Book review: the interpreter’s journal

Benjawan Poomsan has dedicated the last 15 years to fostering mutual understanding, even while building a career as a legal interpreter. This latter aspect of her professional life is the subject of The Interpreter’s Journal, a thoroughly enjoyable book for anyone with an interest in interpreting, languages, Thailand, and inter-cultural issues.

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Benjawan Poomsan Becker
The Interpreter’s Journal
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Benjawan Poomsan’s series of Thai language books is well known to foreigners in Thailand. In fact, her Paiboon Publishing is establishing itself, as its slogan says, as ‘The Publisher for Southeast Asian Languages and Culture’, boasting not only books, dictionaries and audio materials for learners of Thai, but also resources for other languages of the region (e.g. Lao, Burmese), fun tools such as Thai songs for language learners, and practical how-to guides. Several of these resources are even available in software or Apple apps form.

An impressive catalogue accumulated over a mere fifteen years of one woman’s passionate dedication to a mission – fostering mutual understanding across the cultural divide. All the more impressive as Benjawan has over the same period become a very active court interpreter whose assignments also take her well beyond the judiciary realm.

What Benjawan has to say about interpreting in The Interpreter’s Journal is music to any true professional’s ears – beyond words, the interpreter is a communicator of meaning. Importantly, she feeds into this an insatiable curiosity for the often hidden depths of meaning embedded in words, and a Buddhist Thai’s compassionate attitude that lends sensitivity to the range of human suffering and offences encountered in the endless variety of cases and situations where she interprets. While Benjawan is very clear and ‘Western’ about the ethics and confidentiality of her job, and takes great pride in her professionalism, her very Thai/Laotian way of weaving compassion into those dimensions actually reinforces them. In itself, this point is a valuable contribution to ‘interpretation literature’.

This is not a book about interpreting per se, not a ‘journal’ of days spent interpreting. The ‘journal’ describes the improbable and inspirational journey of a hard-working girl from an impoverished family, hailing from a remote rural setting in the poorer Lao-speaking part of Thailand. The girl is bright, driven from childhood by a fascination for languages and communication (and an ability to act on opportunities) most uncharacteristic of both the Lao and Thai easy-going majority. She defies expectations and tradition to take a sociology degree in Japan, to learn English to a high degree of
proficiency, and eventually to become an interpreter in the USA – driven by a will to succeed, to learn constantly, and also by a very traditional desire to fulfil a Lao/Thai child’s obligation to support her family back home.

The ‘journal’ is about the human emotions and experiences of her journey, the meanderings of her linguistic eagerness and acquisitiveness, the inter-cultural issues that offer fertile material for mutual explanations of Thai versus Western misunderstandings and conflicts. The style is direct and pragmatic – not unlike the style of her language teaching books – devoid of the kind of intimate tonalities one expects in a ‘journal’ form. This is no doubt congruent with the style of English the author has cultivated, as a pragmatic professional conducting her business in real America, as an interpreter providing precise renditions – and it may also stem from the mindscape of most Lao and Thai women whose very concrete roles as pillars of family, society and economy leave little space for the poetic searching of sentiment and lyricism.

I find an intrinsic and welcome humility in Benjawan’s unadorned style (will the upcoming Thai version have the same direct and unadorned quality?). There is the humility of humble roots that remain alive in the successful professional, and the humility of the perpetual learner, the humility that is an integral part of the practitioner’s proud excellence, and intrinsic to the sincere performance of useful service to others. Noble humility, the inseparable companion of compassion.

This is possibly the lesson delivered by Benjawan’s story of an impressive journey to all practitioners of ‘communication’, and especially to those who see themselves as ‘elite’: a joyful sense of humility and an active sense of compassion.

Visit Benjawan Poomsan’s website for more information on her books.

Recommended citation format: