***Beyond Good and Evil? Essays on the Literature and Culture of the Asia-Pacific Region*. Ed. Dennis Haskell, Megan McKinlay and Pamina Rich. Perth: U of Western Australia P, 2005, 231pp.**
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At the end of 2003, the tenth symposium on literature and culture in the Asia-Pacific region was held at the University of Western Australia. For twenty years the venue has alternated between Perth and the National University of Singapore. This curiously and complicatedly titled book, *Beyond Good and Evil? Essays on the Literature and Culture of the Asia-Pacific Region*, is a selection from papers given at the latest symposium. Let's reverse the usual order of reviewing procedures for conference collections and begin—not with the over-arching concept of the book and the symposium, but with an address to some of the individual offerings.

Agnes Lam leads off the section called "Moral Values and Moral meanings" with a commentary on the ambivalence of political orientation in Hong Kong writing. More generally she notes that "the man or woman in the street loves freedom of speech but hates American imperialism or British colonialism". That declaration done, caution takes over and we don't learn much more. Roger Bourke's article on the allied Prisoner-of-War as Christ-figure will be familiar to some already because his useful book, *Prisoners of the Japanese*, beat this one into print. In "Typical Evil?" Megumi Kato rehearses familiar material in discussing representations of the Japanese in Australian War Writings. By 1941, "the imagined enemy, faceless and coming *en masse*, was finally taking form". Nearer to the present, she looks for a more hopeful relationship between the two countries.

One of the strongest pieces is Souk Yee Wong's fascinating commentary on Kuo Pao Kim's play in numerous languages, *Mama Looking For Her Cat*. She trenchantly investigates Singapore's curb on languages other than Mandarin and English (notably Malay, Tamil or such dialects of Chinese as Hokkien). It is a process that she names "self-Orientalism". Less is transacted in Chitra Sankaran's discussion of Salman Rushdie's novel *Fury*. There is plot summary and grand gesture: "Thus, at the centre of *Fury*, this Nietzschean-Whitmaneseque mode of privileging contradictions and aligning oppositions is evident". Which brings us to the next part of the book, blandly titled "Individual and National Identity".

It opens with a potentially interesting, but ultimately incomprehensible, piece by Dean Chan on "Staging Hybridity in the Chinese-Australian Visual Arts Context". The hands of Homi Bha-bha and others lie heavily on this piece. Thus, "Implicit in the foregoing reading of Beynon's work is a now well-rehearsed reading of the potential for critically negotiating hybrid identification and diasporic ambivalence". No doubt advisedly, Chan concludes by cautioning us that "abstract metaphors" can lead to "thorny problems of fetishisation". With relief, one comes upon Tseen Khoo's account of "Representations of Chinese-Australian Heritage". Intelligent, illuminating, the article confronts the problem of finding faces with which to people a heritage site, and not just a place for it. At Ararat, for instance, "the literature of the heritage centre collapses narratives of Chinese community establishment with the timeless homeland of China and Chinese culture".

The last part of the book, "A Writer's Reflections", in fact contains three of them, by the Australian dramatist John Romeril, who is still best known for his play *The Floating World*, by the poet Miriam W. Lo, whose "Tale of Two Grandmothers" probes the issues of a writer's sources and finally by Alf Taylor, "a Nyoongah writer and a man of the Stolen Generation". He offers an extract from "God, the Devil, and Me". That done, we are left to wonder what to make of it all, especially in the light of the book's title and its provenance. So it is time to return to the opening salvoes of *Beyond Good and Evil?*

The introduction relates the first, Nietzschean part of the title to that fissure in world affairs, 11 September 2001, and considers how the antithetical concepts may have become less relative than he intended. Then a long bow is drawn, as the three editors—Dennis Haskell, Megan McKinlay and Pamina Rich—assert "the need for intellectual discussion about the Asia-Pacific and the theme of good and evil". "Theme" of what exactly, or who? And then only to do with a vast and disparate region? The second part of the book's title mentions that region, but nowhere is there a discussion of what it actually comprises. Much of Asia, after all, is as far from the Pacific as—say—Perth, where the symposium was held. The Pacific is hardly addressed in these papers at all, except in so far as a couple of them are concerned with the Pacific theatre of the Second World War. The flag of convenience, Asia-Pacific, needs to be struck, and the notion radically reconsidered, perhaps in the next symposium.

The foreword to the book comes from retired diplomat Sue Boyd (among whose postings was three years as Australian ambassador to Vietnam). Retired

she may be, but the prose of her calling has not deserted her in this title: "The International Spread of Ideas and Their Impact on Societies in Our Region". Boyd's place in the book suggests that this is the sort of enterprise that the Australian government, which she served, would welcome. It is, after all, a tool of cultural diplomacy. The spread of Australian literature overseas (its retreat in its own country is another story)—to readers, scholars, students, translators in many cities and several continents, is one of the great successes of that diplomacy.

Boyd makes the salutary point that "there is less contact between contemporary Australian and contemporary Pacific Islanders than there ought to be" (or is in this book) before handing over to the two distinguished founders of this symposium: the poet and emeritus professor at the National University of Singapore, Edwin Thumboo, and Professor Bruce Bennett, of the University of New South Wales at ADFA. Both of them attack the debasement of the study of literature. Thumboo deplores the shift of literary scholarship towards cultural studies; remarks how the "exciting interplay in dialectics . . . is self-approving". Bennett's "personal protest" against "genuflections in the direction of Paris and Yale", was to turn in his own scholarly practice to biography and literary history.

Accentuating the positive (although his contribution is titled "Who Moved the Literature?"), Thumboo speaks of the rich potential for inquiry in South-East Asia (no Pacific is mentioned), "the only region in the world where all the major modern colonialisms have come together". Bennett's title suggests that he is more sure than Thumboo of the status of his subject. "The Ground We Stand On" recalls the special relationship between "university intellectuals and writers in Perth and Singapore" that has been both the initial inspiration for the symposium and the source of its continual refreshment. Yet he, too, strikes gloomy notes, not only about the shrinking pool of Asia specialists in Australia, but—"equally alarming"—"the general lack of interest among Asian university scholars and students in Australia". Maybe the diplomacy is not working as well as had been hoped, or is it the necessary condition of such admirable collections as this one to invest itself with cultural pessimism, to doubt the worth of its project at the same time as diligently and creatively pursuing it?

Peter Pierce