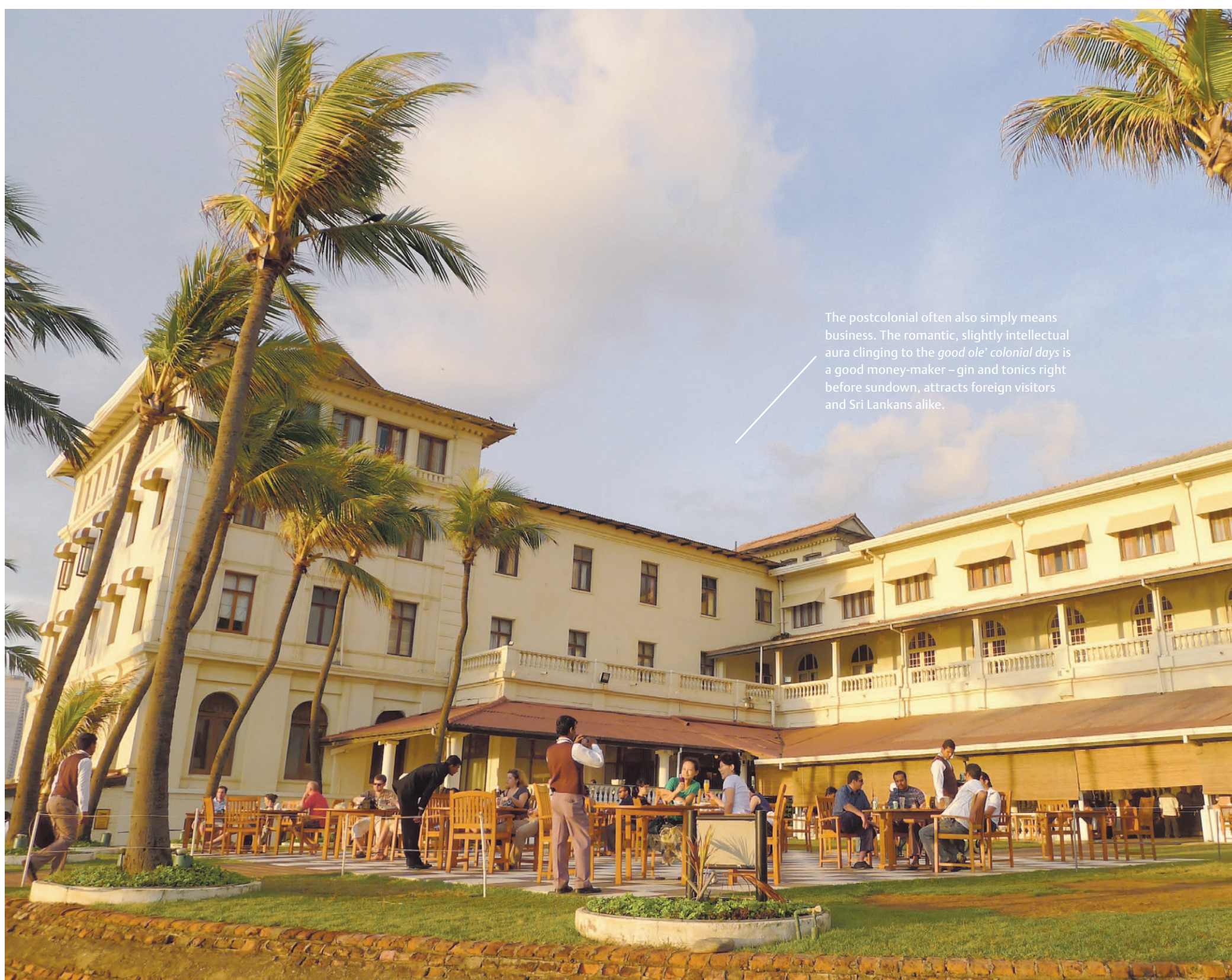


Pull-out supplement

theFocus



The postcolonial often also simply means business. The romantic, slightly intellectual aura clinging to the *good ole' colonial days* is a good money-maker – gin and tonics right before sundown, attracts foreign visitors and Sri Lankans alike.

Postcolonial dialogues

In November 2011 IIAS hosted a two-day roundtable, tentatively titled The Postcolonial Dialogues. The idea was simple, yet we were well aware of the complexities that came with this so-called simplicity. In terms of the colonial experience and postcolonial realities, our task at hand was to explore what has been left unsaid, untouched upon, undocumented, unexplored or maybe even purposely ignored. What, in short, should our agenda be the coming years when speaking of 'postcolonialism'? We were, however, all in agreement of one thing from the start: much has already been said. Another thing we firmly agreed on is that this does not mean there are no more issues to be dealt with.

Michiel Baas

Renewing postcolonial dialogues

RECURRING DEBATES TAKING PLACE IN EUROPE concerning their colonial pasts often paint a confusing image; one that wishes to celebrate a certain colonial legacy yet at the same time also one that demands recognition of the atrocities committed and the structures of inequality that were introduced during colonial days, and which often saw their perpetuation and/or reinvention in the years after independence. This is nicely illustrated by the French law on “the positive aspects of colonization”, introduced in 2005, or the more than ambiguous celebrations for the 50-year anniversary of independence in a number of sub-Saharan African countries in 2010 and in the former “*métropoles*”.

In line with this, what can we make of the Dutch former prime-minister's call for more ‘VOC mentality’ with regards to the national economy and the success of Dutch companies? Especially when we consider the recent, incredibly late apology on 9 December 2011 by the Dutch ambassador to Indonesia, on behalf of the Dutch government, for the atrocities committed in the village of Rawagede (west Java), where more than four hundred innocent men were murdered by Dutch military in 1947 because the villagers refused to reveal the Indonesian fighter Luka Kustario's hiding place?

And how do we understand recent happenings in the Middle East – the so-called Arab Spring (already a contested term for various reasons) – in light of the various dependencies and power relations that have coloured and shaped regional histories? Has the Occupy movement been influenced and/or inspired by these happenings and how does all this relate to shifting (economic) power relations on the planet in general? In short, there was clearly plenty to explore during the two-day roundtable on Post-Colonial Dialogues, and we very much realized it had to be exactly that: a dialogue; one where scholars could come together to talk, *dialogue*, and work towards an agenda that could set the tone for future research.

The postcolonial (study) agenda

The study of postcolonialism, by definition, does not do ‘firm’ conclusions; its very purpose seems even to avoid reaching them. This may have its roots in the colonial experience itself, which was quintessentially hegemonic, dominating, dividing, and firm in its determination to get its message across. The study of postcolonialism is characterized by a whole plethora of often disagreeing voices giving firm *voice* to issues left unaddressed, unnoticed, swept under the carpet, or simply even blatantly denied. However, it is, in the end, also a field never quite (fully) in agreement. And thus was the roundtable held without a firm agenda, building on the objective that what we were coming together for was actually to determine what the agenda for the coming years should be.

And not just that, the sheer mention of a possible *agenda* already denoted something important and something that we were desperately trying to avoid: *that to have one would be to continue one*. In a sense postcolonialism, in both theory and practice, has always been an agenda of sorts. It has always come with a particular plan to steer ‘things’ in a certain direction; it has always been imbued by and layered with objectives, goals, plans and meanings. And thus did we come together without an agenda, but certainly not without having done our homework.

In a Background Document (available on the IIAS website) a brief history of postcolonialism (as a field of study) was provided, after which a number of more in-depth analyses were made of a number of possible topics for future research and, of course, ‘dialogue’. The final chapter of this document was titled ‘Not Yet a Conclusion’ and took the reader on a ‘postcolonial’ trip, not so much down memory lane, but into the postcolonial realities of the present. Some of these scenes will be reproduced here in this article.

The scenes are based on experiences and observations, no scholarly research was conducted and thus they are somewhat ‘anecdotal’, almost ‘entertaining’, in their description. But this is very much on purpose, as what is hoped to be accomplished by this, is to trigger further thinking in terms of instances, situations, and references; from which a certain (problematic, contested, ‘head-scratching’) postcoloniality emerges that we need to think through and talk about and that could form the basis for a future research agenda.

A Dutch issue: what to do with Jan Pieterszoon Coen?

The statue of Jan Pieterszoon Coen (8 January 1587 – 21 September 1629) standing in the small city of Hoorn (the Netherlands) has been contested for decades (fig. 2). Coen was an officer of the Dutch East India Company (VOC), even holding two terms as its Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies. Most Dutch have grown up thinking that Coen was a national hero, one that the Dutch should be proud of; a representative of their glorious past *in den vreemde* (‘in strange lands’), bringing home considerable wealth.



However, (local) newspapers have often reported on various protests and initiatives raising awareness as to the tyrannical and abusive ‘qualities’ of this so-called hero. As a young boy myself, having grown up in provincial Netherlands, the VOC (East India Company) and almost all things associated with it were cause for celebration, certainly not commemoration. They were reminiscent of a glorious past, one that would and should instil the Dutch with pride. ‘This business’ with Jan Pieterszoon Coen was mostly understood as a nuisance, something that rather left-wing revolutionary types (Socialists! Communists!) felt the need to bring up, but which nobody else really seemed too bothered about.

Coen's appetite for (rather gruesome) violence is what stands out most in the historic accounts of his Company days, in particular relating to his extremely violent enforcement of Dutch monopoly on the nutmeg and mace trade, leading to the massacre at Banda (Aceh, Indonesia). By the time Coen arrived in, what is now, Indonesia the Dutch had already been trying to enforce such a monopoly for more than twenty years. Although Greater Banda had been coerced into promising to uphold the monopoly, it had been a promise not everybody felt inclined to keep. Local inhabitants had the ‘audacity’ to sell to the British seafarers, and according to some accounts even traded them for canons. Although they had managed to stop Coen from entering Banda in 1621, his second attack was far more ‘successful’ with, as a result, many people fleeing the region. Although the accounts vary somewhat, in the end eight hundred local inhabitants were captured and shipped off as slaves or forced labourers to Batavia. According to a book that was published one year later (*Verhaal van eenighe oorlogen in Indië*, 1622), six Japanese mercenaries were given the task to cut in half, behead and quarter, using sharp swords, the bodies of eight of the leaders of the uprising, after which another 36 ‘convicted’ were also beheaded and quartered. Another account speaks of 5,000 Bandanese living in the region pre-Coen, and only 1,000 alive by 1635.

Coen was definitely no hero, but he is credited for paving the way of VOC dominance in the East Indies. In his own days, however, he was already highly contested and his appetite for bloodshed was too much for many. ‘Publicly’ acknowledging that Coen was no hero, however, that he was in fact a mass murderer, remains, to put it euphemistically ‘complicated’, in the Netherlands. And this becomes all the more apparent when we look at the discussion about his statue in the city of Hoorn that has been ongoing for decades now. The Dutch remain divided on the issue. While papers have frequently reported on historical evidence of his misdeeds in Indonesia, a certain pride concerning his ‘grand deeds’, bringing home wealth to the city, to the country even, percolates through many other accounts. The VOC, and Coen as one of its figure-heads, is something to be proud of, a legacy to be treasured. This also goes for all that is (still) left of the VOC in terms of buildings, paintings and, indeed, other statues. Thus while people will agree that Coen was probably not the kind of national hero he was long revered to be, his statue is part of a history to be treasured, one that deserves to be kept, maintained and to a certain degree, to remain uncontested.

Throughout the years Coen has often been ‘discovered’ by passers-by as having been bedecked or otherwise decorated. Walking down *Het Grote Noord* (Hoorn's main shopping street) one ends up at *De Rode Steen* (‘the red stone’), the square in which, smack in the middle, Coen has taken up position. Here, at night, local activists frequently come together to dress up Coen in one way or another; to cover him in paint, wrap strange pieces of cloth around his waist and hang stuff from his hands. On 16 August 2011, Coen was finally removed from his pedestal, though, admittedly by accident. A heavy crane accidentally made a wrong move and ever so slightly bumped the statue, after which, balance lost, Coen came crashing down (fig. 3). His fall was applauded, and people

2(above left):
Jan Pieterszoon
Coen standing
proudly on his
pedestal in Hoorn.

3(above right):
Jan Pieterszoon Coen
after being knocked
to the ground in
2011. The decision
then had to be made
of whether or not
to put him back.

The study of postcolonialism, by definition, does not do ‘firm’ conclusions; its very purpose seems even to avoid reaching them. This may have its roots in the colonial experience itself, which was quintessentially hegemonic, dominating, dividing, and firm in its determination to get its message across.

immediately wondered whether this would be his ultimate exit. The City Council decided it would not. Coen would return, though this time with a footnote, in the form of a small plaque at the base of the statue, explaining Coen's more than problematic past. Obviously, the final word has not been spoken. Protest groups continue to argue that a country that prides itself on its liberal values, openness and tolerance, should be adult enough to recognize that Coen cannot continue to be honoured in this way.

The case is one of many. The Netherlands continues to celebrate its once colonial might. It has been argued that the Dutch continued celebration of its colonial heyday stands in direct relationship to the rather marginalized role it plays on the world stage nowadays. There is a lingering memory of different times, times when the Dutch were to be reckoned with, and what remains is that highly coloured memory and the very concrete reminders dotting the Dutch landscape. This is also what seems to continue to stand in the way of any real debate on the reality of the Dutch colonial enterprise.

Painted innocence or ‘how to relive those days’

Postcolonialism, however, is certainly not always about such concrete reminders of a problematic past and troublesome ways of dealing with history. Sometimes one simply ends up in a situation where these discussions about (post) colonial histories, oriental representations and changing (economic) power relations come together in one room while the intentions are at first glance so very unproblematic. The recent overview exhibition of Liu Kang (1911-2004) – one of Singapore's most important artists, and accordingly, a guiding figure in the development of Singapore's art scene – at the Singapore Art Museum, opens up such an opportunity.

Liu Kang's work is spectacularly colourful, depicting village/communal life, local traditions, and most importantly, many Balinese women carrying one thing or the other (though mostly pots). At times it is like seeing an anthropologist at work, painting his observations, displaying an almost intimate knowledge of the lives of his subjects. Many of his paintings also communicate a sense of innocence, of times gone by, no longer there, having faced the onslaught of modernity and progress. Liu Kang provides us with a glimpse of the past, although a past coloured and imbued with the painter's perspective (fig. 4)

A critic might ponder the question ‘what if this had been a Western painter, *painting the east*, painting his image of the East?’ But that is not *im Frage* here. This is not an inquisition à la Saïd, unravelling the hidden (self)orientalization in this particular work. No, what the reader is invited to partake in is another question, a question raised on the second floor of the museum by a kind lady who wanted to make sure nobody missed this extraordinary opportunity. *Dress up* it said in bold letters on the white wall; underneath on an equally white table lay a number of attributes one could dress up with – among which straw hats, colourful sarongs and a nice basket to hold ‘something’. Attributes that could have featured in Liu Kang's paintings; symbolizing something ‘ultimate’, something that could stand for the larger whole – a particular feeling, atmosphere, even a certain reality (see front cover photo).

Once dressed up, people could have their picture taken and have it sent home by email. However, if we stop for a minute, and let it sink in what the museum is asking of us, a curious thing begins to occur; something that lets itself best be described in terms of ‘unease’. As mentioned, the colonial is mostly absent in Liu Kang's paintings, yet what is referred to – not so much by Kang but by the way he is celebrated in the museum – is an idealized version of the East; one that in a larger perspective of The Rise of Asia and the popularity of Asian aesthetics/arts takes up an interesting yet problematic position. The question that slowly bubbles up to the surface is: what is being communicated here? What is being told, and who is it that is doing the talking? What is it actually that Singapore is telling its audience here? And who is this audience actually imagined to be?

The post in postcolonial and the future to think of

The Singapore example does not necessarily argue that the Museum should have done things differently. It is not altogether clear if there is a ‘different’, as in ‘alternative’. Liu Kang is undoubtedly a tremendously accomplished and important painter whose work will stand the test of time and will continue to inspire audiences for many years to come. However, when talking about the (post)colonial in/about his work, or at least the museum's engagement with it, his work does raise interesting questions that might allude to other more pressing ones; questions that help us come to terms with how both former colonizer and colonized deal with, understand, depict, portray, even envisage the past and so on. It actually brings us to the question of the *post* in postcolonial.

Exploring a new research agenda



What is this *post* we keep talking about? It is what comes after the colonial, yet it also implies an undefined (endless?) period, in which the past, present and future are inseparably connected. As the case of Jan Pieterszoon Coen clearly illustrates, this *post* continues to represent a struggle – a struggle of coming to terms with – a struggle to understand *what* (what happened, what led us to come to here, what will we do now). It may even represent a struggle of struggles – of having to do *something* with 'it'. Colonialism cannot (ever) simply be put to rest. The influence of colonialism, on both sides of the divide (colonizer vs. colonized), is always there, one way or the other, having shaped our present and influencing that what is yet to come.

Politics and business

Politically it often makes sense to contest colonial remnants simply for what they symbolize or, as is often the case, made to symbolize in current 'daily life'. But the postcolonial often also simply means business. The romantic, slightly intellectual aura that continues to cling to the *good ole'* colonial days continues as a good money-maker. The colonial 'style' is more popular than ever before. A recent visit to Sri Lanka, for example, showed how much the colonial can be celebrated for its infinite imaginary qualities. Gin and tonics at Galle Face Hotel on Sunday afternoon, right before sundown, is something that not only attracts foreign visitors but many Sri Lankan couples and families as well (fig. 1 page 23). The old British guesthouses en route to ancient sites such as Anuradhapura, Sigirya, and Pollonarawa, have all been refurbished, brought back to their illustrious style of days long gone by, and generating a feeling of what it must have been like back then (fig. 5). It left a Sri Lankan friend to ponder openly that perhaps colonialism was not such a big deal for Sri Lanka... Whether or not this is actually so is not why it is worth reproducing this little scene here, on paper; a scene that was characterized by a fine Pekoe tea, served in beautifully decorated fine white porcelain cups, by an impeccably dressed waiter who seemed to have stepped straight off the set of a Merchant Ivory film. It is to draw our attention to the way the colonial – and whatever it is supposed to stand for – is continuously reproduced, often rather unproblematically, because it is what the 'public' wants and thus also what the 'public' is willing to pay for. When we talk about the postcolonial these are things we need to keep in mind; that, for the public, the colonial, what it represents, or is supposed to stand for, often holds a difficult divide between admiration or romanticization – even imbued by a certain longing – and awareness of its incredibly painful dimensions and its ongoing, highly influential, yet problematic legacy.

4(above):
A detail from
a painting by
Liu Kang (1997)
Trying out a
Batik Dress.
5(right): Terrace
with colonial-style
furniture at a
guesthouse.

This focus on postcolonialism

The following articles in this focus section on postcolonialism deal, each in their own way, with the meaning of colonial pasts in current contexts and debates, bringing to the fore new and interesting cases which hitherto have received no, or only marginal, attention. What is striking in their analyses is the continued relevance and importance of the colonial experience to the way the state, in a sense, reflects on itself, and uses and negotiates these experiences to fit a certain economic/political agenda. But the articles also raise awareness for colonial remnants ('cultural heritage') and their continued and shifting meaning to the inhabitants of formerly colonized countries. These articles do not pretend to have the final word on the direction postcolonial studies need to take, but they do provide an interesting insight not just into individual cases, but also into the changing nature of the study of postcolonialism itself. Increasingly, cultural heritage, colonial memories, state projects and transnational relations, shape postcolonial inquiries.

While Lung-chih Chang and Min-chin Kay Chiang focus on Taiwanese postcolonial identity – explored through Japanese colonial/heritage sites – the focus in Marieke Bloembergen and Martijn Eickhoff's article is very simply one object: an opulently carved teakwood room-screen, which was used in the early eighteenth century to furnish the Council Room of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) in Batavia. In both cases it becomes clear that a detailed analysis of the shifting meaning that is attached to such heritage sites, or even just one object, can reveal a vast world of knowledge with regards to how people relate to and reflect on a certain colonial past and postcolonial present. Even more so, it unveils the changing dimensions of



such relations and reflections bringing a certain dynamics to the postcolonial exploration that studies so far often seemed to lack.

Tharaphi Than's analysis of postcolonial Burma reveals how the country engaged in a project of Burmanization in order to 'resurrect' Burmese 'lost culture' and by doing so had to distinguish itself from what it considered foreign. While even foreign businesses participated in this project, clearly keeping business interests in mind, the goal of the project was to remove that what was considered not-Burmese and thus foreign. Thailand never ventured off into such a project, as it was so 'very clearly' never colonized. However, Rachel Harrison places some very apparent question marks to this commonly held perception in her article. She refers to scholarly work that demonstrates the extent to which Siam was in fact, in several respects, semi-colonial. In addition, she also refers to work that has demonstrated how the assertion of control over peripheral areas of the Siamese state was even strategized towards the Bangkok elite by adopting aspects of colonial policy. Not only does Harrison argue that such power relations continue to manifest themselves in contemporary politico-cultural discourses of the urban elite over rural provinces, but that this also connects to recent political protests in Bangkok.

While a Thai colonial past reads like an oxymoron, China's colonial past is an easily forgotten one in light of the country's recent successes. Zheng Wang's article, however, makes perfectly clear that the notion of time – and perhaps the very recent memories of economic success – healing all wounds, is unfortunately wrong. Wang argues that although China is certainly no longer the weak and isolated state it once was, the Chinese have not really moved forward from what he describes as 'their past humiliation.' He concludes in a way that would have befitted the 2011 roundtable on Postcolonial Dialogues: "What individuals and countries remember and what they choose to forget are telling indicators of their current values, perceptions, and even their aspirations."

Michiel Baas is coordinator with the International Institute for Asian Studies. His work is mainly on migration, transnationalism and globalization and more in particular on the rapidly growing and developing Indian middle class. In 2010 Anthem Press (London) published his PhD dissertation titled: *Imagined Mobility. Migration and Transnationalism among Indian Students in Australia*. The Indian edition of the book will come out in August 2012.