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Cross-Cultural Exchange in Colonial South-East Asia

Gregory Bracken

Cross-Cultural Exchange and the Colonial Imaginary, edited by H. Hazel Hahn, examines a phenomenon she says is as old as the history of human settlement. One of the book's main strengths is its focus on exchange for the modern period which, as Hahn admits, is unusual but useful because it's not so well understood (particularly when compared to the early-modern era).

The evolving meanings of objects and practices can be interpreted in numerous ways. This book's ten chapters examine buildings and places, photography, dress, diaries, scholarly societies, and even jazz to range across the Dutch East Indies, French Indochina, British Malaya and Ceylon, and the Philippines, offering fresh perspectives through their multi-layered interpretations. Highlighting the fragmented nature of exchange and showing it to be fluid, multi-linear and multi-layered, these chapters contribute to a more dynamic understanding of culture as it continuously evolves.

Colonisation looms large over the history of Southeast Asia. Yet, we see it here as a process. We also see its contested nature where objects, buildings, and cultural practices are contextualised within patterns of flows freed from the reductive binaries of precolonial-colonial or colonial-postcolonial because, as Hahn points out, periodisations like these often overshadow continuities. The standard narrative of colonisation is one of domination, with the imposition of colonisers' cultures onto local ones, with an assumed superiority and an insistence on clear distinctions between coloniser and colonised. The metropole was seen as impervious to colonial influences, and political history, even when emphasising agency for the colonised (for example, in independence struggles) tends to maintain those binaries. Hahn and her contributors show how ethnically and culturally diverse colonial societies actually were, with complex motivations, diverse worldviews, and varying degrees of agency. Colonisers are also shown to be (relatively) diverse. This book helps us move away from the view of all-powerful empire towards one where the dynamic interpretations of 'entangled' histories show shared spaces, cultures, and strategies that allowed for integration, adaptation, appropriation, and resistance.

Knowledge Exchange

Chapter 3 (the last chapter in Section 1 on Knowledge Exchange) is by Arnout H.C. van der Meer and examines the confrontation between a young Javanese subordinate and his European superior over dress and deference in 1913, a time when Dutch reliance on adopted symbols of the indigenous power elite were falling foul of new colonial directives to modernise. This shows a cross-cultural exchange that both supported and undermined Dutch colonial legitimacy. Chapter 1, by George Dutton, examines the diaries of a Vietnamese priest based in Lisbon, in the early nineteenth century. Though never published, these diaries were intended for a readership back home, to prepare fellow countrymen for visits to the West. This unusual cross-cultural exchange gives fascinating insights into everyday Portuguese life from an Asian perspective. Chapter 2, by Matthew J. Schauer, examines knowledge dissemination by amateur scholarly societies in British Malaya. Intending to aid colonial expansion, they also sought to provide for a more culturally sensitive empire (clearly foregrounding the later 'hearts and minds' policy). By preserving cultural traditions from the threat of modernity, these societies saw themselves as custodians of ethnological knowledge. Interestingly, these networks also allowed for exchanges across imperial divides, and while they also contained some pro-imperial rhetoric, they were less overtly propagandistic than the colonial exhibitions that took place in Europe at the same time.

Material and Architectural Exchange

Section 2, Material and Architectural Exchange, contains four chapters. The first, by Dawn Odell, analyses a carved 'Chinese' screen in Batavia, which at first glance appears to be a successful cross-cultural translation. A closer examination, however, reveals more about the social and ecological particularities of the space it inhabits. While such screens were popular in Dutch colonies, they never translated back to the Netherlands; perhaps because they were an example of unresolved imitation, an incoherent translation, suggesting the interesting possibility that failure might also be an aspect of cross-cultural exchange. The next chapter, by editor H. Hazel Hahn, analyses an incongruously decorated *vimana* on the Sri Thendayuthapani Temple in Ho Chi Minh City. Dating from the 1880s, it features Hindu boys dressed as Europeans. In relating patterns of cross-cultural exchange to the politics of cultural heritage, Hahn's chapter focuses on the interwar period, a time of intense and pivotal change in colonial Vietnam, to show how this unique *vimana* accurately reflects meanings unique to a specific location.

The next two chapters deal specifically with the built environment and are possibly the most insightful in the book. Caroline Herbelin rethinks the relationship between 'colonial' and 'local' by examining the Governor General's palace in Hanoi and some so-called 'French' homes built by wealthy Vietnamese in rural Cochinchina. These seemingly disparate examples uncover shared mechanisms in the manufacturing of interculturalism and show how it can be an active and complex exchange that allows different sides to impact each other. Chapter 7, by Sarah Moser, brilliantly exposes the Malaysian government's unwitting reproduction of British colonial tropes in the city planning of Putrajaya, the new government city. Designed to be an 'anti-Kuala Lumpur,' Putrajaya sought to break ties with the colonial past by pivoting away from the West to strengthen ties with the Middle East. Yet all it shows is that the ruling elite have internalised values and ideals from colonial Britain (long after they were abandoned there). Things like seeing town planning as heroic (something to be gifted to the masses from the ruling elite), strict zoning maintaining separation of races, and a new 'national' style that resurrects the fantasy Orientalism of the British Raj. While the Malaysian state has actively sought to distance itself from its colonial past, recent planning shows it to be maintaining the grandiose gestures and top-down approaches beloved of late colonialism; places designed not for the benefit of the people but for the projection and sustaining of power.

Leisure Exchange

The third and final section begins with Benita Stambler's analysis of photographs from colonial Ceylon. Circulating in England via postcards, books, newspapers, and magazines, she shows how these images require additional information to be understood properly. Susie Protschky's Chapter 9 highlights the cultural encounter between Europeans and Javanese via two vignettes: portrait photographs of European women dressed in Javanese costume. Acts like this demonstrated a competence across cultures but were also transgressive of class and race (and would now be condemned as cultural appropriation). The final chapter, by Frederick J. Schenker, is one of the most interesting in the book. In it, he follows the proliferation of jazz in the British empire to show how a leisure activity (like dancing) could be crucial for strengthening imperial structures through the cultivation of distinction. Consuming jazz was a leisure practice that allowed for the performance of new forms of modernity. He shows how colonisers were able to domesticate foreign spaces by reproducing practices from Europe. He also shows how the demand for jazz led to the emergence of Asian jazz professionals, thus complicating their position as seemingly static, immobile, colonised subjects, and creating a new category of cosmopolitan labour, thereby bolstering their capacity for independence.

Conclusion

This book does indeed, as it promises, provide a fuller picture of exchange networks through geographical, temporal, and inter-group frameworks. By reassessing long-standing interpretive

divisions, such as metropole-periphery, coloniser-colonised, precolonial-colonial, and colonial-postcolonial, it shows how cross-cultural exchange is so much more than simply the straightforward trade of objects or information. It can (and often does) lead to new lifestyles, new ways of thinking, and even the formation of new cultural identities.