

Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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Angkor Wat – A Transcultural History of Heritage, vol. 1, *Angkor in France: From Plaster Casts to Exhibition Pavilions*, vol. 2, *Angkor in Cambodia: From Jungle Find to Global Icon*. Michael Falser. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019. 1,400 pp.

At the cusp of the Gutenberg Galaxy era* of printed communication, and of a period of paradigm shifts, we must approach Michael Falser's venture into monumental history (by studying the great architectural monument of Angkor Wat) with deep respect. Falser's sizeable two-volume monograph is itself a 'monumental' study of great import. The titles of the volumes—*1: Angkor in France (From Plaster Casts to Exhibition Pavilions)* and *2: Angkor in Cambodia (From Jungle Find to Global Icon)*—suggest that the author deliberately chose an ambiguous message as a 'hook' to instantly attract the attention of those interested in Angkor.

Is there really a need for another scientific publication on Angkor? What can Falser tell us that we do not already know on the subject? Besides being wonderfully designed, the books are well written and based on first-class research materials. Falser introduces us to an enormous collection of assorted sources on heritage protection in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He presents his research in a unique overview of the motivations of European heritage protection and restoration, and how the French heritage ideals became relevant in Southeast Asia, especially in distinguished heritage sites such as Angkor in Cambodia.

* Marshall McLuhan created this term in 1962 (see McLuhan 1962).

The volumes contain representative research details, written resources and illustrations that are impressively rich and detailed. Falser structures each chapter with conscious thoroughness. This thoroughness in presenting details is important, as it enables readers to grasp the broad links and interconnections between individual content elements. Falser's monograph is thus a rather remarkable undertaking as it presents Angkor from multiple perspectives: French colonialism, French heritage protection, and Khmer cultural heritage.

The substantive message of the volumes promises much more than another reintroduction of Angkor. The first volume is a masterful summary of an earlier valid interpretation of the timeless topic of Angkor. With each chapter, the progress of the construction of Angkor's authentic replica comes alive for readers. The written and visual sources also help readers to get a glimpse of Angkor's symbolic meaning for the French. This raises some questions: how did Angkor become a symbol of Indochina's pacification? And how was Angkor interpreted in the colonial motherland?

Falser's discussion of Angkor cultural heritage requires his audience to be well-versed in cultural history and knowledge of that era's monument protection and heritage management practices. By featuring many interesting documents that determine the age of the building, Falser gives us a guide to understand the evolution of preliminary replicas of Angkor and their gradual transformation over time into the life-size replica of the building, and also the reasons and motivations to conceptualize and create Angkor. Falser gives readers additional insight into similar European ventures of the same era, especially the archetypes of the interpretation, representation and reconstruction of monumental heritage.

The presentation of historical context is extremely important, as readers might believe that the creation of a replica is merely a demonstration of strength and a colonial symbol of the French celebrating its victory over defeated nations. Consider, however, the representations of images taken from the Musée National des Monuments Français in the nineteenth century depicting distinguished

architectural elements of the French Middle Ages. Through these original images we are able to feel the sophistication and admiration created by Viollet-le-Duc's restorations of medieval French landmarks. In a similar vein, Europe turned its eye and interest to the historical monuments of the 'exotic' Southeast Asia.

The need for sensitivity to the arts was also making the rounds of Europe's capitals at the *fin de siècle* of the nineteenth century. Artistically composed study buildings of local architectural heritage were emerging as special representations of the national and colonial architectural heritage of the age. These study buildings were sophisticated reconstructions featuring several historical styles and typical decorations of the era they represented; they were constructed as 'case studies' to convey a practical—even tactile—understanding of famous historical remains. At the historical juncture in time when national or local museums and collections were used as a medium of information for citizens to learn about the historical and cultural 'power' of the nation, such as France, style buildings also became an important presentation of political power—especially the nation's overseas or Asian conquests. Angkor's replica was thus a visual aid of French regional power in Southeast Asia. In this context, the extravagant representation of Angkor and Khmer architecture does not appear extraneous.

Returning to the review of the volumes, we believe that the author's analysis of Angkor's 'presentation' by the French reflects his courage and commitment to show the historical context of how Angkor assumed its symbolic status as the crown jewel of French colonialism. That "Angkor in Cambodia" is the title of both the first volume's second chapter and of the monograph's second volume may provoke the disapproval of Khmer colleagues, as Falser started by situating his first volume as "Angkor in France". This intentional titling may affect Khmer sensitivities that Angkor in relation to Cambodia comes secondary to France. But the contents of Falser's monograph are not the usual 'Angkor story'; they are not merely a list of historical data in chronological order. Instead, Falser's introduction to the well-known history of Angkor is only a means

of presenting the local heritage organization system, and the efforts of some distinguished persons to restore the original splendour of the building, which dates back a century and a half.

The professionally composed “milestones” of the second volume help to clarify the complex local historical context. We can get credible facts about the colonial environment and local conflict and how they changed the aspects of monument protection, and how Angkor became the symbol of regional nationalism. Falser gives a nod to the efforts of politicians, researchers and the heritage preservation system supported by UNESCO to ‘create’ Angkor as one of the world’s cultural heritage monuments and as the national symbol of Cambodia.

Falser’s two-volume monograph on Angkor is a multilayered scientific text; it is both a catalogue commemorating the spirit of the age and a book on monument protection. The positivist ideology of history espoused in the book is a remnant of the view of colonizers from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries. With well-selected and relevant sources, Falser has revealed new aspects of the relationship between European monument protection, colonialism and Asian cultural heritage. The monograph provides clear and sophisticated information about the era, the political and scientific background, and the environment in which Angkor became a world cultural heritage site. For these reasons alone, Falser’s two-volume monograph merits mention as one of the most interesting publications of recent times.

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