

'Inventing' the horse

This book is full of interest. The geographical and historical core of it may be found in the sub-title. Its chief authors, Greg Bankoff and Sandra Swart, are respectively authorities on the Philippines and Southern Africa: the former discusses the introduction of horses in the Philippines, their role in its colonial history, their impact on and adaptation to the environment; the latter the role of horses in settler South Africa and the emergence of the 'Besotho pony' in Lesotho.

Nicholas Tarling

Bankoff, G. and Sandra Swart, with Peter Boomgaard, William Clarence-Smith, Bernice de Jong Boers and Dhiravat na Pombejra. 2007.

Breeds of Empire. The 'Invention' of the Horse in Southeast Asia and Southern Africa 1500-1950. Copenhagen: NIAS Press. viii + 263 pages. Maps, tables, illus. ISBN 978 87 7694 014 0

COLLABORATORS in the book include William Clarence-Smith, whose concise and informative essay on the maritime horse trade of the Indian Ocean shows the connection between the two areas; Peter Boomgaard, who writes on horse-breeding and trading in the history of Indonesia; Bernice de Jong Boers, who writes illuminatingly on the horses of the Indonesian island of Sumbawa; and Dhiravat na Pombejra, who, drawing on Dutch sources for the history of Ayutthaya, reminds us that horses were not the draught animals of Southeast Asia, but were used in non-colonial states for military and ceremonial purposes. Neither Southeast Asia nor Southern Africa was, by contrast, say, to Australia, ideal for the horse. But while horses affected the environment, they also adapted to it. Typically the 'breeds' that emerged were small but their stamina was great.

Horses and humans

The principal authors comment on the story from many points of view and offer many insights on the relationships of horse and human and also some on the relationships among humans. The role of the horse in human society is, of course, not a new topic, but it has rarely been placed in the context of colonialism. Historiography has been more familiar with those who rode into Europe – to borrow the title of the English translation of Miklos Jankovich's book (1971) – or with the feudal system that sustained the mounted knight in Europe. The age of the horse indeed did not at once terminate with the building of railways or the advent of motorised vehicles. Horses were employed and destroyed on a grand scale in the First World War.

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'[T]he only thing that wrings my heart and soul', cried the composer Edward Elgar at its outset, 'is the thought of the horses – oh! my beloved animals – the men – and women can go to hell – but my horses – I walk round and round this room cursing God for allowing dumb animals to be tortured.' (quoted in Jerrold Northrop Moore, *Edward Elgar A Creative Life*, Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 670). But it was true of the Second World War, too. Hitler invaded Russia with 600,000 vehicles, but, as Richard Overy points out, also with 700,000 horses. (Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, London: Pimlico, 2006, p. 264)

Perhaps our authors under-emphasise the extent to which horses have appeared in past historiography – Napoleon's Marengo is not the first war-horse whose name is remembered: Bucephalus supported Alexander the Great and Babieca El Cid (and no Antipodean author can forget the legendary race-horse Phar Lap) – and in literature – Black Beauty is preceded by Rosinante. It is not clear, in other words, that the horse has been quite so 'othered' as is suggested. Whether there is, or should be, horse-story as there may be her-story as well as history is open to question. The principal authors raise it, but do not goad us to answer. But their initiative is welcome. Could it apply to other creatures that have had the good fortune and the misfortune to be closely associated with the activities and imaginings of humankind? – the cat, the dog, or the elephant, the chicken or the hawk, the whale.

Breeds and breeding

Our authors put some emphasis on the 'invention' of the horse and on the emergence of 'breeds' and the concept of 'thoroughbreds'. That invites the adoption of yet other perspectives. Notwithstanding the usefulness and the endurance of the horses that adapted to the conditions of Southern Africa or Southeast Asia, human beings sought to improve their 'breeding'. In the late 19th century, as Professor Bankoff points out, Spaniards in the Philippines became convinced that life in the tropics debilitated both man and beast and that 'science' had the answer. 'And just as nature needed the intervening hand of man, white man, to reverse the process of retardation, so the local population required the guidance and control of Spanish colonialism to escape from 'savagery'.' (p.121)

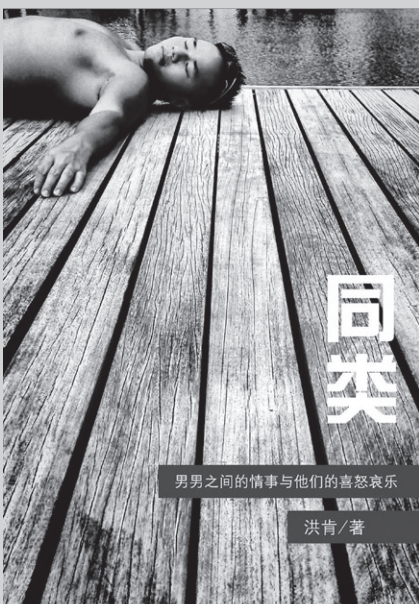
'It is widely accepted', Dr Swart adds, 'that human 'races' are far from natural and are in fact socially produced and shifting, but animal breeds are often a safe realm for those narratives on to which conceptions of human difference such as hierarchy, gender, class, and national character are mapped.' (p. 147) Historians of the colonial world, and indeed of the Western world, cannot ignore the looseness of thinking and talking about the 'races' of men. If, as they should, they read this excellent book, they will also be reminded how easy it has been, not only to imagine animals as humans, but to regard humans as animals, to be, in the case of 'lesser breeds' or 'impure blood' or 'bad stock', to be improved, used or disposed of, trampled down by panzers and horses' hooves.

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INSET TOP:
Chinese dressage horse
INSET MIDDLE:
Besotho pony.
Image by Jazz Kuschke.
INSET BELOW:
Napoleon crossing the Alps on his horse Marengo.

BELOW: 同类, the first anthology of Singaporean gay Chinese fiction. Written by Ken Ang.



男男之间的情事与他们的喜怒哀乐

洪肯/著

stars, soccer hooliganism, gay festivals, CNN, or Hollywood. Or, for that matter, what about the ambiguity of identity of tribal groups who have to maintain identity while accommodating with dominant regional populations and languages, with the penetration of the 'nation-state', and with the national and international media to boot?²

Ambiguity

The window is dressed by an ominous quote from Jacques Derrida on which the book opens, and in places the reader will be in for a rough ride, since many contributors eagerly theorise their descriptions of the obvious and expectable. However this may be, the best working hypothesis that emerges is that the localisation or adaptation of extraneous inputs hybridises, pollutes, betrays, bastardises, and demonstrates the dangers of essentialism or the quest for pristine purity. This implies that identities, however deeply rooted, are ambiguous and negotiable, too.

Even so, certain authors want to emphasise essences and stress the often expressed nativism of the adapters. Did

the *ligne sac* and hula-hoop crazes I witnessed in 1958 make the Japanese any less self-secure?³ Most probably not. Did the soccer hooliganism of the fans of *FC Surabaya* – regularly drawing a trail of destruction through Java in the 1990s – make these fans any less Madurese, Javanese, Indonesian? It probably did, yet it may have strengthened their urban proletarian belonging. There is an element of the all-possible in the outcome of culture contact, and so I remain reticent to efforts of over-theorisation of intercultural translation or the over-interpretation of cultural essentials of which the volume offers many instances.

Overwhelming diversity

Concretely, the collection offers readings on being gay in Chinese and Indonesian localities; on maintaining an evolving local identity in the face of extraneous modernisation and state-sponsored essentialism that tells the citizens what it is to be Chinese, Korean, Indonesian; on Indonesian and Korean pop and youth culture; on de-territorialising aesthetics in international Indonesian and diasporic Chinese art.

The rationale for this overwhelming diversity is that we may gain theoretically relevant insight through focusing on the marginal. In exploratory studies, this often is the case indeed, also because absurd outcomes have the merit of showing what things are not. This approach through serendipity would have tremendously gained in credibility if any or some of the tentative conclusions on translation, root-searching, or cultural pollution would have

been applied to mainstream situations that are, wherever in the world, subject to the same processes. Thus far, however, these marginal cases, diversity, eclectic theorising, etc., make me fear that the editors bit off more than they could chew. Granted, the question of how scholars should engage the contradictions in everyday practices and the concomitant uncertainties of identity remains as valid as ever, yet the present miscellany of divergent interpretations leaves the reader – me, at least – bewildered. Maybe I am growing old.

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Notes

1. E.g., Niels Mulder. 2008. *Doing Thailand; the anthropologist as a young dog in Bangkok in the 1960s and 2009. Professional Stranger; doing Thailand during its most violent decade. A field diary.* Bangkok: White Lotus.
2. E.g., Nguyen Van Thang. 2007. *Ambiguity of Identity. The Mieu in North Vietnam.* Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books.
3. In, Niels Mulder. 2008. *Rondje Wereld in het jaar van de hoelahoep.* Rijswijk: Elmar.