

# TRANSLATING ASIA: MIGRATIONS AND TRANSGRESSIONS<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Few books on Asian translation traditions have been published; among them are Hung and Wakabayash's *Asian Translation Traditions* (St. Jerome Publishing 2005); Kothari and Wakabayashi's *Decentering Translation Studies: India and Beyond* (John Benjamins, 2009); Ricci and van der Putten's *Translation in Asia* (St. Jerome Publishing 2011). All seek to present conceptualizations, histories, and epistemologies departing from Western models.

Like these publications, this collection aims to present the uniqueness of Asian translation traditions using, however, a specific focus: translation in the context of migration. Migration is a particularly appropriate site for understanding translation in the region, this being an immediate and concrete reality among Asians both in the past and the present. According to Papastergiadis, translation can be a key conceptual tool for understanding the effects of cross-cultural mixtures and transnational flows".<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, migration has opened spaces for cross-cultural encounters in which translation has played a key mediating role. It is thus a vantage point for understanding translation traditions and its transgressions in the region.

There were 30 million migrant workers in Asia in 2013.<sup>3</sup> Also in 2013, Asia hosted the largest number of refugees who account for 7% of international migrants. A significant number of populations in India, Indonesia and the Philippines, work as migrant workers and professionals worldwide, and a few Asian countries such as

Brunei, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and the United Arab Emirates are hosts to migrants. Translation has been crucial in negotiating adjustments between migrants and hosts.

But migration is also historically rooted in the region; it has been a defining feature of life in Asia, maritime Asia, in particular. Even in pre-modern times, Reid observes that such maritime culture was “ethnically varied”, reliant on the world market, and “open to external influences” resulting from migration flows. Propelled largely by economic factors, these inevitably involved cultural exchange, diffusions, and indigenizations mediated by translation. Please see, for example, Ricci’s *Islam Translated* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

In Mainland Asia, the case of China, for instance, Hung (2005) observes that large-scale translation activities were migration-related. For centuries, China drew immigrants from her northern and north-western border regions whose cultures were mostly “nomadic,” “racially different from the Chinese,” and marked by their own languages and scripts. Translation was thus vital not just to communication but to the shaping of Chinese identity/ies.

The papers have been selected mainly for their relevance to the theme of the collection which is reflected in the title. They offer significant insights into Asian translation traditions: the forms translation has taken in the region, better still, the forms it is taking; the epistemological roots from which these are derived, and the methodological lines they follow or transgress. The structuring concept for discussing translation, that which lends coherence to this volume on translation, is migration. However, migration is not simply “moves of working people from one place to another.” It is obvious in the following overview of the articles that migration is not simply physical, but cultural. Even in Weisbrood’s essay which deals with a migrant worker in Israel, migration involves not just the movement of people, but the cultural and psychological encounter between host and migrant. In another instance, migration takes form in the circuits and flows of languages and cultures between the Philippines and two Western colonizers which, for centuries, have shaped translation production in the country (Mojares, in this

collection); likewise, the travels or migrations of Arabic scholars, preachers, and traders from the Middle East to Asia led to the adaptations of Sufi dance within Islamic aesthetics and Malaysian artistic conventions. Migration is both cognitive and spiritual as is seen in Hanafi's analysis in this collection of the translations of the poems of Damono, a famous contemporary Indonesian poet. Migration could involve as well inter-medial crossings. In an article on kaleidoscopic translation (Allen, in this collection) a Thai audio-visual installation and a Chinese digital C-print are juxtaposed with each other in translation exchange. These articles demonstrate how certain variables are brought together in the nexus of translation and migration. In a sense, translation and migration create and define each other.

But the meaning of translation is itself not fixed; it is culturally determined. Its most common meaning is "to ferry across" as derived from the Latin *translatio* (which itself comes from *trans-* and from *fero*, together meaning "a carrying across" or "a bringing across"). In Cebuano, a major Philippine language, a term for translation is *hubad* (which means to make naked or to unravel); in Chinese, there are several terms for "to translate": *diadong* which means "to mobilize" or *jeieshi*—to define. Rather than stipulating a single meaning for translation, the editors have left it to the contributors to explore the possibilities of translation. This is in keeping with our view that translation is hermeneutic, rather than instrumental.<sup>4</sup>

The authors explore migration and translation in relation to a range of variables — spirituality, ideology, cultural identity, decolonization and nation-building, literary modernization, performance, pedagogy, host-migrant relations, and inter-medial crossings. Some introduce lines of inquiry to be further pursued, but the collection is reflective of current and emerging concerns on translation in Asia and the Middle East from the perspectives of scholars from India, the Philippines, Malaysia, China, Israel, Indonesia, Canada, and the United States.

The authors are an interesting mix: translation studies scholars who have published in the field, among them Rachel Weissbrod,

and Theresa Hyun; Resil Mojares, an eminent cultural studies scholar from the Philippines; Lawrence Wong who has published extensively on Chinese translation traditions; Mohd Anis Md Nor, an esteemed international scholar on Malay and Southeast Asian Performing Arts, scholars from diverse backgrounds, artists now realizing the kinship between translation and their art, other scholars who are non-specialists in translation studies, but taking a fresh look at their research interests thru the lenses of translation. By exploring academic discourse within translation paradigm(s), the articles point to the possibilities of a nascent discipline in the region.

### **Overview of Articles**

In “The Circuits of Translation: the Philippines and the World,” Resil Mojares claims that “the Philippines is a nation constituted through translations.” Such translations have been propelled by the circuits and flows of languages and cultures between the Philippines and two colonizers and within the Philippines itself where there are about 55 indigenous languages and 142 dialects. Translation thus has been central to intellectual production, especially, to the development of the Philippines’s national literature. This involved the twin process of consolidating, codifying, and promoting local languages and traditions; and appropriating, diverting, and converting the foreign into local capital. Sketching the conditions of language practice in the Philippines, Mojares argues that in the circuits and flows of languages and cultures, anomalies and possibilities exist; relationships thus remain complex and the issue of what in the Filipino history of translation is gained and lost remains an open question.

One such flow related to translation is the subject of Lawrence Wang-chi Wong’s “Charles Gutzlaff (1803-1851) and the First Opium War.” This is a case study of Charles Gutzlaff, a Prussian missionary and a major translator/interpreter, who migrated to China to help open it up to Christianity. During the Opium War (1830-1842) translators and interpreters played a highly significant role not only in assisting communication between the British and the Chinese but also in shaping the course of events. Unfortunately,

very few studies have been made on them. Gutzlaff, for instance, acted as interpreter for the opium ships in exchange for money and the chance to preach. During the war, he bribed people to collect military information for the British, later served as magistrate in British-occupied areas and eventually participated in peace negotiations between the British and the Chinese. Gutzlaff's deeds and behavior provide an insight into the social and cultural positions of migrant translators/interpreters, as they helped shape events particularly, at historical junctures such as the Opium War.

The encounter between migrant and host in Israel today is the subject of "'Translated People' and the Receiving Culture—Filipino Caregivers in Israeli Literature." Rachel Weissbrod takes up Salman Rushdie's concept of "translated people" to refer to immigrants, labor migrants, and others who maneuver between their native and acquired languages, norms and identities. Her focus, however, is the reaction of the target culture towards migrants as seen in the stories of two major Israeli writers: Savyon Liebrecht (2000) and Dahlia Ravikovitch (2005). Responding to the growing dependence of Israelis on foreign caregivers, the authors ponder on the impact of these servants of globalization" on the target culture at large.<sup>5</sup> Citing Steiner, Weissbrod says the translation process comprises the aggression that "people under translation" face; the sense of threat that they raise, and the possibility of gaining some balance in a situation of inequality.

In the late 13th century, Islam spread on a large-scale as Sufi scholars, preachers, and traders migrated to maritime Asia from the south of Saudi Arabia, the Gujerar and Malabar regions of India, and some Muslim communities in China. In "Arabic Connections: Translating Performative Sufism in the Malay Zapin among Muslim Societies in Insular Southeast Asia, Mohd Anis Md Nor follows the spread of *zapin*, the oldest traceable form of folk and social dance and music genre adapted from the Arab world and indigenized by Muslim societies in insular Southeast Asia, especially Indonesia and Malaysia. Central to the *zapin* is the performance of the *Qalb* or the spiritual heart through which the practitioners seek divine presence. The article focuses on the permutations of performative Sufism, in particular, the permeation of Islamic aesthetics and

Malay artistic conventions, as these permutations translate the *qalb* within a traditional mode of temporality. Migration thus is not just a crossing in the physical sense but a carrying across of a performative spirituality.

The commingling of spirituality, performance, and orality in a dance festival is the subject of Ruth Jordana Pison's "The Dinagyang Festival: An Afterlife of the Ilonggos' Faith." The Dinagyang is a festival of dance held each January in Iloilo, in Panay, Central Philippines. This celebrates two historical events—the Barter of Panay in which Panay was sold by the Aetas to ten Malay datus who migrated from Borneo to escape an oppressive sultan; and the subsequent conversion of natives to Christianity in which the Santo Nino (the Child Jesus) is central. The festival is a "translation" of both "sacred" and secular investments; it is constituted by performances which articulate the migration of movements from different points of Philippine history and from different movement vocabularies. The migration of movements—a translation of the performers' bodies in space—from the terrain of personal faith to a public space of performance creates a constellation of values, beliefs, and aesthetic constructs set against contemporary Philippine realities.

Spirituality in personal and individual terms is the subject of "Framing Faith: Rendering Religiosity in Sapardi Dyoko Damono's Poems." Taufiq Hanafi notes that faith in the poems of Damono, a famous contemporary Indonesian poet, is questioned and no longer viewed as sacrosanct. This is problematized further as the source poems migrate into two English translations: *Contemporary Indonesian Poetry* and *Before Dawn* in which the poems are domesticated for the English reader. However, domestication is redefined not just to refer to a strategy of translating but of uncovering a subject matter that is active and changing. Thus, instead of violently violating the source text, the translations provide new grounds for faith to be continuously tampered on, or, even pampered with a dynamics of doubts.

The migration of texts from socialist cultures and their subsequent translation into Asian languages is an underlying theme in a

number of articles. Among these is Theresa Hyun's "How Did Shakespeare Pass Border Inspection? : Migration and Translation of English and American Literature in North Korea in the 1950s and 60s." Hyun observes that as in the case of many Asian cultures, the translation of Western literary works in North Korea (particularly from the turn of the 20th century till the 1930's) was part of a literary modernization process. Translations have also been closely aligned to state department policy. In the 1950's to the '60's, foreign literature into North Korea migrated largely from Europe and America, rather from the Soviet Union and China. The shift was a move by North Korea to carve an independent socialist culture. In her preliminary survey of prefaces and translation techniques, Hyun identifies some tendencies which require further investigation to determine the degree of conformity of translations to official rules and how these diverse approaches relate to the working conditions and the agency of translators facing shifts in official cultural practices.

Maria Lorena M. Santos' "Translating Gender in Online Incarnations of Jane Austen" examines online adaptations or re-imaginings of Jane Austen as woman-centered cultural translations. These are adaptations or migrations of the core story via electronic technology with a relatively young audience as target. *Three Sex and the Austen Girls* (2010), a comedy web-series; *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* (2012), a transmedia production of *Pride and Prejudice*; and *Well-Played*, a Philippine-authored print and web-retelling of *Pride and Prejudice* published via the digital media company /fan fiction community, Wattpad. These online Austens mediate between what cultural critics describe as "classic novels of courtship celebrating male and female harmony" and a variety of contexts that are "acutely aware of gender roles" (Pucci and Thompson 5). They not only blur the boundaries between print and media and between canonical and popular culture. As Austen meets the internet and the global audience, these translations become a space for creativity and for agency to reaffirm, question, and renegotiate gender roles in Austen's world and ours.

In "Kaleidoscopic Translation: Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook's *The Two Planets* and the New Landscapes of Yao Lu," Jeffner Allen puts

into conversation two seemingly unrelated works that somehow migrate into each other and evolve into new forms. *Two Planets*, an audio-visual installation on Thai farmers and Thai farmer values, is, in Allen's words, "a quasi-fantasy animated by simultaneous, discordant voices, ambient sounds, and images." Yao Lu's *New Landscapes* (first shown in Beijing in 2008) is a digital C-print exhibit which superimposes in a chaotic and unstable fashion the green mountain and water paintings of the Song Dynasty and the mounds of rubble and debris covered with protective nets in construction sites of urban China. By projecting a shifting space that enters and exits thresholds of reality, both works invite explorations of translation, mistranslation, and untranslatability. Traversing that space, according to Allen, involves kaleidoscopic translation, which she connects with poet-philosopher Edouard Glissant's concept of relation: that which "always changes all the elements composing it, and consequently, the resulting relationship which then changes them all over again."

While Allen explores migration and kaleidoscopic translation, Liza Escoto-Ramos connects migration with translating hybrid works in "F. Sionil-Jose's *Po-on*: Translating a Hybrid Philippine Novel." The subject of her analysis is *Anochecer* (Maeva 2003), Carlos Milla's translation into Spanish of *Poon*, a Filipino novel which F. Sionil-Jose originally wrote in English. It is, according to Escoto-Ramos, a "post-colonial hybrid text" in the sense used by Snell-Hornby. The hybrid text is written in the language of an ex-colonizer by the colonized. In another sense, *Poon* is already a hybrid text in itself: it contains linguistic and cultural elements in Spanish and in Ilocano, a regional language in North Luzon. This multi-layered quality complicates the task of translating the novel. The author proceeds to examine Milla's strategies in translating hybridity as well as the theoretical foundations underpinning them. The focus on *Anochecer* is particularly significant since it could provide insights into the translation of a work which migrates into a dominant receiving culture.

Victor John M. Loquias' "From Locality to Narrativity: Developing an Indigenous Perspective of Education in a Philippine Region" offers a specific method to realize the twin process involved in

converting the foreign to the local. He notes that the hegemony of the mainstream language threatens to silence diverse discourses operating within local and regional spaces. In Bikol, a region in south Luzon Island in the Philippines, a linguistic turn in the study of philosophy relocates the site of discourse to the indigenous. The method initially devised is the retrieval of connotative terms in the lexicon that speak of meanings with universal significance. This method assists the development and construction of indigenous philosophies as well as the translation of texts from mainstream philosophies to the local. While philosophy maintains its universality as an enterprise of thinking, this indigenization of thinking premised on the utility of language allows for the revitalization of language itself in various acts such as exposition, construction or deconstruction of ideas, and translation.

In “Clear as Mud: Re(ad)ressing Poetry,” Isabela Banzon takes off from Edwin Gentzler’s proposal to rethink translation neither as a product nor a process and instead to see it as “the very foundation upon which cultures and languages emerge.” This view coincides in more ways than one with what it takes to write a poem. This rethinking is especially applicable in cases such as Banzon’s, where givens such as geography, colonial history, and globalization, where a mix of languages and cultures are continually under consideration, provide the experiential material out of which a poem can migrate. The paper shows how the act of creating a poem can be understood as well as an act of translation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The articles in this collection were selected from papers presented at the 6th Asian Translation Traditions International Conference entitled “Translating Asia: Migrations and Transgressions.” Held at the University of the Philippines, Diliman in October 2014, the conference was jointly sponsored by the Asian Translation Traditions Conference Series and the Department of English and Comparative Literature, University of the Philippines Diliman.

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<sup>2</sup> “Cultural translation, cosmopolitanism and the void.” *Translation Studies*, Vol. 4, 2011, pp. 1-20.

<sup>3</sup> International Labor Organization figures.

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Venuti, “Genealogies of Translation Theory : Jerome” in Venuti, Lawrence, Ed. *The Translation Studies Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 2012, p. 483. Using an empiricist frame that language refers to a discrete meaning, one considers translation as *instrumental*, a reproduction of an invariant from a source text; Assuming that language is shaped by linguistic and cultural forces, one sees translation as *hermeneutic*, an interpretation of the source text whose meaning is a variable, subject to creation and shifts in meaning during the translation process.

<sup>5</sup> In Israel, 30.8 % of the population consist of international migrants. Table 3, “Trends in International Migrant Statistics” Dept. of Economic and Social Affairs, UN Population Division, Sept. 2013.