

Tiffany Tsao as a Cultural Agent in Indonesian Literary Circulation: A World Literature Case Study

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Abstract

This paper investigates the function of Tiffany Tsao as a cultural agent in disseminating Indonesian literature to world literature. Although existing studies have extensively explored her micro-level language use and translation techniques, a noticeable lacuna still exists in relation to her non-textual contribution as an institutional figure and public intellectual. In order to fill this lacuna, this paper attempts to explore the way in which Tsao utilizes her position within transnational networks to reform and criticize the visibility of Indonesian literature within a global context. Using the qualitative approach with the design of a case study, this study employs a primary source corpus consisting of essays, interviews, speeches, and institutional documents ranging from 2019 to 2025. These results show how Tsao's embodied and embedded cultural capital allows her to position herself authoritatively in translation, whereas the honor of awards such as the PEN Translation Prize boosts her symbolic capital. Moreover, her scholarly work brings to light the oppressive gatekeeping practices within English-language publishing that make it necessary for periphery texts to become "foreign in familiar ways." This study argues that translation itself is a contentious act of cultural production, one in which Indonesian literature gains global distribution through Tsao's resistant mediation.

Keywords: cultural agent, Indonesian literature, Tiffany Tsao, translator, world literature

Introduction

The growing connectivity in today's world has changed the processes of writing, publication, and consumption of literary pieces in terms of crossing borders. For that reason, literary pieces are not limited only to linguistic and cultural circles from where they emerged; rather, such texts are circulated internationally in the form of translations. World literature as an academic discipline recognizes this trend in focusing on the way literary pieces move out of their original settings and create new interpretations when circulating across nations (Damrosch, 2003). Translation plays a pivotal role in the way national literature makes its way to a global literary sphere. Translation and its significance to world literature have been a subject of intense academic scrutiny over the last two decades. The argument is that translation acts as a link between various literary schools and ensures cross-cultural interaction beyond language barriers (Damrosch, 2014; Walkowitz, 2015). This way, literary productions in lesser-spoken languages can be made more available and become part of the world's literary dialogue. Translation is, therefore, not just a mechanical exercise of converting one language into another but a cultural activity that impacts the visibility and reception of literature. Without translation, literary traditions would be largely closed off from the rest of the world.

When we consider the body of literature in terms of world literature, the literature of Indonesia becomes an interesting subject. Indonesia is a country that has a long and diverse tradition of literature, which has been heavily influenced by many factors historically,

culturally, religiously, and linguistically. There are many literary works of Indonesian literature that focus on a wide array of social, political, and cultural themes. Some of these are the stories about colonialism written in *This Earth of Mankind* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer, the theme of nationalism and identity in the works of Chairil Anwar, gender inequality in novels by Ayu Utami, migration in contemporary Indonesian literature, as well as the themes of religion, cultural change, and globalization in the works of modern Indonesian writers. However, compared to the literature traditions of Europe, North America, Latin America, or East Asia, Indonesian literature seems rather underrepresented (Allen, 2015). New developments, nonetheless, show a growing international engagement with literary products from Indonesia. Indonesian literary works are increasingly gaining international recognition through translations into English and other major languages. In recent years, Indonesian literature has increased their participation in the global literary arena through various international translations, involvement in the international literary festival like the Ubud Writers & Readers Festival and the Frankfurt Book Fair, and through publication by international publishers. The increasing global visibility of Indonesian authors like Eka Kurniawan, Leila S. Chudori, and Tiffany Tsao, who have seen their books translated and published internationally, is an indicator of the increasing opportunities that Indonesian literature has to participate in world literary circulation. Despite the increasing possibilities of Indonesian literature becoming part of world literature, it should be recognized that there is no automaticity in the process of literary movement.

In this regard, translators play a significant role among these individuals. The conventional understanding of translators has viewed them as agent, whose main function is the translation of meaning from one language to another (Venuti, 2018). Recent research has identified translators as literary actors who actively participate in the processes of production and distribution of literature. Instead of acting as a neutral agent, translators determine the choice of text for translation, provide cultural interpretation, help receive literary works by others, and establish literary value (Buzelin, 2011; Roig-Sanz & Meylaerts, 2018). This viewpoint has led to the emergence of such an idea as the translator agency, highlighting the active role of translators. In the field of world literature, cultural agent refers to individuals or institutions that facilitate the movement of literary works across linguistic, cultural, and national boundaries by mediating between authors, translators, publishers, and readers (Bennett, 1993; Wolf & Fukari, 2007). They participate in the selection, translation, promotion, publication, and legitimization of literary texts, thereby influencing which works circulate internationally and how they are interpreted in different cultural contexts (Bourdieu, 1993; Damrosch, 2003). In the context of Indonesian literature, cultural agent includes translators, literary agents, publishers, editors, and literary festival organizers who collectively contribute to the international dissemination and recognition of Indonesian literary works through translation, publishing networks, and cross-cultural exchange. The increased awareness that translators are cultural agents has led researchers to focus on the role played by translators in the larger processes of literary circulation. The translation process is one in which translators mediate between authors, publishers, and audiences as well as other literary organizations within varying cultural environments. The decisions made by translators in relation to which books are to be translated, how they should be translated, and how they should be promoted have an important impact on literary visibility. Thus, the issue of literary circulation cannot be separated from considerations of individual translators (Sapiro, 2020).

One particular translator who has made noteworthy contributions within the realm of Indonesian literature is Tiffany Tsao. Tsao is a U.S.-based writer, translator, editor, and literary critic who traces her ancestry back to Chinese and Indonesian families, and whose contribution has been pivotal towards bringing the rich literature of Indonesia into English-speaking communities (IDWriters, 2026). As part of her translation endeavors, Tsao has made major

contributions to the translation of some of the most acclaimed books by authors like Budi Dharma, Norman Erikson Pasaribu, Dee Lestari, and Laksmi Pamuntjak (IDWriters, 2026). Her translations have also received notable honors, such as the PEN Translation Prize, and have been nominated for the International Booker Prize (IDWriters, 2026). However, there is more to the role that Tsao plays than just being an interpreter of Indonesian literature for foreign readership. In many forums where the topics of Indonesian literature, translation politics, literary representation, and inequality within global publishing houses have been discussed, Tsao has contributed significantly. In her essays, such as “Why Are Indonesians Being Erased from Indonesian Literature?” (Tsao, 2019a) and “The Indonesian Writers Are Where They’ve Always Been—and Stop Making Them Invisible” (Tsao, 2019b), she addresses structural inequalities and postcolonial power imbalances that impact the international representation of Indonesian literature. It implies that Tsao’s involvement goes beyond language.

One way in which the story of Tiffany Tsao can be utilized to study the ways in which translators contribute to the process of circulation in world literature is by looking at their functions beyond translation practices. In this context, the existing body of research has mainly analyzed the work of Tiffany Tsao from the translation of the text perspective. The studies analyze the strategies used by Tiffany Tsao in translating culture specific terms (Ifadloh et al., 2024), idiom translation strategies in *Paper Boats* (Utami et al., 2023), as well as translation techniques and cultural adaptation in Indonesian literary translation (Utami, 2017). Other researchers have investigated the process of lexical translation, culture specific terminology, and translation strategies in English translations of Indonesian literary texts (Aziz, 2017; Azka & Sutrisno, 2025). These works have contributed much to the understanding of the linguistic and cultural aspects of literary translation. Nevertheless, they mainly focus on the process of translation of the text and the linguistic choices made by the translator. As a result, there is insufficient attention paid to the role of the translator as a cultural mediator, promoting the literature of a certain country internationally. Therefore, a new area requiring further research is the analysis of Tiffany Tsao as a cultural mediator promoting Indonesian literature internationally. Not much work has been done on her functions as a cultural agent. This means that while research on textual aspects and idioms of her translations has been studied in depth, questions related to cultural mediation and literary advocacy, among others, have been ignored. In an attempt to fill this void, the present research looks at the work of cultural agent Tiffany Tsao as one who engages in the circulation of Indonesian literature in the field of world literature.

The current research uses the theoretical perspective that combines the theory of world literature suggested by David Damrosch and the sociology of cultural production by Pierre Bourdieu. The concept of world literature is defined by Damrosch (2003) as literary productions that receive new meaning and broader reception during their movement outside their native culture via mechanisms of translation, publication, and cross-cultural reception. This theoretical perspective serves as a basis to analyze the participation of Indonesian literary productions in the global literary system. In addition to the above-mentioned theoretical approach, Bourdieu’s sociology of cultural production (1993) considers literature as a social field in which the agents including authors, translators, publishers, editors, and literary institutions compete and cooperate to produce and legitimize cultural products. Translators are considered in the context of the sociological theory not only as mediators in language issues but also as cultural agents affecting the international reception of literary works. Combining these two theoretical approaches, the current research aims at analyzing the role of Tiffany Tsao’s translation works, publishing collaborations, literary activism, and international networking in the process of Indonesian literature circulation in the field of world literature.

Method

The theoretical approaches adopted in this study are the theories of world literature proposed by David Damrosch (2003) and cultural production by Pierre Bourdieu (1993). These theories have been applied in a complementary way in order to address both the circulation of Indonesian literature within the world literary system and the role of the translator as a cultural intermediary.

David Damrosch's approach will be used to explore the process through which Indonesian literature becomes world literature via translation and international diffusion. In opposition to world literature as a closed canon of books, the idea of world literature proposed by David Damrosch refers to a dynamic concept where literary texts become "world literature" through circulation outside their own national and linguistic spheres. Hence, in this context, the translations and international literary activities of Tiffany Tsao will be examined.

Bourdieu's sociological theory of cultural production is used in analyzing the social aspects of literary circulation. In his sociological theory of cultural production, Bourdieu understands the concept of literature as a cultural field created through the relationship among different actors such as authors, translators, literary festivals, publishing organizations, and educational institutions. Translators in such a field have cultural and symbolic capitals that allow them to decide which literary pieces are chosen, translated, promoted, and legitimized in the international market. Using this theory, the current study will be able to analyze Tiffany Tsao as not just a translator but also a cultural agent.

The application of the above-mentioned frameworks is performed through qualitative document analysis, during which the data are extracted from various sources, such as the translated works of Tiffany Tsao, her interviews, essays, public speeches, published materials on the publisher's website, the presence at literary festivals, and other available documents. While analyzing the information, the data are initially coded through Damrosch's literary circulation, translation, and international reception concepts. Afterward, the data are interpreted with the help of the Bourdieu's concepts of literary field, cultural capital, symbolic capital, and cultural agents in order to reveal the way Tiffany Tsao assists in the international circulation of Indonesian literature.

Table 1. Primary Data Corpus

Document Type	Source/Title Covered	Analytical Focus
Critical Essays	"Why Are Indonesians Being Erased from Indonesian Literature?" (Tsao, 2019a)	Analysis of institutional critique, post-colonial gatekeeping, and field positioning
	"The Indonesian Writers Are Where They've Always Been—and Stop Making Them Invisible" (Tsao, 2019b)	
Translation Portfolio	<i>People from Bloomington</i> (Budi Darma) <i>Happy Stories, Mostly</i> (Norman Erikson Pasaribu)	Evaluation of paratextual framing (introductions) and textual cultural mediation
Public Lectures / Interviews	"Beyond Novelty and Exoticism" (Tsao, 2022) Interviews with <i>Words Without Borders</i> and <i>Liminal Magazine</i> (2021)	Conceptualizations of translation politics and market-driven "travelability"
Institutional Records	PEN America Award Documentation (2023) International Booker Prize Shortlist Records (2022)	Verification and tracking of symbolic capital accumulation

The secondary sources used in this study include peer-reviewed scholarly journals which contain the theory and analysis framework to analyze the primary data. The sources have been chosen due to their relation to translator agency, cultural mediation, literary circulation, and world literature, thus establishing that the analysis will be grounded in academic debates related to these topics.

The first set of secondary sources includes peer-reviewed journal articles analyzing translator agency, sociology of translation, cultural mediation, and circulation of literature internationally. Works like “Translation Strategies Used by Tiffany Tsao in Rendering Culture-Specific Items in Dewi Lestari’s *Paper Boats*” (Ifadloh et al., 2024), “Idiom-Translating Strategies in *Perahu Kertas* Novel by Dee Lestari Translated by Tiffany Tsao” (Utami et al., 2023), and some other recent works on Indonesian literary translation offer important insight into linguistic and cultural aspects of Tiffany Tsao’s translation. They provide the current state of art in the field, at the same time revealing the fact that the previous research in the field was mainly focused on translation strategies of translators but not on their wider role in the international literary scene. Therefore, they are a very important ground to identify the research gap.

The second set includes academic monographs and articles on the sociology of culture, cultural production, translation, and world literature. The main references in this set are *The Field of Cultural Production* by Pierre Bourdieu (1993), *World Literature in Theory* by David Damrosch (2014), and *What Is World Literature?* (2003). Other sources related to sociologies of translation and cultural mediation have been included in this list wherever applicable. Scholarly works in this section form the theoretical basis of our analysis, which focuses on literary production as a social phenomenon with many actors and institutions involved in the process of translation and circulation of literary works.

Moreover, the research is informed by the theoretical foundations that form the basis of the analysis. Works by Pierre Bourdieu such as “The Forms of Capital” (1986) and *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) are utilized in analyzing the theories of cultural capital, symbolic capital, the literary field, and cultural agents. The use of these theories helps to analyze the position of Tiffany Tsao within the international literary networks and the role she plays in promoting Indonesian literature. On the other hand, in addition to the sociological approach, theories from *What Is World Literature?* (2003) and *Around the World in 80 Books* (2021) by Damrosch help understand the process of transforming literary works into world literature through translation and reception outside their culture.

Furthermore, prior studies that have been done on the role of Tiffany Tsao in her translations and on the English translation of Indonesian literary works are taken into account to situate the present research in the current scholarly context. Even though there is significant information provided in these studies about translation methods, cultural adaptation, and language use in the process of translating literary works from Indonesian to English, these studies rarely address the larger role played by Tiffany Tsao in this process as a cultural mediator. Thus, in addition to situating the present study in the current research context, prior studies further emphasize its novelty and relevance.

The data collection involved qualitative document analysis which involved a systematic and iterative process of reading the documents from the primary and secondary corpus, followed by the identification, extraction, and organization of relevant textual data (Bowen, 2009). The methodology allowed the researcher to look at textual and contextual data related to the translation practice, publications, literary promotion and involvement in international literary networks of Tiffany Tsao. The data extracted were then analyzed through thematic analysis to reveal patterns, concepts, and relationships relevant to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2021). In line with the theoretical framework proposed for the study, the codes generation and analysis were done deductively, based on the concepts of David Damrosch’s

world literature theory and Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of culture, namely World Literary Circulation, Cultural Capital, Symbolic Capital, Gatekeeping, Literary Field, and Cultural Agency. The interpretation of the data coded was used to determine how the activities of Tiffany Tsao go beyond translation to allow the international circulation, legitimization, and recognition of Indonesian literature within the global literary field.

Results and Discussion

Tiffany Tsao's Cultural Capital in the Transnational Literary Field

The results show that the role of Tiffany Tsao in the domain of world literature is greatly influenced by her cultural capital in the form of linguistic ability, educational background, and international literary practice. As argued by Bourdieu (1986), the cultural capital of a person consists of his or her education, qualifications, and engagement with cultural production. Such a background helps the individual occupy a legitimate place in a certain cultural field. This can be seen in the career history of Tsao as both a writer and translator.

From Tsao's biography, it can be noted that she possesses a strong educational background in literary studies and linguistics. She graduated with a PhD in English Literature from the University of California, Berkeley, where she was also taught Indonesian language and literature (Tsao, n.d.). An example of this can be found when Tsao speaks about her linguistic abilities in terms of Indonesian literature: "I grew up hearing Indonesian spoken around me, and though I occasionally used it myself, I only began making concerted efforts to improve my language abilities during graduate school by taking classes and reading Indonesian fiction" (Tsao, 2019a). This quote is proof that her linguistic proficiency was not acquired passively; on the contrary, it was acquired actively through academic knowledge. As Bourdieu would say, it represents the acquisition of embodied cultural capital through education.

Another example of this is evident from her definition of professional transformation as: "I moved from being a reader of Indonesian literature to researching it as an academic before becoming a full-time writer and translator" (Tsao, 2019a). This reflects a progressive movement from reception to production in the literary field. It is through such an extensive accumulation of academic and linguistic capital that Tsao was endowed with the structural competency necessary for translating extremely complicated and unconventional texts. Such a move is empirically evident in her translation of Budi Darma's prose in *People from Bloomington* wherein her academic education enabled her to expertly emulate the bleak American rhythm in the latter part of the twentieth century without compromising the Indonesian psychological essence of the text. In terms of Bourdieu's theoretical framework, such a movement demonstrates how cultural capital serves as the basis of gaining access to power in the literary field.

Tiffany Tsao as a Cultural Agent in Indonesian Literary Representation

It is evident from the research results that Tsao serves as a cultural agent who critically analyzes the workings behind the global representation of Indonesian literature. Cultural agent, according to Roig-Sanz and Meylaerts (2018), encompasses both the transfer of literature and the reception processes of its meanings through various cultures. This can be evidenced in the following quote taken from the essay titled "Why Are Indonesians Being Erased from Indonesian Literature?" written by Tsao: "I have become increasingly horrified at the multiple layers of gatekeeping that distort the Western world's impression of Indonesian writing" (Tsao, 2019a). This quote reflects her keen understanding of the filtering mechanisms that operate within literary publication. "Multiple layers of gatekeeping" suggests that the dissemination of literature is managed through institutions that include publishers, literary editors, and literary agents.

Another proof of her awareness can be observed from the critique she makes of publishing pressures: “Publishers aren’t looking for you; they’re looking for Indonesia” (Tsao, 2019a). This statement emphasizes the way in which Indonesian literature has been relegated to mere representation at the national level instead of being analyzed for its literary value as an independent entity.

Tsao goes further to explain this phenomenon as follows: “Foreign work needs to be foreign in familiar ways exotic enough to give the reader satisfaction about foraying into another country or culture without overwhelming or alienating them” (Tsao, 2019a). The paradox shows how the expectations of a global readership dictate literary production and selection. Literary works should be “different” but at the same time comfortably familiar, which restricts their authenticity. Furthermore, interview data also suggests the intermediary role played by Tsao. In her interview, Tsao says that publishers look for Indonesian literature that meets certain aesthetic criteria, that Indonesian literary texts are often expected to have “overtly Indonesian settings” or something that would assist in understanding “what Indonesia is like” (Mercer, 2019).

Such ideological criticism of the cultural framework is seen empirically in her translation process where she opposes such attempts at domestication. For instance, in the case of translation of *Paper Boats* (*Perahu Kertas*) written by Dee Lestari, the text data clearly indicates how Tsao functions as an intermediary in resisting these domestication efforts by consciously retaining culture-specific items (CSIs) as well as idiomatic expressions among others without substituting them with Westernized versions which make reading easier for the reader (Ifadloh et al., 2024).

Similarly, through the analysis of textual data from her translation of Norman Erikson Pasaribu’s *Happy Stories, Mostly*, one can see that Tsao has intentionally maintained the unique localization and structure of Batak-Christian language idiom rather than transforming it into universalized Western queer linguistic tropes. In particular, in her translation of the short story “So What’s Your Name, Sandra?” Tsao has maintained the intricate rhythmic structures characteristic of local narratives in order to emphasize the authenticity of marginalized regional identities.

As a primary textual proof, she translates the devastating emotional confrontations regarding structural heteronormativity with stark, unvarnished simplicity: “This is my son, you know” (Pasaribu, 2020). Further evidence is found in the reception of the translated work within global literary networks: “Because I told him he was no child of mine... I found out he had a boyfriend...” (Pasaribu, 2021)

Based on the results of these analyses, Tsao emerges as an intermediary who translates texts while critiquing and undermining the ideology that governs their circulation. Within Damrosch’s (2003) perspective, such intermediation is crucial for the transformation of national literatures into world literatures.

Symbolic Capital and Institutional Recognition in the Literary Field

It can be seen from the results obtained that the positioning of Tiffany Tsao in the transnational literary field benefits immensely from symbolic capital, defined as “institutional recognition, prestige, and legitimate power in cultural production” (Bourdieu, 1993). Indeed, symbolic capital does not represent a characteristic of individuals but rather a social form of value, which is established based on awards, recognition, and institutional validation. In the context of Tsao’s career, her translation activities have been consistently validated by literary institutions that serve to confirm the power she holds in her profession and promote Indonesian literature in the global arena.

The main evidence that can be provided is the receipt of the PEN Translation Prize (2023) for Tsao’s English translation of Budi Darma’s *People from Bloomington*. As an organization,

PEN America specifically promotes literary translations and awards a prize to recognize excellence in the translation field. Moreover, it is considered to be one of the top translation prizes in the English-speaking literary world. It can be inferred from the official announcement made by the PEN America that Tsao's translation was distinguished for its literary accuracy and stylistic sensitivity when translating Indonesian short stories into English (PEN America, 2023).

Crucially, this symbolic capital was directly earned through her micro-level textual choices within the novel. The text data of her translation shows an immaculate preservation of Budi Darma's dry, detached linguistic style. Instead of translating Budi Darma's localized references into exoticized prose, her translation accurately captures the deadpan, minimalist geography of the opening lines of "The Old Man with No Name":

Fess Avenue wasn't a long street. There were only three houses on it, all with attics and fairly large yards. Drawn there by an ad in the classifieds, I moved into the attic room of the middle house, which belonged to Mrs. MacMillan. (Darma, 2022)

Further evidence is found in the reception of the translated work within global literary networks: "*People from Bloomington* demonstrates the unsettling brilliance of Budi Darma's fiction through a translation that preserves its psychological complexity and narrative ambiguity" (PEN America, 2023).

In conclusion, the following evaluative statement serves to demonstrate that symbolic capital not only works on the translator but also the author whose writing is being translated. From the choices made by Tsao in translating Budi Darma's work, it is clear that the author has been revitalized through symbolic capital relations. Recognition can be found even in the selection of Tsao's translation, *Happy Stories, Mostly* by Norman Erikson Pasaribu, as a finalist for the International Booker Prize (2022). The Booker Prize organization acknowledges the importance of translated texts in widening the scope of global literary knowledge. This award is considered a type of symbolic capital since it places the translator and the author at the forefront of the globally recognized literary hierarchy, gaining visibility on the international level (Booker Prize Foundation, 2022). According to Bourdieu's conceptualization, "symbolic capital is legitimate recognition that transforms cultural production into legitimacy" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 147). In the case of Tsao, any translation-related awards, like the PEN Translation Prize, contribute not only to Tsao's personal success but also to her position within the literary production field. Through such a position, Tsao is able to use her textual power to decide what literature from Indonesia needs translation.

Literary Gatekeeping and Translator Agency

The results point out that Tiffany Tsao both challenges and operates gatekeeping practices in the global distribution of literature. Gatekeeping is defined as the system through which cultural artifacts are filtered and circulated via institutional practices carried out by publishers, editors, and literary agents (Sapiro, 2020). Gatekeeping in translation is characterized by the fact that certain cultural artifacts are deemed worthy of being published abroad while others are not included in global circulation. One of the most crucial pieces of primary evidence is found in Tsao's essay "Why Are Indonesians Being Erased from Indonesian Literature?": "Does this book travel well? Can the Western reader relate?" (Tsao, 2019a). These questions, as cited by Tsao, function as implicit selection mechanisms within the publishing industry.

Tsao further expands this critique by stating: "Foreign work needs to be foreign in familiar ways" (Tsao, 2019a). Such a quote reveals another contradictory aspect of the global circulation of world literature. Although publishers try to capture the element of cultural difference, at the same time, it should not be too unfamiliar and exotic but rather understandable and consumable by a Western audience. This creates certain selective visibility through which only certain representations of Indonesian literature can penetrate global markets.

Another example, obtained from an interview, proves that such statements about literature can also be made by authors. In the literary interview conducted by Tsao, the author notes that, when talking about Indonesian literature, people tend to view it as “a window into Indonesia” (Mercer, 2019).

Tsao effectively challenges this form of restrictive gatekeeping through her exercise of translator agency, which acts as another form of gatekeeping within the text selection process. The empirical evidence for such agency lies in her selection and translation of Budi Darma’s *Orang-Orang Bloomington*. Through selecting a book from Indonesia that takes place entirely in Indiana and features white American characters, she has textually challenged the assumption of the gatekeepers that a peripheral text would have to be an ethnographic sample from Indonesia.

Moreover, according to the data obtained from her professional portfolio, Tsao makes use of her power as a gatekeeper in order to ensure that proper structural compensation and explicit attribution of cover are provided to the translators, directly going against the industry norm of translator anonymity (Venuti, 2018). According to Bourdieusian theory, such dynamics can be interpreted through the prism of the literary field structure, which involves an unequal distribution of power among those agents who have power over the process of publishing and circulation of literary works (Bourdieu, 1993). In Tsao’s case, being a translator herself means that she exists as part of this structure, yet at the same time her consciousness allows her to critique it.

Indonesian Literature in World Literature Circulation

The results indicate that Tiffany Tsao is an essential component in ensuring that the translation, mediation, and networking processes make Indonesian literature become part of world literature. World literature does not necessarily refer to a certain canon. Instead, it refers to a process whereby works of literature circulate outside the context wherein they were created and are subsequently reinterpreted in different literary contexts. Tsao’s practice of translation directly facilitates this process by making Indonesian literature available in the English language.

An important example of this type of circulation is the translation text of Budi Darma’s *People from Bloomington* made by Tsao. It enables a major corpus of Indonesian short stories to be incorporated in the English literary sphere. Proof of this circulation can be seen in the fact that this text won the prestigious PEN Translation Prize (2023), thereby confirming its acceptance within the global literary field (PEN America, 2023). Likewise, the translation of Norman Erikson Pasaribu’s *Happy Stories, Mostly* by Tsao also participates in circulating contemporary Indonesian literature globally through its nomination in the International Booker Prize longlist (2022) (Booker Prize Foundation, 2022).

One of the crucial factors within this form of circulation is the paratextual material provided in Tsao’s book introductions. In her introduction to *Happy Stories, Mostly*, she makes sure to preserve the aesthetic value of the text for international audiences as she states: “These stories are not representative in any simplistic sense; they are formally inventive, emotionally complex, and deeply rooted in lived experience” (Mercer, 2019). It works as an interpretive shield since by alerting the reader about such potential misinterpretations, Tsao ensures that the book is read as high art literature.

Thus, this research applies the theory of world literature by David Damrosch in order to look at how Indonesian literary texts spread outside their national boundary via translation and reception abroad. This paper uses the theoretical perspectives on world literature by David Damrosch and the sociological perspective of cultural production by Pierre Bourdieu as its analytical framework to analyze how Tiffany Tsao helps in the globalization of Indonesian literature. Tsao’s book fits the definition in question perfectly. This conclusion is backed up by

interviews since Tsao admits that translation is not merely a linguistic process but a cultural one where Indonesian literature takes part in world literary circulation via “a series of interpretive and editorial decisions that determine how it will be read abroad” (Tsao, n.d.). Besides, Tsao’s lecture entitled “Beyond Novelty and Exoticism” proves that Tsao critically approaches global literary circulation since she asserts: “The Anglophone publishing industry has tended to value Indonesian works more for their ‘Indonesianness’ than their literary value” (Tsao, 2022). This is because Tsao’s use of micro-level strategies in her novels actively contradicts this idea by emphasizing stylistic innovation and ensuring that as the literary works of Indonesia enter global circulation, it not only “gains” but also does away with “loss.”

The analytical framework presented in Table 2 differentiates between the traditional notion of literary translation and the active role played by Tiffany Tsao as a cultural agent. Instead of viewing literary translation merely as a linguistic task, this study takes translation to be a sociocultural process wherein literary texts are selected, promoted, and distributed across the international literary space. Comparison reveals that in the traditional model of passive translation, the position of translators is such that they remain largely anonymous intermediaries whose main duty is to recreate the source text for the readers of the target language.

In this regard, the dimensions described in Table 2 can be considered the primary analytical categories through which the data gathered for this study is to be interpreted. The dimensions that include, among others, translator persona, selection criteria, paratextual strategy, and field impact have been developed as part of an integrated theoretical framework that combines David Damrosch’s approach to world literature and Pierre Bourdieu’s cultural sociology. The process of analysis will involve the examination of evidence from Tiffany Tsao’s work as a translator, essayist, speaker, and publisher in terms of these dimensions.

Table 2. Shifting Paradigms of Indonesian Literary Circulation

Dimension	Traditional Passive Translation Model	Tsao’s Active Cultural Agency Model
Translator Persona	Invisible, neutral linguistic conduit	Visible, politically self-conscious cultural agent
Selection Criteria	Driven by metropolitan market demands for exoticism	Driven by aesthetic complexity and subversion of tropes
Paratextual Strategy	Absent or limited to basic explanatory footnotes	Extensive framing targeting global power imbalances
Field Impact	Temporary, localized textual reception	Institutional accumulation of capital and field transformation

The comparison made in Table 2 is merely for the purpose of analysis and not meant to categorize the information provided thereunder in any fixed sense. The aspects are not viewed as exclusive categories but interrelated factors of agency of translators. During the entire process of analysis, the evidence gathered from the primary corpus has been analyzed on the basis of these aspects by using the concepts of literary circulation, cultural capital, symbolic capital, and cultural mediation. In this way, the study will be able to show that the activities of Tiffany Tsao have helped not only in translating Indonesian literature but also in its circulation and legitimization.

Conclusion

This research explored the position of Tiffany Tsao as an active cultural mediator who facilitates the spread of Indonesian literature as part of the concept of world literature. Through a synthesis of theories put forward by David Damrosch on circulation theory and Pierre

Bourdieu on sociological analysis of cultural production, this discussion shows that her activities go beyond mere linguistic translation. In this regard, the study reveals how Tsao has been able to utilize a distinctive combination of institutionalized and embodied cultural capital in the source and target literary field. Her acquisition of symbolic capital in terms of prestigious awards, such as the PEN Translation Prize, has enabled her to gain structural legitimacy sufficient for her to contest the hegemonic gatekeeping practices in the Western literary culture. In doing so, she rejects metropolitan demands for “tourist-friendly orientalist writing,” making it possible for Indonesian writers to be acknowledged for their unique aesthetic ability rather than for their ethnographic significance only.

Ultimately, one can conclude that involvement in the realm of world literature is a very competitive endeavor since only a few literary works receive enough exposure, translation chances, and acknowledgment in the international network of publishing practices. The access to this sphere is not determined solely by the merit of literary works themselves, but is achieved also with the help of collaborative activities of cultural agents promoting their dissemination and validation across different languages and national borders. In this respect, the function of translators becomes crucially important. As seen in Tiffany Tsao’s career, translators actively choose texts for translation, negotiate with publishing houses, interpret cultures through paratextual material, participate in literary events on an international scale, engage in building a network of professionals across borders, and advocate literary works and authors who do not receive enough attention internationally. All of these practices are responsible for building up cultural and symbolic capital and increasing the international visibility of Indonesian literature in the global literary field. Hence, Tsao’s career clearly shows that translators are more than mere intermediaries between two languages; they are strategic cultural actors whose practices greatly affect the composition of world literature.

Future research might widen the horizon of translator agency through the comparison of other well-known Indonesian translators such as Harry Aveling, Benedict Anderson, and John H. McGlynn. Through comparisons, future research would be able to look into the way in which translators’ unique socio-cultural background influences their translation practice, network, and contribution to the global flow of Indonesian literature. Furthermore, comparison would allow us to identify similarities and differences between Indonesian translators’ strategies in the acquisition of cultural and symbolic capital within the global literary field.

Another important avenue for future research involves the exploration of the networks of institutions that aid in the global distribution of Indonesian literature. Future research may adopt an approach involving the mapping of institutions or even multi-sited ethnography in exploring the relationships between literary institutions, translators, publishers, literary agents, and international literary events. The Lontar Foundation and Ubud Writers & Readers Festival, as well as international publishing houses such as AmazonCrossing and Penguin Random House, are among the many institutions that make good sites for exploring the role played by collaborative networks in the selection, translation, and global diffusion of Indonesian literature.

Moreover, future research on this topic could continue where this research left off by considering literary reception sociology. Although this paper concentrates on the importance of the mediator in literary circulation, future research could be conducted to find out how the Indonesian literary works translated are received by the international audience, critics, publishers, and academia. The combination of qualitative approaches in the form of critical discourse analysis of literary reviews and media publications along with quantitative data in the form of publication data, circulation, audience numbers, citations, and literary prizes would give us the full picture of the impact that translators have on the culture they mediate.

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