

Languages, Scripts, and Chinese Texts in East Asia. By PETER FRANCIS KORNICKI. Oxford: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2018. Pp. xxx + 393. \$97.50.

Every once in a while, we encounter a work that synthesizes the field with an insight that points to new marks for the discipline and its related intellectual endeavors and has the power to change the way we look at what we know. *Languages, Scripts, and Chinese Texts in East Asia* is the second such work by this author, following his *The Book in Japan: A Cultural History from the Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century* (1998). With characteristic clarity and sound logic, Kornicki recounts the processes of how and to what degree written Sinitic became vernacularized in the East Asian sphere.

As the author states in the conclusion (p. 297), there are three obvious reasons for the existence of a work such as this: Sinitic has flourished outside of China for nearly two thousand years; it lived alongside local vernaculars rather than replacing them until the twentieth century; and the societies that engaged with Sinitic did so to different degrees and in very different ways. Indeed, in Part I (Orientation) Kornicki provides the most substantial discussion thus far of the significance of East Asian vernacularization. He weaves his discussion from three different strands. He introduces the problems of script, orality, material texts, and the migration of texts in East Asia; he lays out a detailed survey of the techniques for reading and translating Chinese texts that led up to the development of their vernacular versions; and finally, he focuses on Buddhist, Confucian, and other widely circulating texts that are exemplary of the processes of vernacularization. By doing so, he fixes a series of methods through which we can sort out the multitude of issues involved in the vernacularization of Sinitic in East Asia. A work as comprehensive as this cannot cover all details, but Kornicki successfully creates a general framework capable of encompassing all aspects and contexts necessary to investigate Sinitic literacy and its shifts in pan-East Asian history. All of his insights and observations are substantiated with bibliographical and historical evidence that is measured against current scholarship in multiple languages. This is where the author's expertise makes this book even more valuable and indispensable.

The East Asia that this book explores—often referred to more conceptually than precisely as the Sinosphere—comprises not only the usual members Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, but also the historical Ryūkyū Kingdom and the Jurchen, Khitan, Mongol, and Tangut empires through centuries. These communities, at one time, all shared Sinitic literary culture, and employed one or more of these three options: writing Sinitic with Sinitic, writing vernacular with Sinitic, or creating vernacular scripts in place of Sinitic. What we see in the coexistence of written Sinitic and spoken vernaculars is a continuing process of localizing Sinitic, which in turn reveals two resulting phenomena: a clear division of the written and the oral dimensions; and the absence of translation of local vernaculars into a common Sinitic that could be exchanged between cultures. Thus, a “Sinitic Republic of Letters” never happened (p. 52), because Sinitic never became a spoken language, not to mention the limited opportunities for cross-cultural personal encounters. Rather, each society eventually developed its own script to write the vernacular, and East Asian intellectuals, including those in China, almost totally depended on the written (Sinitic) word for acquiring knowledge, for domesticating Chinese characters, and for vernacularizing their pronunciation. Most of East Asia, therefore, was monolingual, and in the oral dimension even educated people were prisoners of their own vernaculars (p. 100). This is in fact consistent with the “hermetic” nature of East Asian book cultures (p. 299), due to two factors: most Sinitic texts

written outside China never circulated inter-regionally, and the Chinese preference for “cultural non-proliferation” (p. 133) caused Chinese courts and elites to restrict, or at least not encourage, sharing literary canons with non-Chinese peoples. Thus, there was no “printing revolution” in East Asia as it had transpired in early modern Europe.

What happened within the material space of East Asian books demonstrates how these societies approached Sinitic texts, which Kornicki classes as “vernacular reading.” Vernacular reading is different from translation. The author makes a crucial contribution by introducing the notion of “bound translation” (p. 166), a seemingly expedient form of translation that retains the vocabulary of the original except for grammatical function words. This reading process is often invisible on the surface of the texts but encoded in the form of punctuation and glosses to the original, exemplified by such practices as *kundoku* in Japan or interpretive and consecutive *kugyōl* in Korea. In that sense, a bound translation is a third text, juxtaposed between a fully Sinitic and a fully vernacular text. It was embedded in Sinitic but was malleable enough to be realized in an oral dimension that must have varied according to its temporal, regional, and linguistic conditions. It is likely that vernacular reading first required mentally reordering the original Sinitic into a recognizable vernacular word order and adding particles and inflections in order to transform it into something close to the spoken vernacular. The textual manifestation of this vernacularization process is not uniform, for in some societies, like the Khitan, Tangut, and Jurchen empires, translations were made directly from Sinitic to a vernacular using vernacular scripts, whereas in others, like Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, glossing and punctuation, often in Sinographic scripts, were more prevalent as an intermediary process leading to eventual vernacular renditions. In all cases, however, vernacular reading is a logical necessity, regardless of its physical traces on the book surface. Vernacular reading and bound translation were also practiced pedagogically, to the degree of being actively adapted into oral exercises (such as *sodoku* in Japan) to “train learners in being trained” (p. 178). As the author insightfully points out, vernacular readings eventuate more than antiquarianism or the prestige of Chinese culture, by rendering the Sinitic texts contemporary as well as linguistically and aurally familiar (p. 185).

But the vernacular translation following a vernacular reading did not ensue naturally in terms of quality or quantity. There were texts that transcribed bound translations; some that rewrote it in a less bound, hence more vernacular, language; and some that explained the gist of the original based on commentaries and glosses. Vietnamese translations intriguingly preferred verse-style even for original texts in prose. Textual genres that were translated ranged from Confucian classics to lectures, medical texts, and conduct books. Some were more frequently, others more freely translated than others. Compounded by the variety of physical layouts, such as juxtaposition of the Sinitic and vernacular paragraphs, cramming the vernacular into double lines below the Sinitic, or reserving the upper margin for vernacular translation, the unfurling of vernacular translation of the Sinitic across East Asia is indeed complex. Behind this complexity, as the author notes, lie a changing political environment and questions of identity attached to vernacular scripts. As a result, fully domesticated vernacular translations of Sinitic texts for the most part did not appear until the twentieth century.

A more finely grained analysis focuses on phases and grades of vernacularization. Buddhist canons, having first been translated into Sinitic from Sanskrit and then spread beyond China to other East Asian communities, maintained a distinction between oral and written domains. The concept of a canon certainly contributed to the formation of the cult of books with Sinitic texts as material objects, whereas sermons and lectures were done in the local oral vernacular. The fact that Buddhism came to most communities not as an independent religion but as a part of Chinese literary culture also helped maintain the tradition of written Sinitic while hiding the vernacular in oral environments. Vernacular reading techniques for Confucian classics developed alongside those for Buddhist scriptures. Civil service examinations and literacy education placed Confucian classics as the textual core in a pan-East Asian environment and provided common points of reference, much as the Bible in premodern Europe and the Quran in the Islamic world (p. 248) did. Vernacular glosses and translations served only as adjuncts to Sinitic texts. Primers for Sinitic literacy are another genre of texts inevitably associated with the vernacular, but understandably they are not fully vernacularized and remain resolutely bound to the original Sinitic. Medical texts and conduct books, on the other hand, were directly translated

from Sinitic into vernacular, often foregoing punctuation and glossing. This was done for varying but specific sets of reasons. Medical texts from China contained names of herbs and medicines that needed to be identified in practice, while many conduct books targeted readers, especially women, who were not expected to be able to read Sinitic or to be literate at all.

Concluding this painstakingly thorough study, the author finally explains why Sheldon Pollock's "cosmopolitan versus vernacular" is an "uncomfortably binary formulation" when it comes to the issue of Sinitic in East Asia (p. 298). It is clear why, at the beginning, the author renounced both diglossia and bilingualism as inappropriate designations to describe the East Asian linguistic situation and instead redrew a continuum with written Sinitic at one end, written vernaculars at the other, and a range of hybrid forms in between (pp. 38–40). The many dimensions of vernacularization in East Asia, as Kornicki shows, were not unilinear or consistent but rather demonstrated different modes and employed multiple strategies, even within a single community. Vernacularization was a matter of domesticating Sinitic for different purposes and reasons in each society, also often fraught with political negotiations. East Asian communities were sharply divided from each other, in spite of the existence of a purportedly cosmopolitan language, each being net importers of Sinitic texts but rarely exporters of their own works in it (p. 299). Therefore, as the author seems to imply, Sinitic did not serve to construct a cosmopolitan literacy in East Asia.

The careful contextualization of myriad details allows the reader to access a field of intellectual and print history that is otherwise ambiguous and murky. To start with, we can now embark on a more rigorous investigation of the concept of the vernacular. We often treat the vernacular as a constant that stands in contrast to the literary, as if there is a language that is concrete, self-contained, and distinct from the literary. But, as Kornicki's work demonstrates, "vernacular" is a highly malleable term enclosed within a blurry semantic boundary. The author himself has laid down a flexible definition of the vernacular, as "various forms of Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese . . . that found themselves in contact with Sinitic, the cosmopolitan written language." Written languages always affect vernaculars, and vice versa. In many East Asian languages, the imported Sinitic lexicon vastly replaced vernacular words, or coexisted with them in specific semantic roles; local literati coined a sizable number of words in Sinitic. The high frequency of Sinitic vocabulary in modern vernacular Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese bespeaks how "unvernacular" modern vernaculars are. Furthermore, even some of the grammatical patterns devised for bound translation, unnatural as they may have been, became naturalized in modern written vernaculars, at least in Japan and Korea. Therefore, vernacular and literary languages are never separated by clear boundaries, let alone have distinct identities as two self-contained languages. If vernaculars can only be understood as a concept without a fixed designation, how to discuss vernacularization? Kornicki connects it to John Whitman's notion of the vernacular's relationship to orality, "the fact of oral reading calls into question any absolute distinction between cosmopolitan and vernacular texts based on their written form alone. . . . Texts produced in the cosmopolitan written form . . . were performed and consumed in the vernacular" (p. 184). Then again, how else can we investigate vernacularization without postulating vernaculars? This book finally affords us *a terminus a quo* to engage in critical studies on the multifarious fates of East Asian vernaculars.

The consumption and translation of Chinese vernacular fiction is another example of murky reality. The spoken-language elements in Chinese fiction made it difficult to read even for those who were trained to read Sinitic, and the fiction texts were not amenable to vernacular glossing (pp. 288–93). Readers had thus to rely on vernacular translation or adaptation and on works inspired by Chinese novels, as is epitomized in Edo Japan. But the situation was not so straightforward in other regions. In Korea, as the author explains, some elites who had served on missions to China and familiarized themselves with spoken Chinese read them in Chinese, while others turned to vernacular translations in han'gŭl. But these translations were mostly in manuscripts that could not have circulated widely. And Chosŏn-Korean literati, even those who served on envoy missions to China, were rarely bilingual in any meaningful sense. Still, it is evident that Chinese fiction was widely read, especially in literati circles based in the Seoul area toward the later period of Chosŏn. Here we have an odd asymmetry between readability and readership: if few people could read vernacular Chinese and there were few vernacular translations available, how could there have been a regular consumption of Chinese fiction?

One may propose another premise to this asymmetry. Chosŏn literati were not at all unfamiliar with what was perceived as “vernacular” Chinese, since they had been reading *ŏrok-ch’e* (C. *yuluti*) or “conversational style” texts for a few centuries in the form of records of eminent Buddhist monks’ sayings and major Neo-Confucian texts such as the *Sayings of Zhu Xi* (Zhuzi yulei) and the *Reflections on Things at Hand* (Jinsi lu), which were written in so-called early *baihua* (vernacular Chinese). Although the linguistic details of early *baihua* were not the same as those of Ming-Qing Chinese vernacular fiction, not to mention that their comprehension of *ŏrok-ch’e* was not entirely well grounded in the first place, it never deterred Chosŏn literati from reading fiction imported from China. How well they understood the texts they were reading and how well they thought they understood them are different matters. Kornicki’s careful unravelling of the history of Sinitic and vernacular and their interactions in a variety of forms in East Asia enables us to see where these variations happened and how literacy reacted in different surroundings.

The sobering realization that most Sinitic texts did not get translated until the twentieth century makes us re-appreciate the “epistemological rupture” in modern East Asia, with which the author commenced the entire discussion (p. 26). The resounding effect of this rupture runs far and wide, from the formation of national languages, linguistic politics, colonialism, and the search for modern literary languages, to cultural negotiations and (re-)constructed traditions, translation and subscription to world literature, and so on. The break from Sinitic as “universal writing” that once had been accepted voluntarily in East Asian communities—sometimes at the expense of foreignizing their own languages—does not just mean switching over to vernacular scripts. Vernacularization is still in progress, and this book tells us why. The author’s clear and eloquent language lucidly leads the reader through the complexity of technical details and comparative data that he has carefully accumulated. Every node of comparison inspires new topics of discussion. This is a truly ground-breaking book.

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