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DOI: 10.1355/sj33-3h

Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature. By Brian C. Bernards. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015 and Singapore: NUS Press, 2016. xiii+288 pp.

This is a nuanced and wide-ranging study of the literary representation of the South Seas throughout the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century. Combining literary analysis and cultural history, *Writing the South Seas* conceptualizes “the Nanyang” (p. 3) as a trope that pulls together a vast range of different forms of expression. Nanyang, the South Seas, denotes an area in Southeast Asia that is also “an archipelagic trope” (p. 13), yet Bernards goes much further than simply using the geographical boundaries of the archipelago as a framework for comparative literary studies. Instead, the Nanyang is at once a “postcolonial literary trope of Chinese travel, migration, settlement, and creolization in Southeast Asia” (p. 3) and “a literary trope [that] moves between different national literary contexts” (p. 9). Most importantly, as a literary trope it “crosses colonial, national, and linguistic borders” (p. 8), while denoting “symbiotic,

interdependent relations” (p. 19). Bernards speaks of “the Nanyang imagination” (p. 4) as he endeavours to trace its “evolution” (p. 4), with a focus on the twentieth century. The “nautical” (p. 14) approach allows a “tidal flexibility” (p. 14), facilitating also a comparison that ought to have been obvious, and yet has seldom been made; the juxtaposition of the East Indies with “other archipelagos, such as the ‘West Indies’” (p. 14).

The introduction contains a useful overview of the shifting terms that have largely been synonymous with the Nanyang — including also *Dongnan Ya* (Southeast Asia) — but which denote different agendas as well as viewpoints. The Nanyang, by contrast, means an itinerary of trade, travel and migration, and as a trope it works across — and thereby connects — different traditions and literary articulations.

The theoretical framework is chiefly informed by postcolonial studies, including recent trends in reassessing Sinophone and Anglophone literature of the diverse diasporas. Bernards is well-versed in the theoretical discourses and utilizes a nuanced approach to the main concepts currently in vogue within diaspora and postcolonial studies. In fact, while he admittedly utilizes a plethora of very specific terms — creolization, translingual, ecopoetic — he explains each term succinctly, stressing the ways they are useful in his study. The book is therefore also accessible to the non-specialist reader who might be interested in the history or the changing literary representations of the region, while it contributes to current developments in postcolonial studies, diaspora studies, as well as comparative literature, and more particularly the conceptualization of creolization and the trans-colonial.

Bernards convincingly illustrates the need to read the divergent representations of the region in tandem with each other. He maintains that criticism has hitherto almost exclusively focused on Anglophone literary works — and how they negotiate mainly Anglophone traditions — which is ironic given that the area is particularly suited to a “multilingual, ‘multisited’ close reading” (p. 14). Bernards suggests that it is precisely the area’s “daunting diversity” (p. 14)

and “instability as a regional concept” (p. 14) that provide intriguing venues for a redirection of postcolonial studies. Hence, he utilizes creolization as a central concept in exploring the different forms in which the Nanyang has been imagined in the literature of the region. As a postcolonial trope, the Nanyang is thus appropriated across colonial, national and linguistic boundaries.

The organizational framework of the study is at first chronological before it then shifts to a juxtaposition between contemporary literary developments in the separate nations and diasporas located within the South Seas. Bernards begins by locating the Nanyang as a region and a trope at the historical confluence of multiple forms and periods of imperialism. He distinguishes between the South Seas as a motif evoking maritime lineages in early twentieth-century Sinophone literature and the way in which writers in different languages evoke the South Seas as an imaginary that is adapted to — or viewed through — different, largely imported literary traditions. In particular, the resulting transliteration produces creative engagements with a changing world and a shifting cultural imagination. Different authors, in creatively different ways, endow the Nanyang with cultural, geopolitical, or also ecological significance. The study includes a critical reassessment of the impressionistic South Sea colour in the fiction of Xu Zhimo and Xu Dishan, and similarly of southbound authors who imagine the Nanyang to challenge nationalism in Chinese-language Cold War writing. Among the analyses of diasporic writing, two points of focus stand out: the exploration of how Sinophone Malaysian literature negotiates different migrations across the South Seas — as reflected, for example, in Ng Kim Chew’s experience of a Nanyang diaspora in Taiwan — and the still rare inclusion of Thai writing in contemporary studies of the region’s literary developments, although the focus remains on Sino-Thai novels, with a somewhat cursory reference to the ways in which proliferating “Thai-language popular novels on Sino-Thai history beginning in the 1980s” have redeployed the Nanyang trope (p. 182). The individual chapters contain extensive historical and geopolitical detail, but this is, given the geographical

range of the study, probably unavoidable. Most importantly, in reapplying a familiar postcolonial trope, Bernards maintains that the different narratives “write back” not only to colonial but also to national authorities “that repress or elide these creole histories under discourses of race, indigeneity, diaspora, assimilation, and even multiculturalism” (p. 9). The main significance of his study rests in this reassessment, as Bernards foregrounds how individual authors articulate the suppression of their creole histories under sterile categories.

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DOI: 10.1355/sj33-3i

Southeast Asia in Ruins: Art and Empire in the Early 19th Century.
By Sarah Tiffin. Singapore: NUS Press, 2016. xii+316 pp.

Sarah Tiffin’s *Southeast Asia in Ruins* is the inaugural volume under NUS Press’s new series dedicated to art history in Southeast Asia, the first of its kind since Oxford University Press stopped its publications on Southeast Asian art in the 1990s. This impeccable art history scholarship is the result of long and thorough doctoral research on decoding narratives hinted in landscape paintings and prints of Southeast Asia’s Hindu and Buddhist sanctuaries in ruins. This pioneering engagement of the author with the topic is evident in the numerous notes — occupying almost a third of the book — that contain references to primary sources and related poetry, artworks and publications. Tiffin demonstrates how images, when analysed with historical text and other sources, can help to unravel the otherwise concealed aspirations and anxieties of British “progress and power” (p. 2) encoded in colonial art and image production of the British in Southeast Asia, more specifically in the Malay world. In particular, she adapts the postcolonial discourse of Edward Said