

debate about world cinema. In addition, it serves as a conduit for multiple meanings and discourses that reflect colonial legacies and ideologies that continue to haunt postcolonial Malaysian and Singaporean societies.

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*Empire of Convicts: Indian Penal Labor in Colonial Southeast Asia*. By Anand A. Yang. Oakland: University of California Press, 2021. vii+292 pp.

Penal transportation was a key facet of British Imperial rule. Beginning with the earliest deportations to America and Australia, the policy was subsequently replicated in other British colonies. In *Empire of Convicts*, Anand Yang focuses on the exile of Indian prisoners and their detention in British colonial outposts across Southeast Asia over the course of the ‘long’ nineteenth century—a trajectory of penal transportation that has received scant scholarly attention. In addressing this lacuna, Yang provides fascinating insights into the experience of the Indian convicts in these colonies with a masterful exposition of the circumstances that led to their deportation and the faculty with which the prisoners navigated life over the course of their imprisonment overseas.

Yang posits that penal transportation, which initially involved European convicts in North America, was extended to Indian prisoners to facilitate “the consolidation of Empire across land and water” (p. 11). Penal transportation was not only an important element of the “metropole-colony” (p. 12) relationship between India and the other settlements but it also provided the British with the labour required to develop fledgling outposts across the Indian Ocean (p. 12). This

form of punishment was deemed especially effective for Indians as many feared crossing the *kala pani* (the dark water of the ocean) on religious grounds, thus allowing colonial administrators to use the sentence as a powerful deterrent of crime. While the demand for penal labour was posed by the colonies, colonial administrators represented the shift from capital punishment to deportation as a benevolent and merciful measure, signifying the difference between a ‘civilized’ colonial power and the preceding Mughal Empire (p. 14).

With that context in place, *Empire of Convicts* details the lived experiences of the convicts in three key penal settlements in Southeast Asia: Bengkulu in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and Penang as well as Singapore in the nineteenth century. In Bengkulu—the first British outpost in the region—the narrative focuses on Fateh Khan. A convict from Benares, he came to be respected as ‘Khan Sahib’—a recognized leader who came to own property, forged links with locals and whose prominence was evident in his ownership of a slave (pp. 78–80). The narrative also offers insights into the regulations that comprised the “Bencoolen rules”—a system of rewards and punishments which became the blueprint for transported penal settlements in Southeast Asia (p. 98). When Bengkulu was handed over to the Dutch after the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824, the convicts held there were transferred to Penang and Singapore.

A substantial convict population was accorded to Penang in the aftermath of the Anglo-Dutch Treaty as colonial administrators were determined to transform the island into a major strategic port for the British Empire in the Straits of Malacca. That ambition, however, fell short for various reasons, including budgetary shortfalls, administrative mismanagement and a shortage of labour. To defray the colony’s maintenance costs, convicts were even ‘loaned’ as servants to colonial officials and other Europeans. Yang informs readers that it was this context that resulted in a shift in both the occupation of the convicts and how they described themselves—as

“*kampanee ke naukar*” (servants of the East India Company) instead of “*bandwars*” (inmates) (p. 96).

The presumed laxity of the penal settlement in Penang, alongside the frequency of reported escapes, resulted in Singapore taking over as the main destination for convicts transported from India to the Straits Settlements. Yang unpacks the vital contributions over four decades of these convict workers to the development of the island—by clearing forests, draining swamps and building infrastructure. It was here that a sixfold classification system was adopted in the 1830s, which divided convicts according to various stipulations and determined the extent of their duties and privileges (pp. 164–66). The book also explores how administrators in Singapore, Calcutta and London were fixated with measuring the advantages and disadvantages of forced versus free labour, which was reflected in their meticulous documentation of the details on the convict workers, collectively and individually. Of particular interest in the Singapore penal settlement was the treatment meted out to Bhai Maharaj Singh and Khurruk Singh, two Sikh rebels who were exiled to Singapore in 1850 as ‘state prisoners’. These political detainees were exempt from manual labour and enjoyed special privileges, including ‘liberal’ rations and the opportunity to maintain correspondence, with their letters providing rich insights into their lives in exile (p. 146).

*Empire of Convicts* closes with a repertoire of convict experiences in the Straits Settlements between the 1860s and 1870s, when the system of penal transportation finally ended in the region. During this period, and especially after the Indian Rebellion of 1857, the European community in the Straits Settlements had become increasingly wary of the policy—a position that had become tenable with the expansion of alternative forms of labour migration such as indentured labour. Yang explores the diverse perspectives of the Straits and Indian authorities vis-à-vis the impending closure of the prison, with the former supporting the repatriation of convicts which the latter opposed because of concerns over the implications of their return. Both parties eventually conceded to adopting measures on

a case-by-case basis, although the majority remained in the Straits (p. 190).

Through *Empire of Convicts*, Anand Yang adds significantly to the scholarly understanding of the subaltern history of the (predominantly male) Indian convicts in the Straits Settlements, who negotiated their position in the colonial order despite shifting administrative concerns and policies. The book—a product of decades of research—is especially valuable as a narrative that weaves together the lived experiences of convicts and the larger socio-economic and political order that they were coerced to serve.

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