Chan would have seen the popularity of the Javanese Peranakan translations and observed the readers' demand for translated Chinese novels.

"The Dutch colonial government promoted the romanisation of Malay in Indonesia, which started the translation work in Indonesia. Thanks to various translation versions, more and more local readers became fond of this type of reading materials. Chan Kim Boon, who was trying to make good use of his leisure time, attempted to translate the same works in Singapore, so as to meet the needs of the readers from all over Malaya" (Ma, 1961: 60).

After some of the Chinese classical novels that had been translated into Romanised Malay by Javanese Chinese became popular in Dutch Indonesia and Malaya, Chan Kim Boon began to follow their footsteps in the hope of popularising Chinese literature (Wen, 1970).

The most important reason, however, may have been what Chan Kim Boon himself once said, namely, that he translated Chinese novels into Baba Malay because "he wanted to provide something for his community to read and he wanted Peranakans who knew no Chinese to learn about classic Chinese literature." (Yang, 2014: 80)

The Peranakan community grew out from the off-springs of the marriages between early Chinese immigrants with native women, who spoke the mother tongue of their mothers and had lost their knowledge of the Chinese language. Although the women remained uneducated, the boys were sent to receive an English education. By the end of the 19th century, they had grown into a very influential and wealthy community. At the same time, it was a community afflicted by severe social ills with prostitution, gambling, opium smoking, and alcohol abuse being rife. Peranakan women, being uneducated, were said to be closed-minded, dependent, ignorant,

unenlightened, weak, and degenerate, which led to the decay of the Baba families, with devastating effects on the entire Peranakan community (Yang & Wang, 1995). The decadent lifestyle was contagious and Chan Kim Boon himself was also infected. When he worked at the legal firm, Chan often went gambling after work and was sued at court for gambling on November 17, 1889 (Mei, 1983).

In the preface to Volume I of *Song Kang*, Chan said:

“On public holidays in the Straits Settlements, the rich mostly entertain themselves by going to theatres or by eating, drinking, and sleeping; while the young would spend all day gambling, or going whoring until they become penniless or get infected with syphilis. The elderly and the weak, however, have to stay idly at home, then they could kill time by reading” (Mei, 1983: 9).

The whole community was decaying, like a rootless duckweed, floating to a critical point of collapsing. In the preface to Volume XIII of *Song Kang*, Chan expounded on the four major taboos in Chinese traditions: prostitution, gambling, opium smoking, and alcohol abuse, and he hoped to instil good Chinese traditions through his translations and inspire the people of his community to enhance their life pursuits (Mei, 1983).

He also used the prefaces to convey ideas of reform and patriotism – in a language the Peranakan community could understand. Driving his great labour, was the belief that knowledge of the classical Chinese novels, and the virtues celebrated therein would contribute to the reform of Peranakan society and dispel the evils which had befallen it. Chan Kim Boon’s desire to educate and reform this domestic Peranakan world of uneducated women and idle men given to gambling and other vices through making available translations of classical Chinese novels was influenced by the corresponding translation movement in China. As noted by intellectuals such as Qiu Fengjia, the famous Taiwan defender, it was important to translate Western books so that those without knowledge of Western languages may be able to read and study them (Li, 2012).

Yan Fu and Lin Shu, two famous Chinese translators, started their career of translation primarily for enlightening the Chinese people and for saving the country. Translations were seen as an important tool for reforming a society unable to defend itself against Western aggression. In fact, during the late Qing Dynasty, the government was the only and the strongest patron for translators. It encouraged the translation of Western books into Chinese as part of the modernisation movement.

This theme of patriotism and reform was taken up by the Singapore Straits Chinese elites. Chan Kim Boon had links with Lim Boon Keng and Khoo Seok Wan, who were leaders of the Reform Movement in Singapore. The Reform Movement of Chinese intellectuals in the Straits Settlements at the end of the 19th century was a response to the Reform Movement in China. The Chinese Philomathic Society, founded in 1896, was a political organization founded by

members of the Chinese Empire Reform Association. Disguised as a cultural organization with a purpose to promote cultural causes, the Chinese Philomathic Society advocated political ideas to support the Chinese Empire Reform Association. (Lim & Loh, 1984).

In 1898, Khoo Seok Wan set up a newspaper Thien Nam Shin Pao, aiming to promote the social progress of the Chinese in Singapore and to support the New Policies of the late Qing in China. Chan Kim Boon and Lim Boon Keng helped Khoo handle English related issues in Thien Nam Shin Pao (Li, 2012). In 1899, after Khoo Seok Wan was appointed Chairman of the Southeast Asia Branch of the Chinese Empire Reform Association, Thien Nam Shin Pao became the official newspaper of the Association. Qiu Fengjia, who kept in close contact with Khoo Seok Wan when he was in Singapore in 1900, had once specifically stated the importance of Chan and Lim to Khoo (Li, 2012). In a letter to Khoo Seok Wan during his visit to Singapore in 1900, Qiu Fengjia specifically praised Chan Kim Boon and his translated works, and asked for every copy of Chan's novels in order to broaden his horizon (Li, 2012).

His translation work thus stems from a life led at the intersection of three different socio-cultural and linguistic environments co-existing in the culturally vibrant colonial Singapore at the turn of the century. These were the Peranakan Malay, the Chinese literati, and the Straits Chinese English-speaking cosmopolitan cultures. His life was formed by these three different cultural backgrounds, and they in turn shaped his translation work.

Chan Kim Boon's Translations

Chan Kim Boon was not the first translator of classical Chinese novels into Baba Malay. According to Yoong and Zainab (2004), the earliest Peranakan translator was Tan Beng Teck who translated three short stories *Heng Guan Seo Chia*, *Hong Keow* and *Kim Ko Kee Quan*, all in 1889, after which he stopped. Chan Kim Boon continued the translation of *Hong Keow* and later revised Tan's original translations. While there were other translators at work during Chan Kim Boon's lifetime, such as Chek Swee Liong and Peng Swee, Chan's output far exceeded theirs. After his death in 1920, a decline in the number of translations ensued (from 1915 to 1931 only five titles appeared), followed by a resurgence in the 1930s when 38 titles emerged, 21 of which were translated by Wan Boon Seng, who himself could not read the Chinese written language, but was assisted by other translators like Lee Seng Poh and Seow Chin San (Yoong & Zainab, 2004).

However, it was only Chan Kim Boon, with his equally good command of English, Chinese, and Malay, who made translations his life work. His first translations were of two popular Chinese novels, *Hong Keow sama Lee Tan (Hong Keow)* and *Gnoh Bee Yean (The Five Beauties)*, published serially from 1891 to 1892. He then proceeded with his magnum opus, the translation of the Chinese classic *Sam Kok (Romance of the Three Kingdoms)*, the first volume appearing in 1892 and the final in 1896. The translation of *Sam Kok* took four years and 30 volumes to complete. It should be noted that when Chan's translation of *Sam Kok* was published in 1896, there was no other translated version of *Sam Kok* in Europe except for a

partial French-translated version by Theodore Pavie. The first complete version in a European language did not appear until 1925 with the English version by C. H. Brewitt-Taylor (Salmon, 1992). Chan's translation of *Sam Kok* also preceded the earliest Javanese translations, which were published in Batavia from 1910 to 1913 (Salmon, 1987).

This massive work was followed by the translations of two other major Chinese classics, *Song Kang (Water Margin)*, completed by 1902, and *Kou They Thian (Journey to the West)*, completed by 1913. He had embarked on his translation work at the age of 40 in 1891, finishing at the age of 62, just seven years before his death in 1920. The titles of his works were transliterated into the Hokkien dialect, which was the Chinese vernacular spoken by his Peranakan readership, and common at that time for Baba Malay translated works.

Most of Chan's works were published by the Kim Sek Chye Press, except for *Song Kang* published by Lim Kim Poh (Salmon, 1987). But the *Chrita dahulu-kala di Triak Song Kang*, in 19 volumes, was published by the author himself and sold at three Singapore addresses, one of which was the author's residence (Proudfoot, 1986). The publications appeared in a serialized form, as was common then with all the Baba Malay translations (Proudfoot, 1986). *A Variety of Malay Quatrains*, the only collection of poems in Malay by him, was published by the local Batu Gantong Press which sounds like his own press for Batu Gantong was his pen name.

The biggest problem his translation faced was his readers' insufficient knowledge of the cultural background of the novels. He made every effort to reduce the culture gap as much as possible by always including a glossary of terms at the beginning of several instalments, giving Chinese expressions in the Malay version, with a translation or an explanation in Malay, and sometimes in English as well. He converted the dates of the original text to bring them in line with the Christian calendar. He wrote footnotes as well, and from Volume 10 of *Sam Kok* onwards gave the Chinese characters proper names, titles, and functions (Salmon, 1987).

But that did not suffice. The official titles, the rituals, the weapons, clothing etc. in the novel are so culturally loaded that even most Chinese cannot understand them, let alone the sojourners or foreigners in a strange land. In order to help readers understand the works more easily, he would remove parts of the original novel deemed unimportant by him, which of course, would have caused much trouble because he had to decide which parts were important and which were not. For example, in the preface to Volume 1 of *Song Kang*, he announced that the names of the items, the weapons, and the properties in the novel could not be really understood by most readers. Therefore, he just deleted the parts that he thought were useless (Mei, 1983).

Meanwhile, he also tried his best to convey the traditional Chinese cultural essence to his audience. He translated the ancient poetry in the original Chinese novels into Baba Malay or even converted the poetry into the form of Malay Pantun (Mei, 1983), which was quite rare at that time, since it is much more demanding and painstaking to translate poems from one language into another.

Chan Kim Boon also took pains to ensure that *Sam Kok* was richly illustrated, most often by Tan Phiak Kong, or Chen Biguang (陈璧光), who was a well-known artist from China who charged fees far above the average (Yeo, 2019). The beautiful illustrations by Chen Biguang contributed much to the appeal of the publications, but Chan was unable to eventually afford him, and so he had to turn to Zheng Fangqing for illustrations after Volume 13 of *Sam Kok*, much to his dissatisfaction. After *Sam Kok*, illustrations in the translations of *Song Kang* and *Kou They Thian* would not include more story illustrations except for a few illustrations of the characters (Yang, 2014).

The need to attract and engage with his readers is also shown by the frequent inclusion at the beginning of the translations of light-hearted poems in English written by himself. Some of these poems, however, were more serious in tone and placed emphasis on the value of the service rendered to his countrymen (Salmon, 1987). In fact, one striking feature of his publications is the frequent political messages he inserted in the prefaces to some volumes in *Sam Kok*. He introduced and analysed the war situation in China, Japan, and Korea at that time. He also attached cartoons satirizing Japan, one of which he explained as: Mr. Batu Gantong (Chan Kim Boon's own nickname) was carrying a gun and riding a dog of Pulau Tikus, ready to kill the Japanese (Mei, 1983). Moreover, in the preface to Volume 18 of *Sam Kok*, he said he believed that China's strategy of protracting the anti-Japanese war would cause Japan's economy to collapse (Mei, 1983).

Meanwhile, he bore in mind that it was his responsibility to instil traditional Chinese culture in his translations. Therefore, in the appendix to each volume in *Sam Kok*, he included fables, jokes or humorous stories where Chinese traditional morality was conveyed and propagated. Sometimes he also mentioned something quite personal that had nothing to do with the work itself or with his translation, such as his family life. But his mention of him mourning for the death of his seventh child and his worsening health showed the difficult situation he was in during his translation work. In each instalment of his translations, he carefully included letters of congratulations and of praise written to Batu Gantong, his pen name, in English, Chinese, and Malay from his readers, which had surely motivated him to remain true to his original aspiration.

Conclusion

Although Chan Kim Boon achieved much recognition in his lifetime with his translations – his Chinese contemporary, Qiu Fengjia, had equated Chan with Lim Boon Keng and had even asked for copies of all his novels to be sent to him – his fame has not lasted. In his book, *A Study of Translators From Fujian*, Lin Benchun (2004) noted that the Fujian Naval College was the cradle of modern Chinese translators and had listed a group of translators from Fujian who came from this school at the end of the 19th century such as Lo Feng Luh, Yan Fu, Chen Jitong, Chen Shoupeng, and Ma Jianzhong. Lin even included other translators from Fuzhou who were

not from this school such as Lin Shu, Xue Shaohui, and Lin Yutang, as well as two Peranakan translators, Gu Hongming and Lim Boon Keng. Regrettably, Chan Kim Boon, a Penang native who once taught at the Fujian Naval College and who had translated five Chinese classical novels into Baba Malay, was left unmentioned. It should be noted that Chan had published his first translation in 1891 and had completed his 30-volume translation of *Sam Kok* by 1896. Whereas the famous Chinese translator Yan Fu, who was among the earliest recruits to the Fujian Naval College, published his first translation *Evolution and Ethics* only in 1895, and Lin Shu, another noted translator in China, started his translation career in 1897.

Disappointingly, Chan Kim Boon was not listed in the 455-page book, *A Study of Translators from Fujian*. He was not mentioned in the doctoral thesis, *A Study of Modern Translators from Fuzhou*, by Chen Aicha in 2007, or in the paper, “Fujian Naval College: The cradle of modern translators,” by Yue Feng in his *Chinese Translators Journal* in 2004. It is not obvious why Chan was not included in the list of translators from Fujian, yet Gu Hongming and Lim Boon Keng, who were given honourable mentions by Chinese scholars. They were all Chinese of Peranakan origin domiciled in Penang and Singapore.

Similarly, in Malaysia today, Chan Kim Boon’s translations have become collector’s items (see Kee, 2012), but they are hardly read. His contribution to Peranakan, and indeed Malayan culture, as well as his place in the cultural history of Malaysia’s multicultural society as one of its outstanding representatives, has also been largely neglected by the English language research literature which has seldom gone beyond a brief introduction to his translations in general overviews of the literature.

In the final volume of his translation of *Kou They Thian*, Chan Kim Boon attached a letter from his nephew in which he wrote that Chan’s reputation would have been greater if he had translated the Chinese literary works into English. Ian Proudfoot believed that his nephew’s words were “a rather sad epigraph to his massive literary endeavour” (Proudfoot 1993: 24). Indeed, Qiu Fengjia had specifically asked for Chan Kim Boon to translate English texts into Chinese in a letter to Khoo Sek Wan, in which he noted that if Chan were to translate some legal texts into Chinese, it would be a great contribution to today’s reform (Li, 2012).

The English language is a major international language whereas Baba Malay was the vernacular of a small Peranakan community. The diminishment of Chan Kim Boon’s reputation with the passage of time will have to do with the gradual demise of the Baba Malay language, especially after the Second World War. Altogether, 68 titles were translated from classical Chinese into Baba Malay between the years 1889 to 1950. Chan Kim Boon himself contributed the largest output, in terms of number of titles until he stopped publication in 1914, six years before his death in 1920. The First World War and the difficult post-war years interrupted the steady flow of translations. But perhaps inspired by his work and his success, the period of 1930–1939 witnessed a revival of such translations, during which 38 titles were published by 14 different translators (Yoong & Zainab, 2004). The Second World War brought an end to

this flowering, and there was no further post-war revival. Only one final translation into Baba Malay was undertaken after 1939, namely Botan Kiongchoo in 1950 (Yoong & Zainab, 2004).

The Japanese Occupation years from 1942–1945 had greatly affected the wealth and standing of the Straits Chinese Peranakan elites in Singapore. Leadership of the Chinese community, which had firmly been in the hands of the Baba Malay and English-speaking Peranakan elites at the beginning of the twentieth century, during which time Chan Kim Boon produced his master works, had, by the mid-20th century, passed into the hands of the Chinese-educated and other English-educated elites to whom Baba Malay was an unknown vernacular (Rudolph, 1998). At the same time, the Straits Chinese elites had begun to provide English education for their women, setting up the Singapore Chinese Girl's School in 1899. By the 1950s, there was no longer a readership for publications in Baba Malay. Chan Kim Boon's works were consigned to the rare books section of public libraries.

Nonetheless, he remains a significant figure in the cultural history of the time and the region, and he deserves greater recognition. By being fluent in the three languages, which defined the heritage of the Peranakan community of the Straits Settlements, Chan stood at the intersection of three different socio-cultural currents at a critical juncture in the region's history, and he laboured at the task of cultural reform through his monumental translations. In the Peranakan community, known above all for its men of commerce and the newly emergent breed of university-educated professionals, Chan Kim Boon assumed the identity and performed the role of the Chinese literatus, drawing upon his multiple cultural resources in an attempt to reform his own society.

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