

Twice hidden, twice forgotten

Ikeya's study brought lectures of two of my former teachers to mind. A favourite topic of the ethnologist among them was "Why exceptions?", while the then so-called non-western sociologist prompted us to always be alert to 'counterpoints'. However ingenious and plausible, paradigms 'freeze' the object of scrutiny, at the same time that things social are always on the move and never fixed. As a result, the absence of exceptions should evoke our suspicion that something is amiss, or missing at least, at the same time that counterpoints could well be indicators of things to come.

Niels Mulder

Ikeya, Chie. 2011. *Refiguring Women, Colonialism, and Modernity in Burma*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. xiii + 239 pages. ISBN: 9780824834616 (hardback)

IN HER INTRODUCTION, the author draws attention to two dominant themes that provide the blinkers that restrict the common understanding of 20th-century Burmese history and society. The first is the deeply seated image of a society that rejects foreign influences, which was tenaciously kept alive for the fifty years that xenophobic generals ran the country's affairs. This very image tends to hide the late-colonial opening up of those who actively engaged with new and foreign identities, ideas, practices, and institutions, or, in brief, with a modernity that offered alternatives to the either-or choice between westernisation and ethno-nationalism.

Focus on the 'new woman'

To unearth the forgotten or suppressed history of colonial interaction, imagination, and cosmopolitanism spells the broad subject of the study. This history is intertwined with another hidden past that most appropriately details it, viz. that of the 'modern woman' who came into view in the 1920s and 1930s. In this Burma is no exception as the 'new woman' was a world-wide topic of often controversial debates on female education, employment, comportment, political emancipation, etc. Through opening the treasure trove of official and popular Burmese- and English-language documents, plus literary and journalistic media, the book examines what it meant to be or to become modern in colonial Burma. The result is enumerated in separate chapters that focus on the educated young woman, the politicised woman, the consumerist woman, the wives and mistresses of foreign men, and the self-indulgent and often westernised woman. In doing so, our sight is trained on the counterpoints that reveal the unsettling of norms and practices, and that contributed to new social formations and asymmetries.

wonders why Western women want to give her help when she feels control over her own life, being able to enjoy sexual activity with partners she chooses. Madhok quotes a 'grass-roots worker' on a rally in which large groups of citizens mobilized and employed vernacular conceptions of the 'right to work', successfully calling for the government to guarantee employment in vulnerable rural districts. These vignettes, and the collection in general, provide examples of the ways in which the languages women activists employ refract at a number of different levels, from the rural village to the red-light district to the national media, and are harnessed for strategic social change that benefits women's lives.

Activism across borders

One of the book's major, stated contributions is that it moves beyond national frameworks to examine transnational networks and connections. While some articles mention early moments of organisation, specifically the Pan Pacific Women's Conference in 1928 and the 1934 All Asian Women's Conference in Lahore, the more recent examples are highlighted in the introduction. These include Sisters of Islam, founded in Malaysia in 1988, a highly successful transnational organisation that draws on a global community of Muslims to promote women's rights within an Islamic framework, most notably through their re-interpretations of the Qu'ran on issues such as domestic violence and polygamy. Falk looks at campaigns by Buddhist nuns in Thailand, a country that bans their ordination into the *sangha*. A network of Buddhist nuns across Asia, and elsewhere, has played a major role in the movement for ordination as well as actually performing ordinations in Thailand, being outside the *sangha*'s control. This serves as an example of the way in which transnational activist networks provide new opportunities for women to fulfil their potential, while states can still continue to pose limitations that are impossible to evade without emigration.

Some issues have had an implicit transnational dimension, requiring mobilisation across borders. The problem of female

As such, the book is an exercise in the *histoire des mentalités* that traces the evolution of thought in an ethnically plural urban colonial environment. In doing so, the author convincingly demonstrates that the analysis of the cosmopolitanism of practices and discourses associated with women is a formidable crowbar to crack the dominant narrative.

As hegemonic national epics, such narratives tend to centre on the historic role of great men while freezing the image of the late colonial period and obscuring its coincident opening to the world. Whereas in such epical accounts women are at best 'inserted' as an afterthought or an indulgent nod to their unavoidable existence, it is precisely through opening up how they experienced themselves, and how they perceived and shaped the political, cultural, and socioeconomic landscape of colonial Burma that a gendered discourse grounded in real life comes to the fore.

John S. Furnivall

Next to the emasculating experience of colonialism, the second dominant theme – that corroborated with the first – grounds in John Furnivall's influential characterisation of colonial Burma as a plural society in which the Burmese lived side by side with the Europeans, Chinese, and Indians that flooded the country and that monopolised the modern sector from which the Buddhist, agrarian natives were largely excluded. In Furnivall's model, the separate groups kept apart and met only in the marketplace.

Whereas Furnivall's theorising is definitely an eye-opener to understanding multiple colonial realities, it bars life in the urban centres from view, especially the capital cities, while it is just there that schools, cosmopolitan communications, the presence of foreigners, and the influx of outlandish fashions and ideas – not to mention nationalism! – thrived. It is there that an interstitial room came into existence where people mixed and came out of the cocoon of their respective styles of life, while learning from each other. Through marrying a Burmese woman, she and Furnivall himself even became bridging figures.

trafficking has resulted in the formation of regional coalitions, like the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women and the Development Action Women's Network. The issue of Comfort Women during World War II has brought Korean and Filipino activists into conversation in demanding reparations from the Japanese government, while imploring Japanese women to re-examine the complicity of early Japanese feminists in failing to question their country's aggressive military policies. Meanwhile, foreign domestic workers have lacked adequate representation in the countries they worked. Lyons explains that in Singapore, many middle-class/elite women activists employed foreign domestic workers themselves, but the issue is now being addressed by organisations such as Transient Workers Count Too, an organisation open to Singapore citizens and foreign domestic workers of all nationalities.

Forgotten histories

Although the focus on these more recent moments of transnational organisation are indeed an important contribution, the collection could have been strengthened by situating Asian women's movements within broader historical processes and trends. This is difficult, given that the format of the collection privileges national feminist narratives. Yet one can discern distinct periods of vibrancy and stagnation in Asian women's movements across the board. The 1920s and 1930s were moments of particular openness, in which women took part in national struggles and engaged with Western women, and with each other, on an unprecedented scale. The appearance of emancipated women in global popular culture, the access to new ideas through the press, the exposure of an albeit small number of women to educational opportunities, and the participation of women in anti-colonial struggles all helped to kick-start women's movements in Asia. For many Asian nations, the 1950s was a decade of post-colonial solidarity and political experimentation. The 1955 Bandung conference, which doesn't appear in the book, was an important moment of solidarity across Asian and African nations, to which women's movements in the region appealed. In Indonesia,

The read

In *Refiguring Women* the focus is on such cultural brokers, on women who aspired to be abreast of the times and to participate in wider processes. Be that as it may, it is regrettable that we are left in the dark as to the quantum of such participation. However often we run into the phrase 'women students, journalists, intellectuals, lawmakers, nurses and teachers', their numbers are nowhere accounted for, even as there must be records on school and university enrolments, and public professional careers. So, whereas we run umpteen times into statements about 'Burmese women of the times', such statements remain unqualified while their wording projects the idea of a powerful trend that only in the Conclusion is qualified as confined to the colonial capital Rangoon.

Apart from the lectures of my teachers, the composition of the book brought another admonishment to mind. It was the editorial advice with which I was sent home to rework my first academic monograph: "Mister Mulder, there are four paragraphs to the page". When I protested about this straightjacket, they pointed out that I should have my potential readers in mind. In the present work, two crowded paragraphs a page are the rule, even as these occasionally go on for more than the length of a full page. This makes for tiresome reading. The very exhaustive, often circular and repetitious arguments in those sections are burdensome, too, and retain the character of the dissertation the book once was. The same can be said about the steady surfeit of Burmese words that are supposed to have settled unambiguously in the reader's mind once introduced, but that are out of place if the text is to be of interest – as it is claimed – and accessible to students involved in Southeast Asian-, cultural-, colonial- and postcolonial studies, plus the broad subject of women and gender. Whereas the argument that has been delineated with crystal clarity in the Introduction certainly deserves this extensive audience, said obstacles should have been edited out.

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The association of feminism with supposed 'bra-burning' and Western radicalism is something that many Asian women activists have often tried to distance themselves from, particularly in the face of male critics prone to dismissing feminism as a corrupting Western import.

as Susan Blackburn notes, the 1950s saw the birth of socialist feminism under a period of parliamentary democracy. In Pakistan, women lobbied for legal reform over inheritance rights and the restriction of polygamy.

While the 1960s and 1970s are decades most closely associated with the 'second wave' of feminism in the West, this was a period in which the Cold War cast its shadow across Asia, with many countries, particularly in Southeast Asia, falling under authoritarian rule. Roces recognises that these were 'macho regimes' by nature, that clamped down on women's movements across the region. Barely any dynamic women's groups appeared in this period, apart from pockets of student activism in the Philippines. The ousting of dictators coupled with the rise of Asia's 'tiger-economies' in the 1980s was a turning point as a growing and newly confident middle-class stimulated the emergence of a vibrant civil society. It was from this period that women's groups in Asia came into their own and began conversing with each other within and across national borders over a wide range of issues.

Women's movements in Asia have shared many of the same struggles over the past hundred years, and the ability of Asian women to connect with each other across borders has often stemmed from these shared historical experiences. Overall, the book provides a rich collection of dense, critical histories detailing the emergence of women's movements in Asian countries and the particular challenges women activists have had to face. It is essential reading for anyone interested in gender issues in Asia, and, in the hopes of instilling a little humility in the face of a century of Asian women's activism, it should be in the carry-on luggage of any visiting gender specialist to the region.

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