



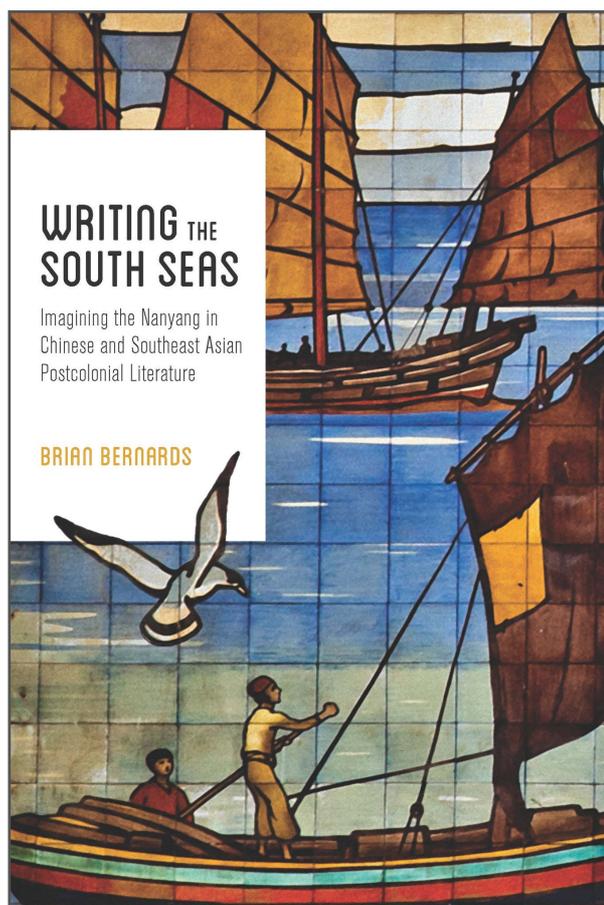
BOOK REVIEW

***Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature* by Brian Bernards
Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015**

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Despite a growing number of literary anthologies featuring writers from across the region, postcolonial literary discourse in Southeast Asia largely remains within the confines of national borders. This also seemed to be the case in Sinophone studies until recently, with a growing number of theorists such as Shih Shu-Mei expanding the definitions of “Sinophone” to include regional as well as diasporic inflections. In *Writing the South Seas*, Brian Bernards continues this line of thought by both critiquing the homogenizing project of “national culture” in postcolonial Southeast Asia, as well as by resituating “Chinese literature” beyond national, territorial, and linguistic borders, and into the Chinese diaspora in the Nanyang (the “South Seas”). He proposes the literary trope of the Nanyang in the understanding of diasporic Chinese literature that renegotiates the boundaries of national literatures: “it is just



as capable of expressing Malaysianness, Singaporeanness, and Thainess as it is

Chineseness”.¹

Deviating from the traditional land-based “continental imagination” that focuses on a singular point of origin as the cultural capital of a particular nation, Bernards’ novel approach draws from Stuart Hall and Epeli Hau-ofa, envisioning this contact point of Southeast Asian and Sinophone literature as a multi-sited, multivalent, and multilingual space where identities are negotiated and formed not through the unilinear passing down of culture, but through the creolization of cultures from multiple points of origin. This “archipelagic imagination” reemphasizes the importance of transcolonial, transnational maritime networks and exchanges across China, Southeast Asia, and the West, in the development of creolized, heterogeneous identities in the archipelagic Nanyang. As Bernards analyzes the literary works of Nanyang authors writing the South Seas, he engages the reader to go riding the South Seas with him, taking us on a literary journey across the archipelago: from the “orientalist” gaze of Imperial China look out to the “primitive” Nanyang; to the emergence of Sinophone Malay literature; to the disillusionment of ethnic nationalism in postcolonial Malaysia and the yearning to sail back to an imagined Chinese homeland (Taiwan); to mainland topographies transposed onto the new motherland of Borneo; to a translingual, transethnic understanding of belonging through *kampong* (village)

nostalgia; to a more flexible, creolized retelling of the narrative of Thai nationhood.

This book is highly recommended for scholars studying the diaspora and its literature, who may find Bernard’s alternative, sea-oriented framework valuable for the understanding of these texts outside nationalist discourse. By featuring the works of diasporic Chinese who have historically been excluded from the nation-building process in the countries of Southeast Asia, this book is also useful in engaging with questions of nationhood and the role that literature has in its formation as well as deconstruction. Through engaging prose and thought-provoking examples, Bernards deftly navigates these literary crossings for the reader, enabling the conceptualization of the Nanyang Imaginary. At a time when the seas surrounding Southeast Asia are increasingly becoming politicized and territorialized, this book serves to remind us of the multiple maritime trajectories and fluid, creolized nature of postcolonial nationhood.

¹ Brian Bernards, *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2015), 9.