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Modern Times in Southeast Asia, 1920s–1970s. Edited by Susie Protschky and Tom van den Berge. Leiden: Brill, 2018. xi+214 pp.

Located at the crossroads of history, cultural studies, religious studies and anthropology, the collection of papers in *Modern Times in Southeast Asia, 1920s–1970s* offers a notable example of research on the colonial-to-postcolonial transitions in different countries of the region. The introduction of the book deals concisely with theoretical issues, acknowledging “the difficulty of practically distinguishing between the conditions of modernity and its representations” (p. 2). From there on, all contributions avoid high-level abstractions and opt for a bottom-up approach that highlights “the nature and extent of the (dis)continuities in the wake of regime change and revolution” (p. 3) in Southeast Asia through the variegated richness with which “Southeast Asians conceived of modernity at certain places and in particular times of transition” (p. 1). This attention to detail does not exclude the potential for comparison between the cases in the volume, as modernity, however understood, is articulated along the fault lines of ethnicity, class or gender across all chapters.

Protschky calls attention in the introduction to the overlap between the Euro-American colonial project of modernity and its indigeno-nationalist alternative (pp. 2–3), and this overlap is prominently demonstrated in Michael D. Pante’s study (chapter 2) on the vicissitudes of urban planning in Quezon City. Although planning was determined by a top-down ideology connected to American visions of non-inclusive suburban lifestyles, the investigation ultimately reveals “the agency of subaltern urban groups such as informal settlers” (p. 33) in shaping the city.

As the most populated country in the region, Indonesia gets special attention in the volume, with three chapters devoted to it. In the first of these, Julian Millie (chapter 3) investigates the “dialogical nexus between Islam and the emerging public sphere, and its implications for our understanding of Muslim modernity in Indonesia” (p. 40), showing how the fields of ritual worship

and calendrical commemoration turned into arenas in which the new ‘publicness’ of Islamic practice was negotiated in different moments of the twentieth century. Looking into other, non-Islamic forms of religiosity, Marieke Bloembergen (chapter 4) delves into how Indonesia became part of “a larger, inter-Asian and global set of scholarly and spiritual ritual knowledge networks” (p. 61). She does so through the in-depth study of the life trajectories of two local intellectual figures who converted to Buddhism and who played a significant role in the development of “moral geographies that alternate with that of the nation state” (p. 79).

Tom van den Berge (chapter 5) traces the construction of the colonized Other through discourses related to contemporary art in the Indonesia of the central decades of the twentieth century. While local artists showed strong interest towards new trends in Western painting such as cubism, art critics writing in Dutch-language papers criticized the imitation of ‘degenerate’ European models, recommending Indonesian artists to remain within the limits of their culture, as “[w]hen every population group in the colony stuck to his [*sic*] own sphere, circle or tradition..., radical changes would not occur” (p. 109).

Similarly concerned with the reproduction of the social order through artistic representations is the chapter by Timothy Barnard, which examines the role that the lives and screen personas of film actresses in 1950s and 1960s Malaysia played in the configuration of dominant representations of ‘modern’ femininity in this country. While, according to Barnard, these actresses became “models of modernity who promoted acceptance of the changing world around them” (p. 117), such models were still confined to the narrow limits of the household, offering a vision of womanhood more restricted than that prevalent in traditional rural society.

Of course, not only colonized societies had to struggle with the conundrums posed by ‘modernity’. Looking to one such exception through a focus on representation, the chapter by Feangfu and Harrison explores photographic images and literary works of fiction in Thailand, the only country in Southeast Asia that was never

colonized, but where, nevertheless, “the embrace of the modern was interlocked in complex ways with an anxiety over the ability—and indeed the desirability—to ‘keep up’ with the pace set by a foreign other” (p. 171).

In addition to the arts or religion, another field contested by different visions of ‘modernity’ is that of sexuality and body politics. In the first of two chapters dealing with these issues, Chie Ikeya looks at the work of Burmese writer and sexual divulgator P. Moe Nin in Burma prior to the Second World War. According to Ikeya, replicating Western negative valuations of “sexual attitudes and behaviours ... that were deemed indigenous and anti-modern” (p. 151), Moe Nin ended up promoting “a new hegemonic family that revolved around the heterosexual, conjugal couple and that privileged emotion, choice, and individualism over social obligation” (p. 137).

In a brilliant conclusion to the volume, Christina Firpo discusses the intervention of French colonial doctors and administrators upon the bodies of *métis* boys (children of French men and Vietnamese women) ‘guilty’ of engaging in joint masturbation in a Hanoi orphanage, investigating “how both crisis and cure arose out of the subjects’ identity as mutable beings living on the edge of colonial categories” of race, age and sexuality (p. 193).

In spite of its lack of comprehensiveness, the attention to detail and the interpretive quality of the contributions, as well as the broad variety of topics and approaches, make *Modern Times* a stimulating work, highly recommended to anyone interested in issues of social and cultural change in contemporary Southeast Asia.

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