

Gatekeepers forces us to reconsider how much frontiers shape the history of state formation and nation-building in the region. One cannot think of the breakdown of the Marcos and Suharto dictatorships without considering the impact of the ‘wars of independence’ waged by Mindanao’s Moros and the Timorese people. Likewise, the Thai and Burmese militaries may have their national capitals under their thumbs, but this could not prevent the rise of the Chiang Mai strongman Thaksin Shinawatra nor completely quash the cash-rich opium-producing Shan state.

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Mandalay and the Art of Building Cities in Burma. By François Tainturier. Singapore: NUS Press, 2021. xiii+229 pp.

Mandalay and the Art of Building Cities in Burma is a fascinating book, fluidly written, thoroughly researched and clearly structured around key arguments. The title, however, is slightly misleading as the book is largely focused on the founding protocol of the city of Mandalay over the years 1856–59. Readers interested in ‘profane’ urban studies should therefore not expect to find an extensive analysis of the political, social, ecological and economic processes that shaped urban development in the *longue durée* in Burma. The book is indeed primarily one of religious and cultural history, which will be better appreciated by readers with a background in humanities and notions of Buddhist canonical history and the Pali and Myanmar languages.

Methodologically, the book relies primarily on epigraphic sources and royal court records, as well as a rich set of illustrations. Here, the author's unprecedented and rigorous work on vast bodies of archives makes the book particularly valuable. But this methodology also means that history is told, as often in Burma, from the viewpoint of Buddhist elites.

The book's objective is to correct the colonial-era argument that Mandalay was founded, like previous Konbaung capitals, as a cosmic city. The author argues instead that, in the context of British colonization, King Mindon aimed to materialize in his capital a sanctuary for Buddhist believers and to reassert his power over Buddhist land in a non-confrontational way. More broadly, the book asks what the founding protocol of Mandalay entailed ritually and materially. The answer to this question is that this protocol both built upon precedence (chapters 1–3) and departed from it by focusing on the outer city (chapters 4–6).

Chapter 1 traces the encounters of King Mindon and his court that made the founding of Mandalay similar to that of previous royal capitals. The role of the Irrawaddy's geography, non-Buddhist influences, court politics, animism, astrology and—of course—Buddhist history, iconography, rituals and prophecies are thus examined. In so doing, the chapter shows that the founding of Mandalay was not authoritarian but rather the result of a long negotiation between King Mindon and his court.

Chapter 2 explores the aspects of the founding protocol that were brought together from various traditions and belief systems to make Mandalay a sanctuary. This protocol included choosing an auspicious and 'victorious' location and name, and creating a controlled environment through rituals such as the propitiation of local spirits, the burial of sacred objects or the physical demarcation of boundaries.

Chapter 3 narrows the focus on to the royal palace, which is presented as a pivot between the terrestrial and celestial realms. The chapter explores how traditional knowledge on palatial construction developed and was transmitted. It describes the rituals that accompanied the construction of the Mandalay Palace,

including the felling and processing of timber on auspicious days. Finally, architecture and spatial order, which reflected hierarchies of status, function and gender, are meticulously described. The chapter concludes that the Mandalay Palace was built according to pragmatic rather than cosmological concerns.

Chapter 4 focuses on spatial planning in the outer city. This is where the emergence of Mandalay departed from that of previous capitals: the latter was driven by urbanites and developed organically around pre-existing religious structures, whereas Mandalay's planning was systematically and uncompromisingly enforced by royal authorities. This shift of royal attention from the palace to the city reflects the throne's intention to turn Mandalay into a sanctuary for Buddhist populations and the measure of resources and expertise allocated to this project (which nonetheless generated significant hardship for the populations involved). It also reflects Mindon's pragmatism and openness to the world as the planning of the city was also motivated by his encounters with foreign urbanism (especially Haussmannian Paris, British Calcutta and Rangoon).

Chapter 5 discusses the construction of the 'seven places', a centrepiece of every Konbaung capital consisting of a royal bulwark, a moat, a pagoda, a monastery, a library, rest houses and an ordination hall. In Mandalay, for the first time in Konbaung history, these seven places were built in the outer city rather than within the royal walls, showing again the throne's attempt to reassert its grasp over Buddhist land and to turn Mandalay into a sanctuary.

The final chapter details how the throne materialized the Blessed One's Bazaar—that is, a collection of sacred texts, relics and Buddha images, which were again placed in the outer city rather than inside the palace in order to turn Mandalay into a land of the *sāsana* (the teachings of the Buddha and their practice).

The book concludes by arguing that the founding of Mandalay entailed an effort that was inscribed with tradition and departed from it, as it was geared towards framing King Mindon's power, not as cosmic, but rather as closely associated with the *Dhamma*

at a time of aggression by non-Buddhists. Arguably, this explains why Mandalay retained its status as the sacred heartland of Burma to this day.

Overall, the book is a textured and meticulous work of passion that deserves to be read by anyone interested in Southeast Asia's cultural, religious and urban history. It is also a valuable reminder that Burma can be apprehended and appreciated for its cultural and historical richness beyond the horrors faced by its people today.

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The Shop on High Street: At Home with Petite Capitalism. By Souchou Yao. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 177 pp.

Although the centrepiece of Souchou Yao's book is his family's shophouse on High Street in Kuala Lumpur, he separated 'shop' from 'house' in his book and chapter titles to afford himself some analytical distance. As noted in his preface, an autoethnography about his childhood home and himself might seem self-indulgent or overwrought with unsolicited emotions. Why should the plight of his family be published as an academic monograph? He answers this question aptly through an engaging story that simultaneously reveals the intimate life of the shophouse as both home and business and critiques the cultural constructs that have enabled this kind of family business to continue despite their emotional and financial costs.

As the author of *Confucian Capitalism* (2002), Yao further deconstructs the myth of the Chinese entrepreneur through a personal story that reveals how Confucian ethics and dedication towards family are lived values, but upholding these values requires some self-deception, compromise and "promiscuous optimism" (p. 137), which enables family members to endure. Framing his