

# reviews

## **Literary Migrations: Traditional Chinese Fiction in Asia (17<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries)**

*Edited by Claudine Salmon*

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This work was first published in 1987 and translated into Chinese in 1989. It has been out of print in both English and Chinese for many years, so its republication is a welcome development. Since its first publication, interest in the study of ways Chinese literature has been influential in Asia has grown exponentially along with the emergent economic power of China. For a student of the place of English in Asian cultures, this book offers a balance against the ways English power has been studied, especially in the English Language Teaching context. As Christine Salmon reflects in her Introduction to the volume:

Few have attempted to cross these boundaries and reflect on the impact of Chinese fiction in neighbouring countries. Yet the Chinese language and Chinese script have been used for centuries in countries like Korea, Japan and Vietnam, and Chinese literature began to spread in these areas very early, beginning with the Confucian classics, Buddhist suttas and Chinese poetry.

In many countries, such as Korea and Vietnam, Chinese script was used for centuries before the development of indigenous scripts. This in part may explain the very strong historical influence of Chinese culture on these countries' intellectual traditions. In other countries such as Thailand which had their own scripts, translations of Chinese literature came later (in the

early nineteenth century), and consequently had a different impact on the local cultures.

Salmon states that in this book the term traditional Chinese fiction refers to “novels and short stories of the Ming and Qing dynasties.” *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* has been the most often translated and imitated text in other Asian countries, with monarchs, scholars and courtiers using it to model their own governments. In countries such as Thailand, where the local Chinese community began to lose the ability to read in Chinese, translations started to appear. But at first, it was the Thai royal family who developed an interest in Chinese literature. Salmon notes that this was due to the popularity of Chinese acting troupes at court. In the early twentieth century, newspapers began to sponsor translations to publish for local Chinese as well as for others who has developed a taste for Chinese literature.

While immigrants took copies of their favorite texts as they travelled to other lands, as they settled, there was a growing demand for more fiction from China. Often, this demand led to the development of publishing houses in other countries. Not only were the works translated; they were also adapted into other fictions, often by anonymous translators and writers. Salmon notes that there was also a strong oral tradition, especially for the Cambodians and the Mongols. In such recitations, the bards would adapt the stories to local tastes. In Thailand, Bradley, an American missionary set up the first printing press and published translations of Chinese texts in order to attract readers to his church so as to convert them to Christianity. But Salmon notes that there were no bookshops in Thailand and that Bradley only sold 1,000 of a book at most. Given this lack of outlets, it seems natural that the main influence on popular culture would be in the adaptation of Chinese texts into local literature, or the influence of Chinese aesthetic approaches in local literatures in imitations with Chinese settings or characters. She points out that by using Chinese settings, local writers especially in Korea could disguise their political messages as utopian guises.

While the book is geographically divided into sections, there is no material on the Philippines, Laos, or Burma. Salmon explains that no scholars in those countries could be found to undertake research. While most of the sections or chapters are rich in detail, it is unfortunate that the section on Thailand is only two pages. In fact, more information about Thailand is found in Salmon’s Introduction than in the section written by the Thai

scholar. While such a lack of interest in these countries' scholars may reflect the political, social or economic realities in them in the 1980s, it would be surprising if that were the case today, what with the rise of China in the region. There are many opportunities for local scholars in these countries to develop their work in this field following the leads of the scholars of other countries whose extensive research is published in this book. In Thailand, with the explosion of schools and courses offering Chinese language, it may be that the study of the Chinese language may lead to a renewed popular interest in classic Chinese literature as a way of teaching Chinese. If however, the local schools chose to follow the path followed by the teaching of English and just teach an instrumental approach to Chinese in order for students to get jobs, a great opportunity may be lost. The awarding of the Nobel Prize for literature to two Chinese writers in the past fourteen years suggests that Chinese literature's vibrancy is in no way diminished and that many more great works are to come out of the country, partly as a reflection of its growing self-confidence and partly in response to the many challenges facing it in its modernization.

*Literary Migrations* is an unfinished story. The study of how creative literature has shaped international relations in the past may be only the first half of a story of how literature has continued to shape inter-cultural relationships even now. Perhaps, the English language schools may start to introduce English language creative literature back into their syllabuses in response to such a challenge...if it occurs. We can only dream of education systems teaching the ways literature and language interface each other and shape each other even in this overly-commercialised world that just teaches for tests and to train factory workers.