

Book Reviews

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Intercultural Exchange in Southeast Asia: History and Society in the Early Modern World. Edited by Tara Alberts and D.R.M. Irving. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. x+289 pp.

Intercultural Exchange in Southeast Asia promotes the idea of looking largely at the trade of the intangible in addition to that of more tangible objects. The various authors focus much effort on religious exchange but also other cultural themes such as knowledge, music and architecture. In researching a wide variety of perspectives, largely through European print sources, the chapters collectively reflect the themes of intercultural exchange and mutual discovery, thereby countering arguments made by other scholars that seek to diminish the usefulness of such texts in researching Asian societies (Alberts and Irving 2013, p. 9). This work overall seeks to avoid discussing the imposition of systems and ideas on Southeast Asian societies in favour of a more nuanced view of history through sources that in recent years have become more readily available by means of the internet. Avoiding the well-established binary of oppressor and subaltern remains an important aspect of the work overall (pp. 11–12).

The work does a commendable job of looking for instances of indigenous power in the face of European presences throughout the early modern period in Southeast Asia. It promotes a multipolar view of Southeast Asia over a dichotomous one while emphasizing primary sources, which represents a positive step in the development of the literature. Historians generally employed such sources previously even when considered problematic because they needed to cope with the overall dearth of surviving material written by Southeast Asians from the period. Perhaps a more constructive debate might

focus on determining which sources have greater accuracy or utility and should be given more credence over others. If more scholars can find similar evidence of indigenous Southeast Asian autonomy, the field can develop considerably.

In the interest of space, this review will examine the last two chapters of the volume as examples of intercultural exchange as an approach to scholarly inquiry. In chapter 7, Irving examines the exchange of music between English mariners and Southeast Asians with a particular focus on the voyages of Thomas Forrest, who sailed the waters of the archipelago during the late eighteenth century. Forrest served as an agent for the British East India Company and as an independent country trader, while using his musical acumen to attain favour with a variety of people in the region. With his flute and violin, Forrest sailed throughout the archipelago and performed for audiences of differing ethnic and class backgrounds. Irving highlights the music played in the region and notes that an exchange of music occurred between Europeans and Asians with a particular focus on Malay songs (pp. 207–16). The English language translations provided of Forrest and the Mindanao woman's Malay song are varied. George Miller's translation, which is more literal than poetic, is preferable because of the historical rather than aesthetic nature of the published volume (pp. 216, 232–33).

In chapter 8, Katrina Gulliver examines the architecture and city planning strategies of the three European colonial powers in Malacca from 1511 to 1957. She compares and contrasts the influences and styles of the Portuguese, Dutch and British architecture by looking at the goals of the builders and the ultimate realities on the ground that shaped the town. The Portuguese developed Malacca with a focus on military defence, whereas the Dutch focused on centralized planning and constructing civic buildings. British planners integrated Malacca into their global trading network by improving transportation systems in the town (p. 237). Gulliver uses a wide variety of sources concerning the history of Malacca and integrates them well into the overall argument. She emphasizes the distinct architecture that emerged in the town resulting from a multi-ethnic community

living there during a period of relatively low economic growth in comparison with other major colonial ports (pp. 250–52). While overall an excellent contribution, the chapter might have benefited from illustrations given the visual nature of the subject and the availability of such materials.

The writers of this book demonstrate that a thorough examination of texts on Southeast Asia can uncover many different perspectives. The work exemplifies the notion of exchange over imposition as a vital aspect of cultural development and accomplishes this goal effectively. While promoting a history of peaceful intercultural exchange in Southeast Asia is commendable, these interactions occurred under a geopolitical environment that merchants, scientists and religious figures operated within. Regardless of how these figures felt about European colonialism, it enabled them to conduct their work relatively unhindered, a point that scholars must not ignore. The work pushes scholars in the right direction but could have provided better clarity in navigating the treacherous rocks and shoals of the field that has yet to emerge anywhere near its full potential.

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Spirit Possession in Buddhist Southeast Asia: Worlds Ever More Enchanted. Edited by Bénédicte Brac de la Perrière and Peter A. Jackson. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2022. viii+346 pp.

This timely collection of essays puts the spotlight on the prominence of benign spirit possession, or adoricism, in the predominantly Buddhist societies of mainland Southeast Asia as well as in “atheist” Vietnam. Countering normative portrayals of adoricism as bound to extinction