

theoretical, methodological and political potential and possibilities of performance and spotlights how Filipinos in the diaspora engage in performances that “produce new affiliations, politics, and ways of thinking” (p. 28).

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Cities in Motion: Urban Life and Cosmopolitanism in Southeast Asia, 1920–1940. By Su Lin Lewis. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. xii+309 pp.

Cast as, “largely, a social history of an aspirational multi-ethnic group of urban professionals and their children who moved and thrived within the context of the colonial-era port-city” (p. 15), *Cities in Motion* seeks to draw on the cases of interwar Penang, Rangoon and Bangkok to make a contribution to the blossoming field of global history.¹ The book is comprised of an introduction, six substantive chapters and an epilogue. Those chapters address “Maritime Commerce, Old Rivalries, and the Birth of Three Cities”, “Asian Port-Cities in a Turbulent Age”, “Cosmopolitan Publics in Divided Societies”, “Newsprint, Wires, and the Reading Public”, “Playgrounds, Classrooms, and Politics”, and “Gramophones,

Cinema Halls, and Bobbed Hair”. The epilogue bears the subtitle, “Cosmopolitan Legacies”. Several of the chapters are rather long, with four running to more than forty pages each; the epilogue, crucial to the argument that the book would make, runs to nine pages.

Early in the book’s introduction, Su Lin Lewis suggests the purpose that the dense chapters to follow will serve: to use a study of “multi-ethnic port-cities” to contribute to the rescue of scholarship on “twentieth-century Asia” from domination by narratives of “the rise of the nation-state” (p. 2). Following the lead of other scholars, she pursues that goal by studying “cosmopolitanism as a practice” (p. 7) in the three chosen cities in the interwar period. It soon becomes clear, however, that Lewis’s goals transcend the merely historiographic. She seeks in fact to make a bold contribution to the political history of Southeast Asia, broadly understood. For, she contends, in the “forgotten history of urban cosmopolitanism” that *Cities in Motion* unearths lay an alternative to the rise of the “crude ethnic nationalisms” (p. 24) that would later characterize the region.

This ambitious goal gives rise to one of the two fundamental problems that shadow the book. For it is not clear how the practice of cosmopolitanism can effectively reveal “visions ... [of] postcolonial futures founded on pluralism, tolerance, and a ‘broad outlook’ as opposed to a narrow nationalism” (p. 264), except implicitly or by imputation. Practice and vision are very different things, and so there appears to be a lack of fit between the rich substance of *Cities in Motion* and the bold argument that it would make.

The second of these basic problems is methodological. *Cities in Motion* draws on an astonishing range of secondary sources, a good number concerning contexts other than the three cities that represent the ostensible focus of the book; on numerous archives but rather little actual archival material; and on various English-language newspapers, school and university and club publications, and official reports. It uses some of these latter — for example, in its treatment of Burma, the 1928 *Report of the Indian Cinematograph Committee* — to fascinating effect. More often, however, the effect of the book’s approach is dizzying or disorienting. One finds few

extended, let alone analytical, discussions, grounded in primary sources, of the personalities and institutions active in Penang, Rangoon and Bangkok whose names come up in the text. Rather, the author has taken an essentially opportunistic approach, knitting into her chapters passing references to innumerable personalities and institutions that she has encountered in her reading and research. The result is meant, it seems, to be a pointillist rendering of the practice of cosmopolitanism.

This approach has a number of unfortunate corollaries. Despite the appearance, for example, of a handful of brief and stimulating comparative passages that suggest what might have been, “the bulk of the book” is not in any systematic way “a comparative study” (p. 22). Rather, its chapters work above all to hypothesize and catalogue shared or common manifestations of imputed cosmopolitanism in the three cities. Nor does the book have an interest in changes in the practice of cosmopolitanism in these cities during the course of the decades that it treats, in the middle of which the Great Depression struck Southeast Asia. That event had varying and important consequences for the prosperous residents of the export hubs and administrative centres of the region. Further, citations are missing for a significant number of important statements about the people and organizations that come up in the text, and the unique organization of the index — in a book so thick with passing, sometimes repeated, references to those people and organizations — makes that index frustrating to consult. Finally, one encounters in *Cities in Motion* a failure to engage with the actual arguments of many of the secondary sources on which the book draws. Its repeated, often mystifying or apparently random, references to Benedict Anderson’s collection of essays, *The Spectre of Comparisons* (1998), and to the expression — which Anderson borrowed from none other than José Rizal — that gives the collection its title is just one example of this problem. I turn to several others below.

The relationship of the treatment of Penang in *Cities in Motion* to the book as a whole merits particular mention. While ultimately

unsatisfying, that treatment is notably richer and more compelling than the treatment of the other two cities. In particular, material quoted from Penang's English-language press — from, that is, the *Eastern Courier* and the *Straits Echo* — actually gives voice to the city's and the era's apparent cosmopolitans. It leaves the reader wishing that Lewis had altogether more to say about the individuals who wrote for those newspapers, that she could trace in a sustained manner the relationship between their specific experiences and their ideas about their own and Penang's place in the world.

Lewis does discuss the legendary editor of the *Straits Echo*, the Colombo-born Manicasothy "Sara" Saravanamuttu. Sara consciously understood the society in which he lived as "cosmopolitan" (pp. 134, 178); he may be the only individual among the many mentioned in this book whom it quotes actually using the word. Sara also had a clear conception of what we would today call "the public sphere" as it existed in the Penang of his time. The newspaper that he edited reflected and communicated the self-conscious cosmopolitanism that was so evidently abroad in that city, and it was nowise alone in doing so.

Penang figured as a place in which an awareness of and pride in cosmopolitanism accompanied its practice in interwar Southeast Asia. It represents in that sense the most convincing case among the three that Lewis would present in this book. But we do well, perhaps, to consider Penang's particular circumstances. By the interwar period, Penang had seen Singapore eclipse it in commercial terms, and Kuala Lumpur in administrative terms. In these two respects, it differed from Rangoon and Bangkok, with their unrivalled status as primate cities in Burma and Siam, respectively. Without considering its full implications for the principal argument of her book, Lewis cites an unpublished paper by Eng seng Ho (2002) noting the retreat from increasingly ethnicized politics of "an elite class of Malay, Indian, and Chinese Anglophones" (p. 110) in Penang. Apparently even in the interwar period, cosmopolitanism and political marginalization sometimes went hand in hand. As Lewis notes, "already in the 1930s, a sense of collective nostalgia" (p. 135) joined a feeling of

consciously felt superiority in attaching itself to cosmopolitan identity in Penang. In the pages of *Cities in Motion*, that city presents a case marked by the expression rather than merely the practice of cosmopolitanism. But the regret that tinges that expression leads one to wonder whether, in this book's argument and more generally, overt professions of cosmopolitanism are not often claims to distinction rooted in a sense of feared irrelevance.

The treatment of Rangoon in *Cities in Motion* features the book's most sustained move away from its pointillist approach in a section bearing the title, "Rangoon University and Everyday Student Culture" (p. 215ff.), and drawing largely on primary materials. The section seeks to use an account of the "varied and everyday experiences of youth" on that campus and in the city more generally to argue that "[t]he student movement was built on a political vision of a new Burma beyond colonialism and beyond ethnic politics" (p. 225). But, in another case of fundamental disjuncture between substance and argument, this section eschews discussion of understandings among the university's students of the ethnic tensions that roiled interwar Rangoon, not least in the aftermath of the Great Depression. The relationship between those tensions and the political vision that the section attributes to the students thus remains unclear, even as an earlier chapter of the book also mentions the "promotion of a culturally homogenous nationalism" (p. 175) among university students in Rangoon in the same period.

Unsurprisingly, the name of John Sydenham Furnivall is among those that crop up repeatedly, in the discussion not only of Rangoon but also of Southeast Asia more generally, in this book. At least twice, we find his concept of "the plural society" invoked (pp. 8, 65).² But, as in the case of her failure seriously to engage with the arguments of Ho and Anderson, Lewis declines squarely to address the argument that Furnivall coined that term to summarize, let alone the implications of that argument for our understanding of interwar cosmopolitans in Southeast Asian export hubs. To what degree, one wonders, were these people creatures of "the abnormal preponderance of economic forces" (Furnivall

1948, p. 141) that characterized Furnivall's plural society? Was their practice of cosmopolitanism, contrasting as it did with the lives of the majority of those among whom they lived, not perhaps a consequence of the lack of "common social will" (ibid., p. 306) in their societies? Surely the political impotence and resignation of the Anglophone elite of Penang in the 1930s might suggest this latter conclusion. There is, in the end, no ducking the implication of the cosmopolitanism and diversity either of Rangoon or of other Southeast Asian urban centres during the interwar period in colonial capitalism, as Lewis herself recognizes.

One regrets to write that the flaws in the book's treatment of Bangkok, and of figures and developments connected to that city, are grave. They are so grave as to raise doubts about the robustness of the research, and of the methodology, on which the volume as a whole rests. The errors in that treatment, some of which are detailed here, reflect badly on Cambridge University Press and its editorial processes.

One of the difficulties is, quite simply, linguistic, related to the author's unfamiliarity with the Thai language. The book cites, for example, a discussion in the work of Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit (2005, p. 36) of the wealthy *jao sua* (เจ้าสัว) Chinese trading elite of nineteenth-century Bangkok in relation to the mass of less prosperous Chinese immigrants settled in that city and in provincial Siam. Baker and Pasuk get the term right, but in an early chapter of *Cities in Motion* it becomes "*jao su*" (p. 42), an error later repeated when the author drops the term into a discussion of education (p. 185). Similarly, the romanized title of the one Thai-language source cited in the book, a 1977 book on the history of the Thai press, is misspelled every time that it occurs. The Thai word for newspaper — *nangsue phim* (หนังสือพิมพ์) — becomes "*nangu-phim*" (for example, pp. 139 note 6, 143 note 24, 294). Remarkably, on the same page as one of those occurrences, the word *nangsue* (หนังสือ) is rendered — again incorrectly, but incorrectly in a different way — as "*nanseu*" (p. 143).³ Elsewhere, Rama I, whose given name was ทองด้วง (Thongduang), becomes "Thongggduang" (p. 33), with

a three-consonant cluster that will mystify Thai speakers, and the pen-name of a man who called himself “Mr Patriot” (นายรักชาติ) becomes “Nai Rackhati”, instead of *Nai Rak Chat* or *Nai Rak Chati* or *Nai Rakchat* or *Nai Rakchati* (p. 136).

As they accumulate, these linguistic errors converge with other errors to begin to look like serious sloppiness. The description of Bangkok’s Ratchadamnoen Road (pp. 91–92) is both confused and confusing. The American missionary doctor and pioneering Bangkok publisher Dan Beach Bradley becomes “Daniel Beach Bradley” (p. 143), and the renowned Thai writer, propagandist and diplomat *Luang Wichitwathakan* (หลวงวิจิตรวาทการ) becomes “Luang Witchit Wakanan” (p. 137). This reviewer is puzzled, too, by Lewis’s references to the apparent popularity with Siamese students in the interwar period of the rather obscure University of Manila (pp. 212, 261), popularity that her citations make it difficult to corroborate. Nor is it clear that that institution offered instruction in medicine in 1930, as the caption to one of the figures in the book suggests (p. 212).⁴

One could list further, similar, lapses in this book’s treatment of Bangkok and of putative practitioners of cosmopolitanism there. But an example analogous to the matter of *nangu–nanseu–nangsue*, though one of rather greater consequence, merits particular mention. In the space of six pages, the reader of *Cities in Motion* encounters a man called “Prince Varnvaidya” (p. 112) and one called “Prince Wan” (p. 117); the former name reappears later in the book (pp. 125, 136), as does the latter (p. 189). Is the reader unfamiliar with Thailand, its modern history or its intellectual life meant to know that these people were, despite their being listed separately in the book’s index, one and the same man, Prince Wan Waithayakon (พระองค์เจ้าวรรณไพบยากร)? The answer to this question is not clear, and that an apparent reference to the princely monk Wachirayanwarorot (วชิรญาณวโรรส) styles him “Prince Wan Wachirayan” (p. 189) only risks making matters still more confusing.

There are several points, each with methodological and substantive implications, to be made here. Prince Wan is one of a large number of figures — including some linked to Rangoon and Penang rather

than to Bangkok — whose mention in English-language sources has allowed them to appear in the pages of *Cities in Motion*. References to these people on those pages serve to illustrate the ostensible cosmopolitanism-in-practice that is the book's focus. But those references are for the most part fleeting, briefly illustrative of the general scene that Lewis seeks to sketch for us. They fail, that is, to confront the full complexity of these figures' relationship, whether in their ideas or in their lives and careers, to both cosmopolitanism and to the post-war nationalism that would, in Lewis's argument, push it aside. The Oxford- and Paris-educated Prince Wan did, for example, serve as a patron of learned societies with diverse memberships in interwar Bangkok and represent Siam in London and at the League of Nations. But he also coined much of the terminology without which discussion, in the Thai language and among Thais, of their national politics would be impossible even today. In the post-war era — the early phase of the Cold War — he would represent the Siam that had become Field Marshal Po Phibunsongkhram's Thailand at the Bandung Conference of 1955. And Saichon Sattayanurak includes him among the ten thinkers studied in two recent landmark volumes on the construction of the ideas of the "Thai nation" and of "Thainess" (Saichon 2014a and 2014b). That group comprises three other men — *Phraya* Anumanratchathon, *Luang* Wichitwathakan and Prince Damrong Rachanuphap — who also pop up in *Cities in Motion* as exemplars of cosmopolitanism in action. But one will find no extended discussion in the book, despite the immediate relevance of the issue to Lewis's overarching concern, of the relationship between these men's reported participation in the practice of cosmopolitanism and their commitment to the Thai nation or contribution to its ideological construction — the focus of Saichon's scholarship on them.⁵ I return to this point, and to Prince Wan, below.

A number of debatable interpretations of Thai history and historiography also characterize the book's treatment of Bangkok and of figures connected to it. The implicit contention that historians of Thailand, along with Thai intellectuals more broadly, have neglected the fact that both Pridi Phanomyong and some of his fellow plotters of the overthrow of Siam's absolute monarchy in 1932 studied in

France rather than simply in “the West” (p. 207) is, for example, a straw man. And, at the very least, the relationship between Phibun’s alleged admiration for France and the form of Thai nationalism that distinguished above all his first premiership (p. 210) requires elaboration.

The errors, inconsistencies and sloppiness in *Cities in Motion* are by no means confined to its treatment of Bangkok. Harvard University’s Radcliffe College becomes “Radcliff College” (p. 213). A wartime refugee from Rangoon flees that city by boarding “a British army ship to Simla” (p. 265). A 1917 report on city planning is attributed to the Rangoon Development Trust (pp. 72 note 4, 83), which would in the event come into existence only in 1921 (Osada 2016, p. 10). The Burmese writer Journal Kyaw Ma Ma Lay, or Ma Ma Lay, becomes “Ma Lay” (p. 257); there seems to be no citation to the example of her work under discussion, either in the footnotes or in the bibliography. *Cities in Motion* confuses Ne Win’s assumption of the leadership of a “caretaker” government in 1958 with his *coup d’état* of 1962 (p. 271). One could list other examples, but the point should be clear. Works of global history are, in their efforts to delineate and analyse putatively general or interrelated worldwide developments, meant to chart a path out of the ghetto of mere “area studies” or, in Lewis’s preferred term, “regional studies” (pp. xii, 2). But, as these works of global history will often prove many readers’ first or only exposure to the contexts, cases, countries that they treat, surely the transmission to such readers of error and misunderstanding poses a threat to the integrity of the global history field.

Scholarship on the political and intellectual history of Southeast Asia that challenges “the colonial-nationalist teleological framework” (p. 183) has advanced further than the author of *Cities in Motion* appears inclined to believe. And the book’s epilogue falls rather short as an account of the failure of imputed cosmopolitan visions after “[t]he war changed everything” (p. 264). Indeed, with its cursory and impressionistic review of political developments in Malaya,

Burma and Thailand in the decade and a half from 1945 onward, that epilogue concerns contests between cosmopolitanism and nationalism less than those among rival variants of nationalism. In contests of the latter sort, the apparent cosmopolitans of the interwar decades and their heirs emerged as opponents of illiberal political orders as much as of ethnic nationalism per se. Their nationalism comes as little surprise. Even in those interwar decades, Lewis writes, “[n]ationalism took different forms” (p. 127), forms that made being “cosmopolitans as well as patriots” (p. 231) possible. Sara’s service to the “new nation” of Ceylon in a series of diplomatic postings in Southeast Asia during the 1950s was thus not inconsistent with his conscious cosmopolitanism. He had praised the liberal political order of late colonial Ceylon with its universal suffrage on the pages of Penang’s *Straits Echo* in the late 1930s (p. 178). One might understand Prince Wan Waithayakon’s service to post-war Thailand in the same light.⁶

And so one is left to ask, was it, “in Southeast Asia as elsewhere, cosmopolitan political visions [that] suffered with the rise of ethnic nationalism in the 1960s and the resurgence of the military power in Burma and Thailand”? Or should we understand in a slightly different way the visions eclipsed by the developments that Lewis aims to describe here, visions that *Cities in Motion* associates with the late colonial societies that it seeks to document? More than “cosmopolitan”, were these visions — marked by “pluralism, tolerance, and a ‘broad outlook’” (p. 264, again), and by “open-ended nationalism”, Enlightenment commitments, moderation, anti-authoritarianism, concern for the public good, and gradualism (Claudio 2017, pp. 150–54) — not simply and fundamentally liberal?

NOTES

1. For purposes of full disclosure, let me note that Dr Lewis has, very generously, mentioned my name in the acknowledgements to this book, but that I at no time offered formal research advice to its author or commented on drafts of either this book or of the dissertation on which it is based.
2. While *Cities in Motion* cites Furnivall’s most important work on “the plural society” and colonial capitalism (see pp. 55 note 22, 66 note 59),

- Colonial Policy and Practice* (1948), that title is missing from the book's bibliography.
3. On a related note, the editorial team at Cambridge University Press seems to have overlooked the fact that the systems of romanization used to transliterate the two Myanmar-language titles listed in the book's bibliography are inconsistent.
 4. One should in this context note the ongoing work of the Thai historian of the Philippines, Arthit Jiamrattanyoo, on the experiences of Thai students in Manila in the years before the outbreak of the Second World War and on the exposure to the wider world that those experiences brought. In this work, Arthit draws on a rich body of memoirs and other writings.
 5. Nor is Saichon's recent work alone in the Thai-language scholarship on which a monograph with the focus of *Cities in Motion* could have profitably drawn. Surely reference to Nopphon's and Orawan's classic, path-breaking article on the Baba community of Bangkok (Nopphon and Orawan 1991) would, for example, serve the study of "cosmopolitanism" and its "practice" in that city well.
 6. On Prince Wan as a liberal, see the forthcoming Tomas Larsson (2018).

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