

# From the other side of the fence<sup>1</sup> Two new books about Bali

One of the recurrent problems faced by producers of academic knowledge is its institutional separation from not only the people it is about, but from many of the people who would like to read it the most (try getting anything non-sensational published in the mainstream media). A converse problem is the system of institutional gatekeeping that prevents those without proper institutional credentials (implicit as well as explicit) from joining the disciplinary conversation (try getting something into an academic journal without institutional affiliation, let alone proper referencing style). Bali, because it is as popular among uncertified scholars as certified ones, and among popular readers as academic ones, is a fruitful case study for exploring these contradictions.

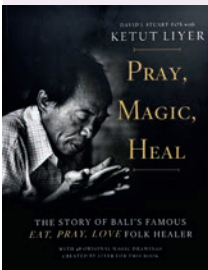
Graeme MacRae



**Reviewed titles:**  
Made Wijaya. 2014.  
*Majapahit Style (Volume 1)*  
Sanur: Wijaya Words  
ISBN 9786027136700

David Stuart-Fox with Ketut Liyer, edited by Charles Levine. 2015.  
*Pray, Magic, Heal: The Story of Bali's Famous Eat, Pray, Love Folk Healer*

New York and Leiderdorp: New Saraswati Press  
ISBN 9780986335105



THE MOST INTERESTING early scholarship on Bali was in fact done by gifted amateurs – expatriate artists (Miguel Covarrubias, Colin McPhee, Walter Spies), colonial administrators (e.g., F.A. Lieftrink) and eccentric escapees from the stifling normalities of European society (e.g., R. Goris). A few certified academics (Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, Jane Belo) did also produce books but ironically almost nobody reads them, then or now. Today there is a constant discourse about the multiple issues that Bali is facing, some (but not all) well-informed and thoughtful. There is also a substantial readership of expatriates and thinking tourists hungry for books which translate academic knowledge about Bali into accessible form, but relatively few books really serve this market.

Two recent books speak into this in-between market, but from outside the academic arena: *Majapahit Style* by Made Wijaya and *Pray, Magic Heal*, by David Stuart-Fox. Stuart-Fox has credentials as an academic specialist on Bali – author

of a PhD thesis and definitive monograph on one of Bali's major temples Pura Besakih and as highly respected within the academy as outside it. But he prefers to downplay these credentials and his career has in fact been largely in the ill-defined borderlands of the academic world – as compiler of the definitive (pre-digital) bibliography of literature on Bali, long-serving (now retired) librarian of the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden and freelance scholar writing since the 1970s on Balinese arts, religion, and culture. *Pray, Magic Heal* is written deliberately for a popular audience and its subject is a pop-culture phenomenon but it is based on decades of in-depth research.

The second author, Made Wijaya, died, suddenly, unexpectedly and tragically, between the writing and publication of this review, which now takes on an element of obituary. He was a veteran of the expatriate community in Bali, tropical landscape designer extraordinaire, one-man multimedia production machine and much more. His book masquerades as a picture book about 'style', and wields its erudition lightly, but it is actually a contribution to the study of Javo-Balinese history that deserves to be taken seriously, not least for its innovative methodological approach to interpretation of cultural transmission.

Both authors are gifted and well-qualified amateurs (in the original sense of the term) speaking over the fence. But who is listening? To date I can find no reviews of either in scholarly journals and only one of each in other media. This is a loss for us all, on both sides of the fence. In my discipline (anthropology) we frequently bemoan our failure to communicate our (usually inherently interesting) knowledge

to non-specialist audiences and I understand it is so in other disciplines. Likewise, scholars outside the academic system have real difficulty getting their (sometimes very well-informed) views heard within the circuits of academic discourse. Some of this fence is structural – a system of academic recognition that increasingly privileges sophisticated (i.e., theoretically framed) and accountable 'academic' values over more everyday ones of readability and accessibility, and in effect becomes a system of gatekeeping. Likewise the mainstream media are, in my experience, surprisingly resistant to contributions of academic knowledge unless they happen to address the sensational issue du jour. But some of it is also habitual and often it becomes easier not to try.

The result is that we are all the poorer – on both sides of the fence. These two books remind us of a greater mission for which we all have some responsibility and that we lose sight of at our peril, especially in a time when universities are, ironically calling for our research to be more relevant and publically accessible as exemplified by the growing media genre of (sometimes well-informed) 'science journalism'.

## *Majapahit Style*

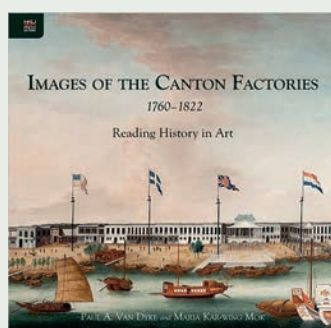
Wijaya was perhaps the best known of the talented expatriates who arrived in Bali in the 1960s and 70s, many of whom have lived there ever since. In addition to his day job as a designer of spectacular and romantic gardens for hotels across Asia, he was a one-man multimedia factory – producing an endless stream of photographs, videos, cultural commentaries, and public satires, much of it cleverly disguised as social gossip. Among all of this he has consistently studied and analysed Balinese architecture and developed a series of arguments about its structural, spatial and aesthetic principles and practices. *Majapahit Style (Volume 1)* is the latest chapter in this opus magnum, expanding his thinking about Balinese architecture to, but also from, its historical origins in neighbouring Java and beyond.

*Majapahit Style* presents itself, I suspect somewhat tongue-in-cheek, as yet another offering in the glossy coffee-table book genre of (this or that) style. But what it represents is the fruit of decades of research, exploring, documenting and reflecting on architectural, aesthetic and ritual practices, first in Bali, then across Indonesia and further across Southeast, South- and East Asia. The resulting text moves across time and space and between anecdote and analysis, expert opinions and personal ones, assertions and speculations, but between them is a thread of argument, not always explicit, but recurring and systematic: that while the direct evidence of Majapahit material culture, especially architecture, has largely disappeared from its historical heartland, it lives on in the material design heritages of other places and times – spread across the archipelago and especially in Bali, where aspects of it survive in living traditions of aesthetic and ritual practice. This argument is implicit in the structure of the book, which moves historically from earliest to latest manifestations

## Images of the Canton factories

The port city of Canton (now Guangzhou), China, served as a vital hub in the early phase of modern global trade. In the 18th century, numerous European companies set up shop in the designated foreign quarter of factories and warehouses. Like their peers around the world, Chinese artists adapted quickly to the sweeping social, economic, and aesthetic changes wrought by these mercantile aspirations on a world scale. The resulting artworks – often labeled as 'export art' – have long been characterized by art historians as inauthentically hybrid, and thus not deserving of scholarly attention. As a broad category, export art encompasses a great diversity of objects made by artists throughout China in a variety of styles and mediums. These include paintings, fans, textiles, decorative and utilitarian ceramics, lacquer ware, and much more.

Hope Marie Childers



**Reviewed title:**  
Paul A. Van Dyke and Maria Kar-wing Mok. 2015.  
*Images of the Canton Factories 1760–1822: Reading History in Art*  
Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press  
ISBN 9789888208555

THIS OBJECT-ORIENTED VOLUME, co-authored by Paul Van Dyke and Maria Kar-wing Mok, examines representations of Canton via a specific type of Chinese export art, using fresh eyes and new angles. Bookended by an introduction and conclusion, the volume consists of nine chapters: six are chronological surveys, each spanning

approximately a decade; the remainder consist of thematic analysis. The introduction provides a succinct history of the founding of Canton's European merchant district, beginning with the construction of China Street in 1760 (p. xx). The study concludes with the years preceding the Great Fire of 1822, when the entire quarter of factories burned down, thus changing the landscape forever.

The authors train their lens on painted panoramas of the Canton factories, specifically those found on porcelain punchbowls and on two-dimensional surfaces, from small gouache panels to large canvases in oil. Their objective, as referenced in the book's subtitle, is 'reading history through

of Majapahit architecture, expands geographically across the vast region of Majapahit influence and architecturally across forms, elements and local aesthetic traditions. The argument is supported, and indeed most compellingly made, by a primary visual text of photographs, maps and drawings, juxtaposing similarities of form, colour and decoration, materials, methods, and names.

Embedded in this empirical argument is a methodological one, perhaps even more important for academic consideration, of the provocative power of comparison of spatial organisation, structural form and especially aesthetic style as a method of analysis across time, space and even cultural transformation. Recognising the evidence of Majapahit culture and interpreting it through the lens of contemporary Balinese architecture and ritual was the starting point of this work, but its systematic expansion into a comparative method is what makes this work compelling.

I will not be surprised if historians and architectural scholars find plenty to disagree with here, but to date there is no evidence of them having read, let alone reviewed it. I'll leave them to assess the historical veracity of Wijaya's evidence or its intersections with the established corpus of Majapahit scholarship, but I think any criticisms in terms of deficits of certified academic practice miss the point, both of its vast empirical sweep and its methodological innovation.

### Pray, Magic, Heal

This is an unusual book, 45 years in the making and unavoidably entwined with its (in)famous twin *Eat, Pray, Love*, but it is not what the title might suggest. Stuart-Fox is another of the extraordinary generation of dedicated Bali scholars who lived in Bali through the 1970s and 80s, became fluent in local languages and for whom deep research into Balinese culture was not a job but a way of life. He knew Ketut Liyer long before his dubious fame through the *Eat, Pray, Love* book/film phenomenon. At this time Liyer was just one of hundreds of *balian* [priest/healer/seer] in villages across Bali. But he was a good one and also a painter of some repute. Because of this and his proximity to the culturally/spiritually oriented tourist centre of Ubud, foreigners began seeking his services in the 1990s and in 2002 Elizabeth Gilbert was just another foreign client. But her book changed his life forever and from 2005 onward he received and counselled a constant stream of foreigners. He charged for these services, considerably more than for his local clientele, and his family prospered as a result. Opinion is divided as to the genuineness of the advice he provided to foreigners and also as to his motivation in doing this work.

But that is not what the book is about. The first chapter relates some of this story briefly, but the majority of it is based on conversations between Liyer and Stuart-Fox, mainly during the 1970s and 80s, in which Liyer outlines the theory and method of his practice. The result is a very readable

account, quite personal in a way, through which we gradually get to know both Liyer the man and the nature of his practices and the beliefs embedded in them.

This book belongs on the same shelf as the Jero Tapakan films by Linda Connor and Tim Asch, Barbara Lovric's work on magic and healing, Angela Hobart's on healers and Hildred Geertz's final books about paintings, temples and artists. They all take us deep into the heart of real grass-roots Balinese spiritual belief and practice, often obscured behind the spectacular beauty of temple ritual and the increasingly banal and sanitised simplifications of official, universalised 'Hinduism'. This is a domain of powerful and potentially dangerous forces, embodied in a range of (usually) invisible beings who need to be placated and managed or sometimes fought and defeated by magical tools and techniques at the disposal of a skilled practitioner. Liyer, notwithstanding the somewhat bizarre distortions of his later career, was for many years a genuine practitioner of these arts. The successive chapters of the book take us through Liyer's repertoire of tools and techniques – meditation and mantras, holy water and incense, magical objects, drawings and sashes. These are described and explained in considerable detail, often including normally secret mantras and instructions and reproductions of magical drawings. The book is generously illustrated with these drawings and photographs and like *Majapahit Style*, these are more than just illustrations, they are an equal part of the text.

What makes this book work, is that Stuart-Fox resists the (academic) temptation to over-interpret and tell us how or what to think about Liyer – despite 40 years' experience and insight into Balinese culture, he steps back and lets Liyer speak for himself, allowing us to make what we will of the imperfect, improvised ordinariness of Balinese healing, but without denying the magic and mystery of it. The Liyer we meet in these pages is neither mystic, magician nor religious scholar, let alone celebrity – he is more like a village craftsman, working with a limited kit of practical tools and a disarming awareness of the limitations of his understanding of the powers behind both sickness and healing. My only disappointment was not learning what he really thought about his later years.

### Ways of knowing Bali

Both these books tell us something about Bali: one unpacking a one-man pop-culture phenomenon and informing our (mis) understanding by relocating him, by way of biography, back into the tradition from which he was plucked by international celebrity culture. In the process, the reader is educated, gradually and accessibly, into the workings of Balinese ritual, healing and artistic practice. The other (by a one-man pop-culture phenomenon) works at a different level, addressing one of the biggest themes in Southeast Asian history, but by way of an innovative approach, largely self-taught and pursued and expressed with an infectious exuberance. Both are well-written and easy to read, but in both cases, much of the work is done by visual means.

As such, customers expected a certain level of verisimilitude and a recognizable sense of place in these souvenir objects.

This understanding paves the way for the volume's second notable contribution: Chapters 3 and 5 offer brief analyses of the technical circumstances behind the production of the porcelain bowls and the paintings, revealing key disparities between the two mediums. For example, the punchbowls are characterized by far less accuracy in rendering a particular moment in time than are the paintings. This may be due partly to their manufacture in pottery centers at some distance from the site, or because the patronage and sales practices demanded more flexibility in content for these utilitarian objects (p. 23-7).

In contrast, the paintings are shown to be highly reliable in their representations of narrow, identifiable slices of time in Canton's history. Further, though the paintings are often extremely similar, no two are alike, as artists avoided the use of templates or direct copying methods (p. 22). Indeed, the uniqueness of each painting serves to dispel the commonplace claim that Chinese artists were merely skilled copyists. Most engaging is the Chapter 5 discussion about the skilled use of vantage point and perspective by the artists to emphasize a distinct set of aesthetic and compositional values. The authors assert that "rather than inferring an ignorance of 'Western' perspective, the Chinese artists' work unveils their knowledge of indigenous Chinese ideas of perspective" (p. 49). They provide details of factory paintings on maps, silk, and reverse painting on glass as examples to demonstrate the influence of multiple perspectives as used in traditional scroll painting.

The result is an interdisciplinary volume that closely entwines object histories and archival context, thus elevating it above the descriptive, evaluative literature of connoisseurship so common to this era of art production. It furthermore stretches trade and economic histories beyond their usual boundaries, to encompass cultural expression.

It is, I think, no coincidence that both authors are veterans of the expatriate scene of the 1970s, which in some respects more resembled the golden age of Baliphilia of the 1930s than the present and before Bali was transformed, as one of them put it, "from a user-friendly magic kingdom into a high-density Paradise theme park"<sup>2</sup> in the 1990s (and something else again since then). This was an extraordinary period in which a loose community of talented and dedicated foreigners immersed themselves into local community and culture. Many of them, like their predecessors in the 1930s, straddled the fence, producing books (Diana Darling), photography (Leonard Lueras)<sup>3</sup> and films (Lawrence and Lorne Blair, John Darling) which have proven classics in contemporary academic understandings of Bali. Some of them moved deeper into local Balinese worlds by way of marriage (e.g. Rucina Ballinger) and engagement with their local communities (Garret Kam). Others (e.g. Michel Picard) crossed the fence into academia from where they continued to provide some of the most insightful studies of Balinese culture. Since then, both expatriate and scholarly engagements with Bali have moved on, the former away from local community and culture into a generic expatriate community that could almost be anywhere in the world; the latter toward more circumscribed and specialised studies based on much shorter (and I fear sometimes shallower) periods of research.

Stuart-Fox and Wijaya both had the privilege of living and working in Bali at this time, and since then have had successful careers in other fields, but both have chosen to honour and repay these privileges with books that are simultaneously serious contributions to Bali studies and effective translations of expert knowledge about into accessible form. One is a model for bringing academic knowledge to a wider readership, the other offering deeply grounded knowledge to the academy for us to engage with. We have something to learn from them both – about Bali and about the way we share our knowledge and understanding.

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### References

- 1 Fences are a common metaphor in antipodean cultures such as Australia, where both authors and the reviewer originate, but are perhaps less familiar to European readers. They refer to borders and boundaries between places and spaces, in this case the well-guarded ones between academic and popular knowledges. A Balinese cognate would be the pervasive *tembok* [masonry walls] that mark divisions between domestic and public, sacred and profane places/spaces.
- 2 Roberts, Scott. 1995. Introduction. In: Wijaya, Made. *Stranger in Paradise: The Diary of an Expatriate in Bali 1979-80*. Sanur: Wijaya Words.
- 3 Rio Helmi is absent from this list, only because he occupies a special place between the expat and local worlds – another fence.

art'. This is achieved using a kind of dialogical method: close scrutiny of archival sources enables the authors to weave an intricate chronology of each European company's presence and activity in Canton, depending on the waxing and waning of their commercial fortunes. As Van Dyke and Mok suggest: "This ongoing rivalry between Europeans – combined with the Hong merchants' willingness to make the changes they wanted so long as they paid the costs – resulted in the gradual transformation of the landscape" (p. 12). In turn, that shifting panorama of factories and warehouses along the quayside can be recognized in visual form on pots and paintings.

The study is distinguished by two fresh approaches brought to bear on the many portraits of China Street and its shifts over time. The first is their painstaking cross-referencing of logistical minutiae gleaned from the archives against close observation of fine details in the artworks. Careful observation of painted elements confirm that numerous scenes serve as fairly reliable documentary evidence of the district's transformation over time. Grounded in this method, Chapters 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, and 8 offer meticulously sourced narratives, visual and textual, of the factories. The list of aspects that the authors consider is impressive: the construction/alteration of buildings; architectural features; interventions by key personnel; increase in rents (affecting occupancy); the presence (or absence) of national flags; seasonal clues; scale and perspective; the impact of fires. Moreover, they have cross-referenced their analysis with colonial-era maps to corroborate their findings.

Equipped with such detail, the authors posit a more precise dating of the painted scenes than previously possible. This matters, they argue, because the factory portraits are a category apart from ordinary export art "such as Chinese life scenes, landscapes, daily activities and images of plants and animals" (p. xxi). Rather, they suggest that "factory paintings were a type of historical record that buyers wanted to display in their homes to represent their experience in China" (p. xxi).

The shortcomings of the book are minor. A number of passages make for rather dry reading, an unavoidable trade-off for a factually dense, detailed chronicle. Another quibble is the lack of a list of illustrations and no page references in the majority of captions. These omissions diminish the ability to enter the volume via the artworks themselves – surely a standard starting point for most readers, especially artists, art historians, collectors, and the like. Rather, the arrangement requires readers to access the images through a mostly linear path through the text itself (which does provide Plate- and Figure-numbers). This discourages casual browsing, ultimately limiting its audience.

The book's many strengths include its well-ordered and comprehensive bibliography, an appendix indexing primary sources pertaining to early company movements, and scrupulously cited detail. The authors mine data from not only the usual colonial-era archives (i.e. British and French), but under-utilized collections in Denmark, Sweden, and Belgium, as well as Chinese-language sources newly available online. While not a theory-driven study of the genre, this extensively illustrated (100 color plates and 32 black and white figures), fact-rich analysis will serve as a vital reference for specialist scholars, such as collectors of Chinese export art of the period and historians of global trade in the early colonial era. It should also have broader appeal among art historians, who have taken greater interest, of late, in such popular, but non-traditional forms. The hallmark of such art is its fast-moving fusion of varied interests, styles, mediums, and markets. Historically, this cross-cultural hybridity has been viewed with skepticism, yet it seems that scholars of Chinese art history are beginning to acknowledge this intriguing and vital – if undervalued – stage in China's formidable aesthetic legacy.

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