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Identity and theatre translation in Hong Kong. By Shelby Kar-yan Chan

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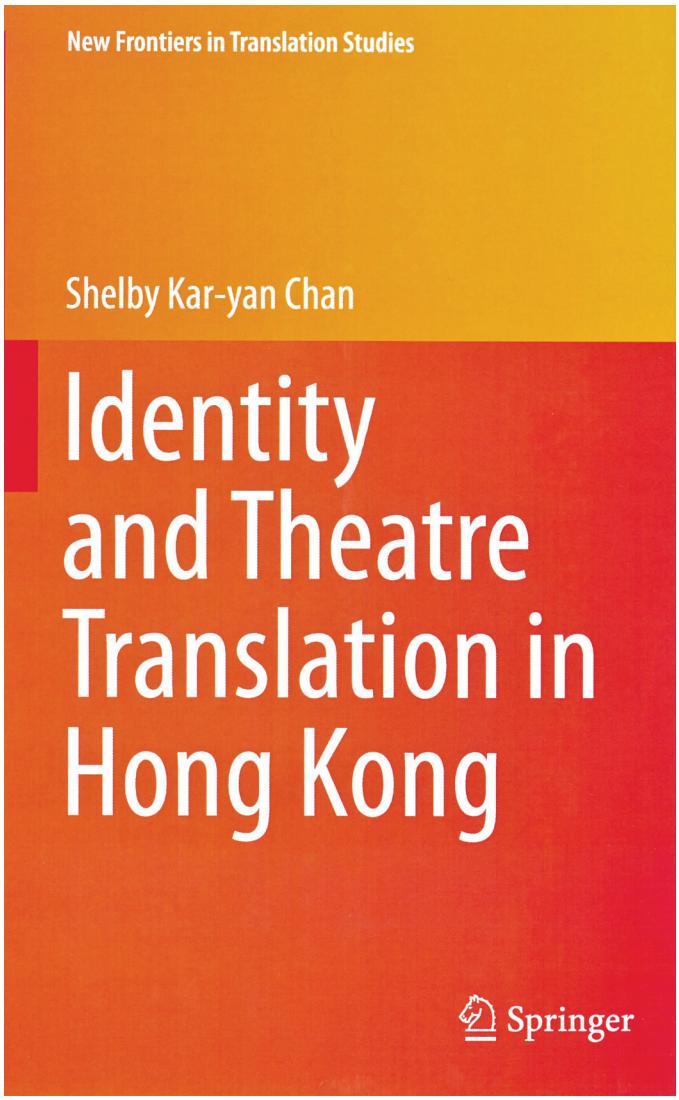

In her recently published monograph, *Theatre Translation and Hong Kong Identity*, Shelby Kar-yan Chan states that her study "represents an attempt to compensate for the general shortage of research into theatre translation as a reflection of identity construction in Hong Kong" (13). But her book does much more. Chan's thesis hinges on the concept of "homelessness at home," a term she coins to describe the Hongkongers' general feeling of a "deprived … sense of ownership and belongingness" (28) — a unique historical circumstance where the territory's denizens were unable to decide their fate as British colonial subjects for a century and a half and who continue to have no say over their political livelihoods after their "return" to Chinese Communist rule in 1997. What is unique to the construction of Hong Kong identity lies, perhaps ironically, in the Hongkongers' being "dependent on their membership [in] the Chinese race and shaped by their colonial past," while at the same time, the "precariousness of the territory's identity heightens Hongkongers' awareness of their differences from mainland Chinese" (29). Chan charts the development of Hong Kong theatre for over a century, focusing on how "translated theatre" (*fanyi ju* 翻譯劇) participated in the construction of a Hong Kong identity in its response to the epochal socio-political changes that impacted the territory in the 1980s and 90s.

Chan's work is empirically grounded and theoretically lucid. Building a theoretical framework on the writings of Jacques Derrida, Homi Bhabha, and Stuart Hall, Chan discusses Hong Kong identity as a "cultural hybridity"[1] lacking a "stable imagined homeland" that "is a matter of 'being' as well as 'becoming'"[2] (3). More specifically, Chan situates her work in the theoretical debates among the principal scholars of Hong Kong Studies, Leung Ping-kwan, Rey Chow, Ackbar Abbas and Leo Ou-fan Lee (5–8), arguing for the importance of translation in "understanding the 'becoming' of identity" in the case of Hong Kong (5). Since "being" and "becoming" are always in states of "in-betweenness," therefore Hong Kong identity resists the notion of being centered entirely in either China or the West; instead, it discriminatingly chooses which aspects of Chinese culture to adopt or reject, displaying a critical "awareness of the needs of the Self and its affirmation" (11–12). In her study, Chan foregrounds the concept of "change" — implying "volatility, adventure and versatility" — to be the distinctive feature in Hong Kong identity construction (15).

1 Homi Bhabha quoted in Chan. For the originals, see Homi Bhabha, "Introduction: Narrating the Nation," in *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), 1-7.

2 Stuart Hall quoted in Chan. For the originals, see Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation," in *Film and Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Robert Stam and Toby Miller (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 704-714.

Demonstrating that the oft-cited postcolonial narrative of the rise of local identity is only partially evinced in the case of Hong Kong, Chan's research offers a much belated but important finding. Postcolonial narratives have accounted for the rise of local identity by focusing on native subjects writing their *own* stories in their *own* language(s) in contrast to the language of the colonial authorities from whom they are breaking away. Through the process of self-writing, these heretofore disparate natives form a subjective group consciousness that in turn develops into a collective local identity. Instead of delving into plays written by Hongkongers, Chan's study, however, focuses on plays that are translated from the Western canon into what she calls "Hongkong-speak" — the creolized form of Cantonese (with a smattering of broken English, various Chinese dialects as well as Japanese, Vietnamese and Korean) spoken in the territory that is distinguished from the Cantonese used in Guangzhou, Vancouver, Sydney, and Kuala Lumpur, among other Cantonese-speaking regions. As opposed to foreign plays (*waiguo ju* 外國劇), which are usually performed in non-Chinese languages for the small expatriate and intellectual communities, and original plays (*yuanchuang ju* 原創劇), which can be avant-garde in nature and hence command only a niche audience (51), translated plays are consumed by a larger audience as evidenced by the tendency of the established Hong Kong theatre companies, such as Hong Kong Repertory Theatre 香港話劇團 and Chung Ying Theatre Company 中英劇團 , to stage more translated plays (52). That several play titles "have been frequently retranslated and rerun" despite the availability of an increased number of original and translated plays leads Chan to consider these "theatre retranslations" to be carrying "certain themes which Hongkongers were particularly keen on revisiting" that are core to the composition of their identity construct (65). Moreover, translated plays, in her opinion, offer a more positive outlook than original plays: in contrast to the notion of home presented in original plays as being "vague, distant and even somewhat lost," locatable perhaps only "in the realm of the beyond" (206), theatre translation negotiates fastidiously between the East-West dichotomy that besieges the territory and acts "like a neutralising agent that counterbalances any discourse that is set to become overwhelming" (80). Most importantly, Chan's account of Hong Kong Self-writing runs contrary to the assumed postcolonial narrative: the expression of Hong Kong subjectivity is achieved "under the protection of the pre-existing" Western text; in other words, the Self-writing process of translated theatre is performed through "rewriting discourses of Others for use by the Self" (214).

In the first part of her monograph, she carefully lays the ground for her readers, outlining her theoretical arch as well as detailing the important socio-political changes in the territory leading up to the development of a Hong Kong consciousness. Following the three introductory

chapters are five case studies wherein she showcases different strategies each theatre translator and director adopted to foreground a different Hong Kong identity construct in response to the changing geopolitical conditions impacting the territory. Chapter 9 is devoted entirely to a discussion of original plays before concluding her ten-chapter study. The trajectory she sketches shows a penchant for emphasizing Westernness in the 1960s, to the late 1990s when the Hong Kong identity construct subverted the West to foreground its own subjectivity, marking the growth of local confidence that emerged in contradistinction to the globality of the West some 30 years ago. Significantly, Chan's historicisation of the socio-political condition specific to each play she examines allows us to see a different Hong Kong identity constructed in each of the five case studies across half a century, accentuating her point that translated theatre is not proactive but rather "*reactive* to what befell the territory and its changing conditions" (79).

The rise of translated theatre to popularity is inseparable from the geopolitical conditions of the times. The closing of the border in 1950 between Hong Kong and the newly established People's Republic of China, the 1966–67 riots, as well as the raising of the Bamboo Curtain during the Cold War not only marked Hong Kong's severance from the mainland but also "a diminishing inclination of Hong Kong people to identify themselves as Chinese nationals" (41–2). The legacy of the Cultural Revolution further exacerbated fears of the territory's stable and prosperous free market economy succumbing to a Communist dictatorship that precipitated fears of a Chinese takeover of Hong Kong in the early 1980s (45). As theatre burgeoned during the "tremendous tension and uncertainty of the 1980s, translated plays "appeared to have been, to a certain extent, able to allay the fear of the [total] eclipse of the Hong Kong identity" (45). Interestingly, Chan's narrative suggests that Hong Kong does not simply deny identity with China. Even while the 1989 Tiananmen Incident left Hongkongers "shocked, disgusted and horrified," worrying if something similar might not happen in post-1997 Hong Kong, what ensued was an upsurge of Hong Kong identity that embraced the Chinese *nation* — and not the Chinese *state* — desiring "an alternative, better Chinese nation than that proffered by the Chinese state, especially when the reunion was impending and the Chinese economy began to gain strength from the 1990s onwards" (49). At the same time, that all the five plays examined originated in the English language is perhaps of no coincidence. As Chan clearly maps out in Chart 3.5: although translated plays in Hong Kong are derived from a variety of source languages, two thirds of these come from the Anglophone world (53). Apart from its British legacy, American intervention to fill the cultural void in the 1950s left by the territory's "alienation from the Chinese hinterland" (42) and the vigorous promotion of "American greenback culture" in its bid to combat "leftist literary power" during the Cold

War "engulfed the sky and swept the ground"[3] of the territory (86). Chan's thesis convincingly demonstrates that Hong Kong traverses between the competing discourses of China and the West, discerning which aspects of Chineseness it desires (such as culture and economy but not politics) in a fine balancing act to maintain its fluctuating subjectivity.

Chan begins five case studies by accounting for the rise of translated theatre in Hong Kong in Chapter 4, first with Chung King-fai's 鍾景輝 return from the prestigious Yale School of Drama in the 1960s, followed by the Seals Players 海豹劇團 and Theatre Space 劇場空間 — groups wholly dedicated to staging translated drama in the 1980s and 1990s. Chan is not altogether uncritical of translated theatre. Although all three are examples of "high-fidelity reproductions" of Western drama, Chung is considered to have capitalized "on the achievement and authority of Western drama … to provide a role model for the [burgeoning] Hong Kong theatre" (86), whereas these two troupes "tended to reinforce rather than destabilise the Westernised identity discourse introduced by British colonial rule" (99). In Chapter 6, she proposes that Rupert Chan's 陳鈞潤 adaptation of *Twelfth Night* (1986) forges "a Hong Kong identity" through sinifying and localising the Shakespearean classic, relocating it to the Chinese Tang dynasty (618–907) at the "south of the ridge" region (142–3, 152). She demonstrates how Rupert Chan's semantic translation performs — in the words of Gilbert Fong — a "reverse mimicry" that empowers local subjectivity: the translated play is so firmly grounded "within the Cantonese cultural context" and its characters' names "so localised" that it gives the impression that the "foreign (the British coloniser)" is imitating "the local (Hong Kong), rather than the other way round" (149).[4] Chan ends in Chapter 8, focusing on the concept of "shifting identities" in Szeto Waikin's 司徒偉健 1993 translation of the Ray Cooney and John Chapman bedroom farce *Move Over, Mrs. Markham!* and Rupert Chan's 1997 stage adaption of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*. Her analyses reveal that in both plays the characters' shifting identities could be read as an allegory of the Sino-Hong Kong political

3 Wong Kai-chee's words quoted in Chan. For the originals, see William Tay 鄭樹森 , Wong Kai-chee 黃繼持 , Lo Wai-luen 盧瑋鑾 , eds., *Xianggang xinwenxue nianbiao (1950–1969)* 香港新文學年表，(一九五〇 —— 一九六九年) [*A Chronology of New Literature of Hong Kong (1950-1969)*] (Hong Kong 香港 : Cosmos Books 天地圖書 , 2000), 17.

4 Quoted in Chan. For the originals, see Gilbert Fong Chee Fun 方梓勳 , "Gangdu yu ma ji qita — Yiming yu yishi xingtai" 港督與馬及其他 —— 譯名與意識形態 ["Hong Kong Governors, Horse and Others — Translated Names and Ideologies"], in *Fanyi xueshu huiyi: Waiwen Zhongyi yanjiu yu tantao* 翻譯學術會議：外文中譯研究與探討 [*Conference on Translation: Studies in Translating into Chinese*], ed. Jin Sheng-hwa 金聖華 , (Hong Kong: Department of Translation, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1998) 420–444.

relationship. In the former, she points out how "Once identities are shuffled, the interpersonal relationship and power structures are twisted and subverted" among the characters (190); in the latter, the female protagonist has learnt that her newly acquired subjectivity is a "systematic consciousness and desire for negotiating identities" and the various identity discourses she puts on under different circumstances are tools for self-empowerment (199). In the same vein, "a persistent appetite for change" is what Chan considers to ground the constancy of Hong Kong identity (200). Translated plays, which capitalise "on change as a motif for the uprooting of certainty and treat difference as a focus for all the fears, confusion and arguments that accompany homelessness," are Chan's cause for optimism as the "homes that translated plays help construct are never finished or completed, but keep on moving to encompass others" (213–4). Such equivocating "about home allows for the multifacetedness and continuity of Self-writing" (214).

In Chapter 7, she turns to *Death of a Salesman* — the foreign play that holds the honor of being restaged most frequently in the territory — contrasting Dominic Cheung (1995) and Hardy Tsoi's (2006) renditions with its 1983 staging in Beijing directed by the playwright Arthur Miller himself. Her intricate discussion of the translation tactics of this contemporary American classic raises two interesting points. First, the play was not localised. To the Hong Kong audience Willy Loman's tragedy can all too readily be interpreted as "the desire for fortune and the desire for sons to be dragons" (*wang zi cheng long* 望子成龍) (177) — the narrative that is synonymous with the Hong Kong dream. The astute Hong Kong audience would have little trouble recognizing the Lomans' "plights of displacement" as their own, since they also suffer from feelings of being "homeless at home" wherein they too are "'displaced' politically and culturally," and both displaced situations may similarly "be remedied with mobility" (172). While Cheung and Tsoi chose not to localise their translation, "they were […] underscoring the fact that there were certain ideas shared between the local and the foreign" that they were projecting "onto the American play" (176). Certain identity traits that might be clouded to the Self are made discernible viewing it through the lenses of the Other owing to its detached distance, therefore achieving what Chan coins "reverse universality" wherein these identity traits are "doubly asserted" (177). Not unlike Gilbert Fong's "reverse mimicry," this strategy proposes that the Hongkongese "Self-identity is reinforced through the discovery of how the Other is similar to the Self" (178), further accentuating the Self identity trait to be universal.

Second, by contrasting this eleven-time restaged work in Hong Kong with the 1983 Beijing rendition, which was also not domesticated for the Chinese audience, Chan further distinguishes the territory from the mainland by pointing out the differences in the staging strategies employed

in the two states, largely owing to their disparate socio-historical conditions. In spite of "the disparities in lifestyle and ideology between the 1930s America and China in the 1980s, especially after close to 30 years of isolation as a result of the Cultural Revolution" (174), Miller attempted to overcome the obstacles to the reception of *Salesman* in China by highlighting the universal aspects of the play, finding "a connection point at which the two worlds would converge" and ensuring that the distance between them "was not so overwhelming that the audience would find the performance 'bizarre' or alienating" (176–7). Therefore while the Beijing reception of the American classic was "still somehow manipulated by a Western Other" (177), the "relatively wealthier and more Westernised capitalistic society of Hong Kong" immediately identified with the play not only because of the play's affinity with "particular features of the Hong Kong identity," but also because Hongkongers "read a particular personality trait of their own into the foreign characters, on the grounds that … *they* are like *us*" (178), again echoing her theory of "reverse universality" further underscoring Hong Kong's distinction from the mainland.

Chan draws her research from a variety of sources, ranging from literary criticism, cultural history, personal interviews, video recordings of performances, population census, play-scripts, statistics of theatrical stagings, newspaper reviews, and live attendance at the theatre to scholarly theoretical debates. Even though the book contains such a vast amount of information and rich analyses of complex material, her lucid prose and clear narrative make it highly readable even to non-specialists of Chinese-language drama and translation studies. Equally superb is her use of graphs, tables and charts to present her comparative analyses between the original play and its Hong Kong rendition, rhyming schemes employed in each translation, and the interwoven relationships between and among characters in multifarious plots. In Tables 3.7–8, for example, she meticulously chronicles the production details of the translated plays most frequently staged in the territory: play title of the original and translation, playwright, translator, director, theatre company, performance date(s) and venue (66–77), are clearly displayed at one glance for over ten pages. In addition, throughout her entire monograph, Chan demonstrates a poetic sensibility not only to the Bard's verses, but also to the rhyming schemes produced by the Hong Kong and Western dramatists she studies.

Most writings on Hong Kong drama are yet unavailable to those who do not read Chinese; in fact to the best of this reviewer's knowledge, Chan's monograph is only the second full-length study on the topic in the English-language after Rozanna Lilley's *Staging Hong Kong: Gender and Performance in Transition* published in 1998. Questions of identity remain both highly contentious and pertinent to the territory as witnessed by the Umbrella Movement barely more than a year ago,

rendering Chan's timely research an invaluable contribution to the debate. This study is a welcome addition to the fields of translation theory, Chinese-language drama and Hong Kong studies, and will be of interest to theatre historians, sociolinguists, cultural theorists, literary specialists, comparativists and political scientists alike. ※