

RESEARCH ARTICLE



After the fairy tale ends: towards an ecological account of the translation of Traditional Ecological Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

In her 2007 ‘fairy tale’ about ‘epistemicide’, Karen Bennett charged scientific discourse with attempted murder. Despite recently employing the notion of ‘knowledge ecology’ in the EPISTRANS project, Bennett remains suspicious of science. This article argues, to the contrary, that scientific discourses can complement humanistic discourses, including the Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) of Indigenous minorities. Although proselytising religions and illiberal states may have tried to suppress TEK in the past in the name of science, ‘epistemicidal’ may not be the best way of characterising the knowledge ecologies in certain settler states today. In Taiwan, academics and officials are supporting efforts by pastors to translate TEK. One such effort yielded a book of ‘autoethnobotanical’ translation that explicitated one kind of TEK. Entitled *Seediq Ethnic Plants*, the book also involved bidirectional interlingual translation: TEK in Seediq was translated into Chinese, and Modern Ecological Knowledge in Chinese was translated into Seediq. Textual analysis showed how culturally sensitive the interlingual translators of TEK had to be, while fieldwork revealed how difficult it was to translate tactile, tacit TEK discursively. It also suggested that the motivation behind inter-epistemic translation in this case was not resistance to epistemicide but rather linguistic and cultural development.

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Introduction

This article is a case study of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) translation from Taiwan. The case is a book of ‘autoethnobotanical’ translation that was published in 2017. Entitled *Seediq Ethnic Plants (SEP)*, the book is autoethnobotanical because it resulted from cultural self-study. It is a translation primarily as an explicitation¹ of the implicit TEK in the heads, hearts, and hands of knowledge keepers. But it is also remarkable as a work of bidirectional interlingual translation: TEK in Seediq was translated into Chinese and what could be called Modern Ecological Knowledge (MEK) in Chinese was translated into Seediq. Based on fieldwork and textual analysis, I argue that the tactile, tacit nature of TEK made it challenging to translate into Seediq let alone into Chinese, that the interlingual translation that went into *SEP* demanded a keen sensitivity to the local cultural situation, and that the motivation behind the translation was linguistic and cultural development.

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I make this argument as a critical contribution to the EPISTRANS or ‘inter-epistemic translation’ project, which was launched in Lisbon in the spring of 2023. One theoretical underpinning of EPISTRANS is the notion of knowledge ecology. Knowledge ecologies in settler states around the world have not been conducive to Indigenous linguistic and cultural development. In fact, they could be described as ‘epistemicidal’. In an academic ‘fairy tale’ that was published in 2007, Karen Bennett, one of the founders of EPISTRANS, had accused scientific discourse of epistemicide. I argue, to the contrary, that scientific and humanistic discourses can be complementary, that an ecological account of epistemicide would identify ‘accessories to epistemic murder’, including illiberal states and proselytising religions, and that epistemicide may not be the best way of describing the knowledge ecologies in certain settler states today; *SEP* would not have been published without support from pastors, (ethno)botanists and bureaucrats.

Excluding the introduction and conclusion, the article is in two halves. In the first half, I find a home for my study in translation studies. In the second half, I proceed to the case.

From ‘Epistemicide!’ to EPISTRANS

In ‘Epistemicide! A Tale of a Predatory Discourse’, which she published in 2007, Karen Bennett borrowed the term ‘epistemicide’ from the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos. Santos had argued that ‘epistemicide’ had been committed by ‘imperial powers’ claiming to act ‘in the name of science’ (2005, xviii). Bennett changed the wording slightly in her article. In her view, the perpetrator of epistemicide was the ‘discourse’ of science, which ‘colonises the social world imperialistically’ (Kress 1988, 7, cited by Bennett 2007, 153). Her article can be read as a ‘fairy tale’ (152) about such colonisation, with an embattled hero and an evil ogre. The hero represents a variety of humanistic discourses, while the evil ogre is scientific discourse.

Referring to the ‘Third World’ and ‘developing countries’ (2007, 154), Bennett obviously had a global purview, but she chose her examples of humanistic discourses from writings by Portuguese humanists. Portuguese humanists, according to Bennett, were being deprived of their dynamism and subjectivity in English translation under the influence of the scientific style that developed in England in the seventeenth century. Although her subtitle suggests animal-on-animal predation, Bennett also used a vegetable metaphor to describe what happened to Portuguese humanistic writings in translation: they were denuded of ‘verbal foliage’ (156). This could still be a kind of predation called herbivory; many animals feed on leaves. On the other hand, many plants offer their leaves to the larvae of insect pollinators. Regardless, an alternative perspective to predation is arboriculture. Overzealous truncation can kill a tree or hedge, as any arborist knows, but judicious pruning can save it from its own worst tendencies. Judging from the prose examples Bennett cites, Portuguese musicologists, architecture scholars, and literary critics flout the features of scientific style, instead writing in an idiom that sounds rather florid. A trim by a transeditor might do them some good.

Drawing on M. A. K. Halliday and others, Bennett describes the scientific style as follows:

... the prose should be lucid, economical and precise, avoiding vagueness, verbosity and circumlocution, and will make use of complete sentences with straightforward syntax.

Impersonal structures, such as the passive and nominalized forms, will predominate in many disciplines, and there will be an absence of figurative language ... (161)

Largely nominal terminologies were formed from Latin and Greek roots, calqued from English into other languages (161), and then cast as the subjects of passive sentences. These syntactic elements of the scientific style ‘had the ideologically significant result of transforming subjective dynamic experience into static objective fact’ (160). Putting to the side ‘the ideologically significant result’ for a moment, I agree that Bennett’s generalisations about scientific style are valid to some extent. I recall being forced to use the passive in high school lab reports, and Newton’s $F=ma$ and Einstein’s $E=mc^2$ are both 75% nouns. But like any generalisations, they might not apply in all cases. Consider in this regard an excerpt from a technical description of the foliage of a certain herbaceous shrub in the *Flora of China*, a monumental, fifty-volume compendium covering the vascular plants of China:

Leaves alternate; stipules lanceolate, free or connate and 2-cleft, 7–11 mm; petiole 2.5–10 cm; leaf blade often orbicular or broadly ovate, sometimes ovate or elliptic-ovate, 5–15 × 3.5–13 cm, herbaceous, secondary veins ca. 3 each side of midvein, abaxial surface snowy tomentose ... (Wu et al. 1994–2013, v. 5, 166)

Consider also another excerpt from a description of the foliage of a liana, a woody climber in the same compendium:

Leaf sheaths yellowish green with gray, brown, or reddish black hairs, with scattered or rows of black, flattened, triangular spines to 4 cm, mixed with some needlelike spines; ocreas obscure; knees conspicuous; rachis to 3 m with 55–100 linear or lanceolate pinnae per side ... (Ibid., v. 23, 142)

If you have not looked these plants up already, you might want to delay epistemological gratification until the second half of this article. For now, I will just point out that these two descriptions do not conform to Bennett’s generalisations about the syntactic elements of scientific style. Although the sentences are impersonal, there is not a passive in sight, and the descriptions are substantially adjectival, not simply nominal. The prose is indeed ‘lucid, economical and precise’, but hardly displays ‘an absence of figurative language’ (Bennett 2007, 161). ‘Snowy tomentose’ in the first description means covered in densely matted white woolly hairs, where tomentose comes from a root meaning the stuffing of a pillow. Lanceolate in the second description means shaped like a lance. Tomentose and lanceolate and many other terms are precise but poetic.

As for the ‘the ideologically significant result of transforming subjective dynamic experience into static objective fact’ (Bennett 2007, 160), I am not sure if it would be ideological progress to emphasise the human observer of the ‘obscure ocreas’, for instance, in the second description. Perhaps there is something virtuous in paying close attention to something outside the human self or the social world. If ‘the old anthropocentric theory of knowledge in the English speaking world’ or any other linguistically defined world limits us to a human perspective, maybe the theory deserved to be ‘replace[d]’ (160). Better yet, the anthropocentric theory can be complemented. Describing plants in the objective terms of the above examples does not preclude a complementary subjective description, maybe from the perspective of a person in a certain culture, perhaps even from a plant’s point of view. It might make a gripping

story. Plants have the same basic problems as we do, making themselves at home somewhere and then surviving and reproducing there. We should be able to relate to them. They have been relating to us for millennia.

At the end of Bennett's fairy tale, the discourse of science appears all powerful, but 'small groups of protesters' were employing 'guerrilla tactics on the fringes of his empire' (Bennett 2007, 166–167). I wonder what has happened since, in two senses. First, has the scientific discourse become all powerful? It seems to me its dominance can be overstated, and that subjective and dynamic humanistic discourses continue to thrive, and not just in Portugal or on the margins of academic or social life. I am writing this in the first person, and though early drafts needed heavy editing, I think the process has done the article a lot of good, without draining it of personality or dynamism. Second, would Bennett tell the fairy tale in the same way today? To answer this question, I turn to the EPISTRANS project, which Bennett cofounded.

EPISTRANS is a very dynamic development in translation studies, with a series of conferences, publications, and lectures.² The project is in part a response to Douglas Robinson's call in 2017 to add '*interepistemic translation*' (200, italics original) to Roman Jakobson (2000 [1959], 113)'s triad of interlingual, intralingual, and intersemiotic translation. Instead of translating between verbal and visual modalities, as in Jakobson's concept of intersemiotic translation, EPISTRANS aims to study translation between 'epistemic systems', with the understanding that such systems can undergo 'transformation' through translation (Robinson 2017, 200, cited by Bennett 2024, 1). I have gladly taken the transformative turn and will be arguing that Seediq inter-epistemic translators are transforming their TEK as much as they are recording it.

According to the project website, EPISTRANS contrasts 'technical "scientific" knowledge (i.e. the kind of knowledge which purports to be *objective, rational and universal*) and the various *embedded, embodied and subjective* forms of knowledge that have served as its Others in different times and places', just as Bennett had done in her fairy tale. But the project has also demonstrated a fertile cross-pollination between the sciences and the humanities in its adoption of Santos's notion of 'ecologies of knowledge' (Bennett 2024, 2, in reference to Santos 2016, 188–211). In using the term ecology, Bennett and her colleagues are not pure descriptivists, or they would view the putative 'predation' of one discourse by another neutrally. Their approach to knowledge ecology is rather ethical, for example, in pursuit of 'cognitive justice' (Ibid.) for marginalised groups. Indigenous minorities in particular deserve justice because 'Indigenous knowledges such as traditional medicines, community justice systems and local lore about the natural world, which cannot be understood within the categories set up by modern science, are systematically eradicated through a process of "epistemicide" ... all in the name of "progress"' (3). In such passages, Bennett's attitude towards scientific discourse does not seem to have changed much. But she now realises that eradication, etymologically 'uprooting', can be 'undo[ne]' (2). It appears that these alternative knowledges were never dead, they were simply uprooted, and can now be replanted. The fairy tale has a happy ending after all!

Fairy tales like Bennett's can offer useful simplifications of complex circumstances, which can feel so overwhelming that they preclude action. Perhaps 'Epistemicide!' can motivate action in defence of humanistic discourses, particularly TEK. It has certainly motivated research, including the article you are reading. But there is also a place for an ecological account of epistemicide or any other problem. Approaching

any issue in its systemic context, ecology encompasses a complexity that is alien to the fairy tale. If one is levelling accusations of epistemicide against scientific discourse, one should also charge proselytising religions, illiberal states, and even ruthless corporations with abetting or committing the crime. As I will exemplify in the next section, settler states and proselytising religions have attempted epistemicide against Indigenous minorities, supposedly for their own good, within living memory.

At the same time as we condemn any attempted epistemicide, we should also acknowledge efforts by allies in settler states to help Indigenous minorities find niches for their languages and cultures to thrive. In the academy, ever since Malinowski started doing participant ethnography in the Trobriand Islands, certain anthropologists have argued for the idea of science as a human universal. Lévi-Strauss proposed a science of the concrete (Berkes 2012, 10), practiced by peoples who were just as capable of a science of the abstract. Certain ecologists, who are experts in what could be called Modern Ecological Knowledge (MEK), have more recently set out to record Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK).³ Outside the academy, certain settler states have attempted to create more diverse knowledge ecologies that promote cognitive justice for Indigenous minorities. I discuss such efforts in one settler state and the kind of inter-epistemic translation they have facilitated in the second half of this article.

On the translation of MEK and TEK in Seediq Ethnic Plants (SEP)

Taiwan is a settler state today because when Chinese settlers began arriving in the seventeenth century, they found that Formosa, the largest island of Taiwan, was home to a number of different groups of hunters, gatherers, and planters who spoke languages that reminded some of the settlers of Tagalog. Speaking languages that are now categorised as Austronesian, many of these peoples, including the Seediq, lived up in the mountains, beyond the reach of the colonial state until the early twentieth century, when Taiwan was under Japanese control. After the Kuomintang, also known as the Chinese Nationalist Party, took over in 1945, Indigenous languages like Seediq and the corresponding cultures were suppressed for nearly five decades under martial law through a national language and culture policy. The policy was implemented through the education system. At school, Indigenous children were taught that their traditions were shameful and punished for speaking their ancestral tongues. The linguistic part of the policy, however, was partly undermined by Christian organisations that the Kuomintang allowed into the mountains for the sake of social control. For most of the post-war period, the Presbyterian and Catholic churches tried to discourage traditional beliefs, but by using ancestral languages in church, they helped delay language shift from Indigenous languages to Chinese until the 1980s.

Inspired by global indigenism, the Indigenous movement in Taiwan dates to the mid-1980s, several years before martial law was lifted in 1987. In the 1990s, in order to pivot to democratic politics, the Kuomintang responded to the Indigenous movement by institutionalising an Indigenous policy. The Indigenous policy has included support for Indigenous language and culture revitalisation, though more recently the term development has been adopted, on the understanding that Indigenous peoples, like all peoples, are adapting to changing circumstances in their own ways. In the late 2010s, state-funded

Indigenous language promotion offices were opened throughout the country, as had been mandated by the 2017 Indigenous Languages Development Act.

Indigenous languages and cultures have been taught at the primary and to some extent secondary levels since the 1990s, but in tertiary education were only studied in linguistics and anthropology departments, whose students were mainly non-Indigenous, until 2019. In that year, a Catholic institution of higher education called Providence University, which is located in Taichung City, set up an experimental programme in Indigenous Cultural Heritage.⁴ The programme was the brainchild of Iwan Pering, the director of the Seediq language promotion office in the town of Puli, and the late Lin Shu-ya, a professor of Indigenous law at Providence. Some of the courses are taught at Providence by experts in fields like law. The programme is experimental because other courses are taught by Seediq leaders and elders, none of whom holds a doctorate, at the office in Puli or in villages around Puli. This programme focuses on the cultural heritage of the Seediq people, and every student but one has been Seediq.

I was the only non-Seediq student to enrol in the experimental programme, in the fall of 2022, as preparation for the study of inter-epistemic translation in Seediqland. Like my classmates, I took courses in Taichung and Puli, but the two courses that made the deepest impression on me, and are most relevant to the study of *SEP* specifically or Seediq TEK in general, were taught in the villages of Gluban and Sipo. Each course was about a particular ethnic plant, but not just about the plant. To be able to make use of ethnic plants, Seediq people had to develop an ecological knowledge of the natural environment, including knowledge of how to transform it to suit their needs. Plant knowledge, for any Indigenous group, is inherently ecological.

As the students in the programme lacked such knowledge, each course began with the teacher giving the students an in-situ introduction to the plant. I was introduced to the plant in [Figure 1](#) on the first Saturday of one course, which was held in the village of Gluban:



Figure 1. Mystery plant no. 1 (credit: Chuang Hsi, used with permission).

I was introduced to the plant in [Figure 2](#) on the first Sunday of the other course, which was held in the village of Sipo:



Figure 2. Mystery plant no. 2 (credit: Chuang Hsi, used with permission)

Does either plant look familiar? These are the plants that were described in such loving detail in the paragraphs from the *Flora of China* that I cited in the first section. The white undersides of the leaves in [Figure 1](#) are snowy tomentose, and the leaflets in [Figure 2](#) are lanceolate. If you belonged to any number of Indigenous minority peoples in tropical or subtropical America, Asia, or Austronesia, at least until relatively recently, you would know not only *what* plants they are but also *where* to find them nearby or *how* to cultivate them. You would also know *how* to process them into yarn or strips, which you could then weave into garments or baskets. You would spend a lot of your daily life doing so. It took me four months, working once a week, to spin a pound of yarn from the fibre of plant 1 and to weave a basket from the bark of plant 2. It would have taken me much longer if I had proceeded to weave the yarn or if I had had to strip the bark; the bark I wove had been imported from Vietnam.

While I was spinning my yarn and weaving my basket, I was amazed at the complexity of the task. To produce yarn, I used a bamboo scraper called a *gesak* to strip the fibre from the stems of plant 1, which I then sun-dried, twisted, spun, and soaked in water dissolved with wood ash, then soaked again in water dissolved with the sap of the dyeing yam (because we wanted the yarn to be red). To weave a basket out of strips of bark from plant 2, I started with one weaving pattern for the base, switched to another for the sides and to yet another to attach basket to rim, which I made out of the dried stems of the same plant; and with a final pattern I attached one of the 'ears' for the strap. I ran out of time at the end and my basket only has a single ear, and no strap. These traditional technologies are

so complicated that it is inconceivable that anyone could have developed them alone. Such technologies were developed over generations and generations; and today they are preserved in the heads, hearts, and hands of keepers of TEK. In Taiwan such people are able, with some assistance and guidance from (ethno)botanists and bureaucrats, to make a living keeping their traditions alive by teaching them to schoolchildren, retirees, tourists, or scholars of TEK's translation such as myself.

While learning Seediq TEK, I also reflected on nature of the knowledge. In addition to '*embedded, embodied and subjective*', as the EPISTRANS website puts it, such knowledge is also tactile and tacit. It is tactile because it depends on a feel for tools like a *gesak* and materials like bamboo. It is tacit because a feel for tools and materials is not inherently discursive. I use the word tacit thanks to one of my classmates in the programme, who referred me to Michael Polanyi's *The Tacit Dimension* (2009 [1966]). She was reading Polanyi in Chinese translation for her master's research project on weaving. Polanyi contrasted tacit and discursive knowledge in terms of *knowing how* versus *knowing what* (2009, 7). Know-how can be verbalised, talked about, in a translation from internal to external, from implicit to explicit, from the form that such knowledge takes in the mind-body to the medium of speech, to guide learners as they try to get a feel for it. But for the most part, I was told by my teachers, it was not talked about traditionally, for two reasons. First, although it can be talked about, it is difficult to convey in language. That is why when know-how is taught it tends to become 'show-how'. Someone shows you how to do it, and you try to follow along. My teachers told me that Seediq mothers would just spin fibre into yarn, and fathers weave bark into baskets, and their daughters and sons were expected to observe and help out. That is what I mostly did, and my teachers were just as patient as they would have been with their own children. Second, the knowledge was kept secret. A traditional Seediq woman had her private patch of plant 1, and a man his thicket of plant 2; but she or he would not let just anyone know where it was, let alone show them how to work with yarn or bark. If you were off to your secret patch or thicket, you wouldn't say that, you'd say you were off to the *dgiyaq*, a lovely metonym that combines the meaning of mountain and forest.

Today, such tactile and tacit TEK is not as widely practiced as it used to be. None of my teachers learned the arts of stripping, spinning, or weaving in childhood. One of them, Iwan Pering, was a special needs educator. Another, Umin Nawi, was an automobile mechanic. They both acquired the traditional know-how later in life, and now they are teaching it to whoever is interested, man or woman, young or old, in an effort to pass the tradition down.

I cannot claim to have inherited the tradition, which would be the work of years, but the know-how I have acquired has been preparation for my study of a recent attempt made by Iwan Pering and her peers to record Seediq TEK of plants through what can be called autoethnobotanical translation. The term 'autoethnobotanical' is based on 'auto-ethnographer'. Just as autoethnographers write about their own cultures, so autoethnobotanists study their own traditional knowledge of plants. I coined the term to draw attention to a form of progress: Indigenous peoples in settler states around the world are no longer simply being studied, they are also studying themselves with the advantage that insider knowledge brings (see Sterk 2025).

As a work of autoethnobotany, *SEP*, which was published in 2017, was the result of a lot of hard work, primarily by the eight Seediq compilers, who were led by Iwan Pering.

Another compiler, Kumu Tapas, wrote a Chinese-language article about the compilation that was translated into English. In it, she stated that the compilers undertook the work because they wished to ‘literalise’ (Tapas 2020, 39) Seediq, meaning to add to the written record of the language, and to document plant knowledge, so that it could continue to be practiced. She acknowledges ‘the painstaking efforts of the government’ to this end (Ibid.). The compilation and publication of *SEP* was funded by a branch of the county government. Kumu Tapas did not mention painstaking efforts by religious leaders and scientists, but she is herself a Presbyterian pastor and last page of *SEP* lists the botanical and ethnobotanical sources that the compilers drew upon (Pering et al. 2017, 228). One of these sources was particularly important: the (ethno)botanist Chang Wen-chao’s 2003 master’s thesis had documented the TEK of thirteen of the nineteen consultants for *SEP* (Pering et al. 2017, 15), five of whom predeceased its compilation.

Figure 3 indicates how the first ethnic plant I studied was presented in *SEP*:



Figure 3. The essay on *keguy* (苧麻 or ramie) in *SEP* (Pering et al. 2017, 84–85).

As the caption to Figure 3 indicates, mystery plant number 1 from Figure 1 above is ramie. In the header by the black-and-purple mountain motif at the top left of Figure 3, you can see 賽德克族(Tgdaya/Truku/Toda)民族植物. That is the name of the book, which I have translated as *Seediq Ethnic Plants (SEP)*, but which could also translate as *Tgdaya/Truku/Toda Ethnobotany* (Tapas 2020, 39). Tgdaya, Truku, and Toda are the names of the three topolects (place-based language varieties) of Seediq. Seediq is the pronunciation in

Tgdaya, and Seejiq and Sediq are the cognate words in Truku and Toda; the word originally meant ‘person’ or ‘people’. The line below the title is the name of the plant in the three topolects, along with the name in Chinese, 苧麻 zhùmá. The next line down supplies the scientific name. The table beneath the scientific name assigns the plant to the category of ‘clothes and dyes’ (as is also indicated in the header at the top right) and identifies the parts of the plant that are used: stem and branch. Three paragraphs in Sediq on the verso page correspond to three paragraphs in Chinese on the recto. The first paragraph covers botany and ecology, the second harvesting, and the third processing. The first four photos illustrate morphology and ecology, the latter four ethnobotany.

Figure 3 can then be compared and contrasted with Figure 4, an essay about the second ethnic plant I studied:

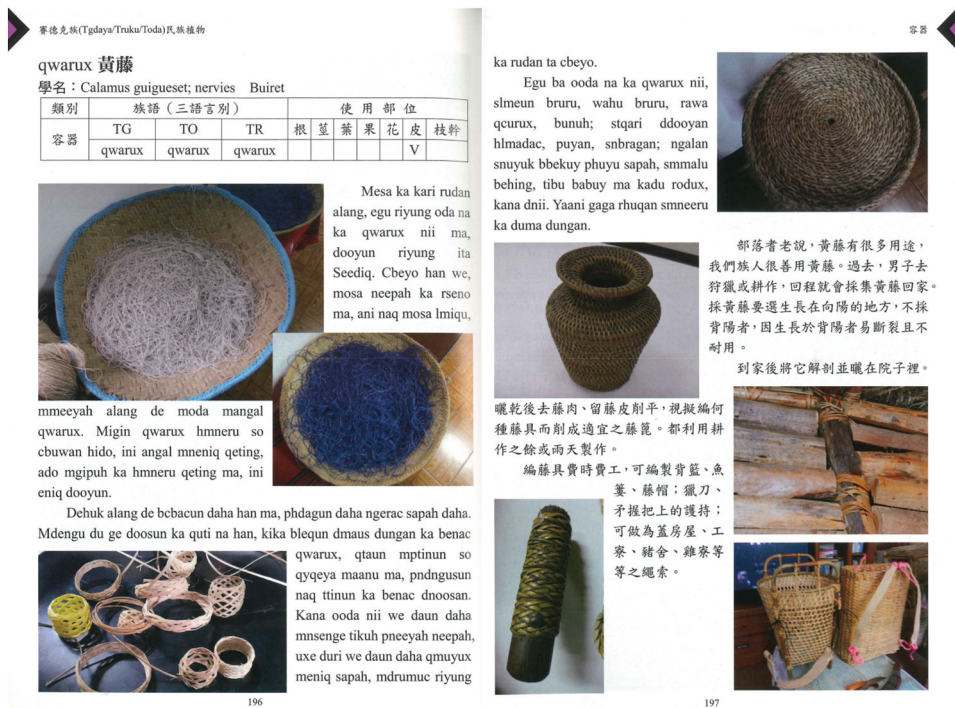


Figure 4. The essay on *qwarux* (黃藤 or rattan) in *SEP* (Pering et al. 2017, 196–197).

As the caption to Figure 4 indicates, mystery plant 2 from Figure 2 above is rattan. This essay is very similar in presentation. The only differences are that the word for rattan is the same in all three topolects, that rattan is classed as a plant for making containers, that the ‘skin’, meaning ‘bark’, of the plant is used, and that all eight pictures are ethnobotanical.

Each essay in *SEP* is a translation in all three of Jakobson’s senses (1959 [2000], 113). It is an intersemiotic translation because it contains photographs taken by the compilers, which can be regarded as translations of the text and vice versa. The first paragraph in Figure 3 describes the undersides of ramie leaves as tomentose, as is illustrated in the picture at the bottom of the verso page (Pering et al. 2017, 84). The third paragraph in

Figure 4 describes a variety of different baskets that can be made from rattan, including *brura*, backpacks, as you can see in the photograph at the bottom of the recto page (197).

Each essay is also an interlingual translation, in both directions. First, the Chinese translations of terms like tomentose and lanceolate were translated into Seediq. The Chinese word for tomentose is 有絨毛 *yǒuróngmáo*, meaning ‘having velvety hair’. It was translated into *niqan uban runge*, meaning ‘having monkey hair’, out of sensitivity to the local situation: Seediq people are much more familiar with monkeys than they are with velvet. The translation is nonetheless apt; monkeys have soft, matted fur that looks velvety. Employing metaphor – the connection between velvet and monkey hair is similarity – the translation is also poetic. The same points can be made about the Seediq translation of the Chinese word for lanceolate, 披針形 *pīzhēnxíng*, meaning ‘spread needle shape’, where ‘spread needle’ is a literal translation of the Chinese word for lance. Ignoring lances, which most Seediq people have little familiarity with, the Seediq translator opted for *mgqumi*, meaning to be like a *qumi*. *Qumi* can be translated as ‘needle’, but the word predates industrially produced steel needles. The original Seediq *qumi* were more like ‘awls’ that were thicker than a typical needle. There was thus no need to qualify *mgqumi*, which is just as apt, poetic, and distinctively Seediq a translation as *niqan uban runge*. Once a technical term like tomentose or lanceolate was translated into one topolect, it spread through the other topolects through intralingual translation, for instance, *uban runge* in Tgdaya was translated into *ubal rungay* (Pering et al. 2017, 42) in Truku. In this way, a Seediq botanical terminology is taking shape, through translation.

As for translation in the other direction, from Seediq to Chinese, here is a pair of examples, one from the first essay and the other from the second essay:

1. *Mqedil ge mangal gesak, skgigan daha smkeguy* (Pering et al. 2017, 84)

Women use *gesak* to scrape ramie (literally: what-is-*keguy*-ed is *keguy*-ed by them).

婦女們 利用 竹製 工具 來 刮取 苧麻 纖維。

Women use a bamboo-made tool to scrape ramie fibre.

2. *Egu ba ooda na ka qwarux nii, slmeun bruru* (Pering et al. 2017, 197)

Rattan is a lot of work (literally: many are rattan’s tasks/uses), and *bruru*, etc. can be made.

編 藤 具 費 時 費 工, 可 編 製 背 籃 ...

Weaving rattan implements takes time and effort, [and] back-baskets, etc. can be woven [from it].

The Seediq and Chinese sentences are from SEP. I did the English translations, fairly literally in order to suggest what is going on grammatically. I will discuss the grammatical aspects below. Let me first comment on explicitation in the Seediq-to-Chinese translation. The first example contains the word *gesak*. Seediq people know what a *gesak* is and women know how to make and use one, but in any other language the word has to be explained somehow. I now realise that ‘bamboo scraper’, my original attempt at describing it, contains an ambiguity that is resolved in ‘bamboo-made tool’, a literal translation of the Chinese translation of *gesak*. The second example ends with *bruru*, the kind of basket I made in my class on rattan. It is basically a ‘backpack’, but translating it in that way would have assimilated a particular Seediq handicraft to a now familiar industrial product that is usually made of nylon. It was thus translated in another way as ‘back-basket’.

The Seediq-to-Chinese translation employed a degree of explicitation, but it seems to me that most of the relevant TEK remains implicit, particularly in the word *slmeun* in the second example. *Slmeun* can be thought of as a passive form of *salu*, the verb for ‘make’. In other words, *bruru* and other kinds of container are ‘made’ from rattan. The amount of TEK that a single word explicitates here is incredible. It summarises four months of Sunday mornings that I spent weaving a single basket. As the second example sentence puts it, many are the tasks that the rattan weaver has to perform. The same goes for the ramie spinner. A shelf of books could be filled with attempts to spell out the TEK in the heads, hearts, and hands of knowledge keepers like my teachers Umin Nawi and Iwan Pering, attempts that could never do more than scratch the surface, because ‘*we can know more than we can tell*’ (Polanyi 2009, 4, italics original). It is fundamentally difficult to translate such tactile, tacit knowledge into discursive form, but of course to some extent such knowledge can be translated, into words like *slmeun* in the Seediq or 編 *biān*, meaning ‘weave’, in the Seediq-to-Chinese translation. Like the finger pointing at the moon in Zen Buddhism, such words can point aspiring learners in the right direction.

As for the grammatical features of TEK in Seediq, note the use of the topic marker *ge* in the first sentence and the subject marker *ka* in the second sentence. While these markers are used in speech, they are used more often in writing. *SEP* is participating in the transformation of the Seediq language. Simply by writing it down, Seediq users are developing a written register. Otherwise, the Seediq sentences read perfectly naturally, which might surprise you given that they contain two grammatical features that according to Bennett (2007, 161) were typical of the scientific style, passive and nominalised verbs. *Skigigan* or ‘*keguy-ed*’ in the first example and *slmeun* or ‘made’ in the second example are passive forms.⁵ *Smkeguy*, ‘what-is-keguy-ed’ in the first example represents renominalization: a noun turned into a verb that turned back into a noun. In truth, passivisation and nominalisation predated the rise of the scientific style in English and are used in many different kinds of discourse in many languages. Their use does not necessarily have ‘the ideologically significant result of transforming subjective dynamic experience into static objective fact’ (160). They have allowed for statements of static objective fact that have complemented expressions of subjective dynamic experience for as long as people have communicated in language.

Simply by complementing oral language with written, TEK with MEK, and Seediq with Chinese, Seediq inter-epistemic translators are transforming their language and their culture. Transformation was a feature of inter-epistemic translation according to Robinson (2017, 200). Does *SEP* represent a negative or positive transformation? I believe it is positive. Seediq TEK remains intact in the heads, hearts, and hands of knowledge keepers, but has now been superficially explicitated in *SEP*, allowing not just for preservation but also for comparison. I have attempted one kind of comparison, between *SEP* and two similar books from other settler states, in another article (Sterk 2025). Here, I will sum up by saying that Seediq people continue to strip, spin, or weave *keguy* and *qwarux*, which they can talk about in traditional terms as women’s or men’s work with good plants (Tapas 2020, 42) and also in terms that their ancestors would not have recognised, complementary terms like *niqan uban runge* and *mqqumi* or even, when they write their master’s theses for the experimental programme at Providence University, ‘tacit’.

Conclusion

By focusing on two essays in *SEP*, I have actually covered a tiny fraction of Seediq TEK, which also includes ‘traditional medicines, community justice systems and local lore about the natural world’ (Bennett 2024, 3). However limited the scope of this article, it is intended as a critical contribution to the EPISTRANS project, both in form and content. Content-wise, I have argued that the difficulty of the translation of Seediq TEK derives from its tactile, tacit nature and not from the epistemicidal character of the local knowledge ecology, let alone of scientific discourse. EPISTRANS is partly based on the idea that ‘intercultural translation’ can further ‘cognitive justice’ (Bennett 2024, 2, in reference to Santos 2016, 188–211), but the Seediq case suggests that translation between the humanities and the sciences might achieve the same aim and increase the diversity of knowledge ecologies at the same time. In terms of form, I have exemplified an alternative to a fairy tale like the one that Bennett told about epistemicide. I am of course not arguing against the fairy tale as a genre, or Bennett’s brilliant scholarly use of it. But after the fairy tale ends, we can attempt more complicated ecological accounts. That is what I have tried to do in this article. Instead of telling a tale of resistance to epistemicide, I have accounted for how the Seediq have been cooperating with allies in government and academia to compile books like *SEP* and pass their tradition, which is transformed or developed by every generation, down. However critical I have been, I imagine, and hope, that Karen Bennett and her EPISTRANS colleagues and I are mostly on the same page.

Notes

1. In translation studies, an explicitation is typically an explanation for the benefit of readers in the target culture. I use it in this way in this article. But I also use it in an idiosyncratic way to refer to a translation without an original text. Either way, what was implicit in the original text or context becomes explicit in translation.
2. For examples, see the project website at <https://www.epistran.org>.
3. The first collections of articles about TEK appeared around 1990, including contributions by the ecologist Fikret Birket, who has emerged as a standard bearer. See Berkes (2012).
4. The Chinese-language programme website is here: <https://ic.pu.edu.tw>.
5. Technically, *skgigan* is in locative focus and *slmeun* in patient focus, but suffice it to say that both are like the passive voice in English.

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