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Reviews

H. Hazel Hahn (ed.), *Cross-cultural exchange and the colonial imaginary: global encounters via Southeast Asia*, Singapore, NUS Press, 2019, xi+310pp, ISBN 978-981-32-5006-2 (pbk).

The volume presents a fascinating collection of case studies, all challenging longstanding binaries used to understand Southeast Asia: Europe and Asia; ruler and ruled; modernisers and those being modernised; and even the sequence pre-colonial/colonial/postcolonial (pp. 1–2). Cross-cultural exchange, ‘fluid, multi-linear and multi-layered’ (p. 3), is set against ‘cultural transfer’ with its inference of passive acceptance.

Although not specifically instanced, the volume works with assumptions of alternative or multiple modernities, which de-center modernization from its assumed point of origin in the West. The lens is ethnographic as well as historical, focused on encounters, practices and objects.

The volume is divided into three sections addressing respectively knowledge exchange (three chapters); material and architectural exchange (four chapters); and leisure exchange (three chapters). If a little contrived, the categorizations nonetheless alert the reader to the range of topics; moreover, each author is assiduous in cross-referencing other chapters in the collection.

Knowledge exchange takes in Philippe Binh, a Vietnamese Catholic priest in early 19th century Portugal; the compilation of gazetteers of Malay knowledge by administrators in colonial Malaya; and the tension over the use of Javanese etiquette by Dutch officials in the Netherlands Indies. From a New Zealand angle, the first recalls the accounts of early Maori travellers to Sydney and to Europe, the second the assiduous gathering of matauranga Maori by George Grey and others.

The second group of four chapters explore objects – Chinese screens in Batavia/Jakarta (chapter 4); Hindu temples in Ho Chi Minh City (chapter 5); the governor-general’s palace and houses built by wealthy locals in interwar French Indochina (chapter 6) and the ‘new city’ of Putrajaya in Malaysia (chapter 7). In respect of this last Sarah Moser convincingly displaces ‘authenticity’ reasoning in favour of identifying the city’s roots in colonial town planning, residential segregation and ‘Orientalized’ architecture (p. 189).

In the final bracket of chapters, the investigation of a particular corpus of photographs (chapter 8), and of just two photographs (chapter 9), shows how much meaning and ambiguity can be extracted from close readings.

In the comment that follows, I focus on one chapter in each section.

In ‘Rituals and power: cross-cultural exchange and the contestation of colonial hegemony in Indonesia,’ Arnout H.C. Van der Meer uses a specific encounter to unpack a wider story. In 1913, Raden Soemarsono, a Javanese public prosecutor, Western-

educated and fluent in Dutch, was asked by R.C. Bedding, the assistant-resident in charge of the court in which he was appearing, to change from the trousers and jacket into a Javanese sarong, and to sit on the floor – appropriately deferential according to traditional etiquette (*hormat*) – not use a chair (pp 75–76).

Van der Meer skillfully narrates the subsequent contest which played out not just between Soemarsono and Bedding, between educated young Javanese and senior Dutch officials, but between young and old Javanese and *within* Dutch officialdom. It is this that makes the episode such a deeply cross-cultural moment.

Van der Meer details the succession of circulars from the colonial government in Batavia (Jakarta) which had sought to end the Dutch use of *hormat* and ‘stimulate increased participation of the Javanese in modern society’ (p. 85). Most had been ignored (pp. 86, 88). The 1913 circular, the sternest and most effective, reiterated that there was ‘no reason to be afraid of the national awakening of the Javanese’ (p. 96) – although the logical endpoint was an end to colonial rule. Novel readers will recognise the contours of the contest between the liberal Fielding and the denizens of the Chandrapore Club in E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* (1924).

In part two H Hazel Hahn equally skillfully explores two Tamil Hindu temples in colonial Saigon, now Ho Chi Minh City: the temple to Mariamman (aka. Khali, a South Indian goddess), and the temple to Sri Thendayuthapani (aka. Murugan, a son of Shiva). Both were a by-product of colonial-era Tamil migration (especially from the French Indian settlements of Pondicherry and Karikal) to Indochina. The cross-cultural interest of the latter lies in the unusual iconography of the Vimana (stepped pyramid), added to the temple in 1936. It incorporated figures of secular youths, which Hahn attributes to borrowings from contemporary French circus posters (pp. 143–45). Hahn acerbically and successfully demolishes a historiography which dates the temples to the early 19th century: a ‘patently wrong revisionist account of Indians’ history in colonial Vietnam, that erases the particular link between the diverse group of Indians and the French colonial regime.’ (p. 148).

Equally confirmatory of the complexity of cross-cultural exchange is Hahn’s explanation of the differing fates of the two temples in contemporary HCMC. The Mariamman temple is one of the most visited religious institutions in southern Vietnam; having early on attracted devotees who identified Khali with the Black Lady (Ba Den) of popular Vietnamese religion, it now does so again. Sri Thendayuthapani is neglected by comparison: it has ‘primarily served the function of expressing the Tamil identity and ... does not provide any compelling reason for Vietnamese devotion’ (p. 151).

In the final chapter of the volume Frederick H Schenker looks at the spread of jazz in the British Empire, in the 1920s. Schenker focuses on the relationship between Westerners, for whom he argues ‘dancing became an important way to try to control foreign space by recreating the leisure practices of home in a new territory’ (p. 269) and the ‘Asian jazz professional’, most often Filipino or Goan (p. 271, the demand for jazz performers having outrun the supply of Westerners). This finding is not novel but a reminder of the bricolage of modernity that characterised the pre-1930 ‘colonial’ Asia, and the way the pathways of empires – Schenker’s example is the British, but consistently with the rest of the volume, could equally be the French or the Dutch – provided opportunities for the ruled as well as the rulers.

A couple of final thoughts. In an era (ours) saturated in notions of sexuality, of gender as performance, it is unusual that none of the chapters engages directly with such matters, although it is obliquely present in a couple. The work of Ann Laura Stoler, the ever-present sexuality in ‘colonial’ writers such as Somerset Maugham and Louis Couperus, suggest that this was a sphere which merited more attention than it attracts in this volume.

The originality of the methodology is over-stated; after all it is nearly two decades since Dipesh Chakrabarty’s *Provincializing Europe* was published. However, this rich trove of case studies demonstrates first, that that task is proving a much longer and demanding one than was envisaged at its outset and second, that there are rich rewards to those who examine thoughtfully and carefully specific objects, encounters and practices.

Reviewed by MALCOLM MCKINNON
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Hayton, Bill, *The Invention of China*. United Kingdom, Yale University Press, 2020.
320 pp. ISBN: 9780300234824 (hardcover).

The Old Nationalists’ New Clothes

Bill Hayton’s “The Invention of China” is an accessible intervention in the study of Chinese nationalism, aimed not at China watchers but at any reader interested in modern Chinese politics. It aims to contextualise present worries about Xi Jinping’s China within the study of intellectual history, exploring how major political figures and thinkers consciously shaped modern China as a national entity and the way in which certain thinkers contracted the notion of China as “a coherent territory with a seamless history” following the collapse of the Qing Empire. In deconstructing clichés such as the “five thousand years of history,” “the century of humiliation” and “the founding of New China,” Hayton argues that these exhausted narratives should instead be interpreted as those of any other nation: mythologies that are contingent on circumstance and as conscious responses to political change. More precisely, he argues that China has succeeded in constructing itself as an exception to the rule that nations and civilizations are overlapping but separate concepts, and that all manifestations of communal political identity are, to some degree, inventions.

In the early chapters of the work, Hayton highlights the fact that Late Qing intellectuals did not understand the foreign term “China” to be commensurate with *Zhongguo*, something that was only conceptualised by Liang Qichao (1873–1929). Foreign rulers, such as the Manchus and Mongolians, when invading the historical territories of China, stumbled upon a heterogeneous set of Sinitic cultures ruled over by a Mandarin-speaking caste, thereby needing a conceptual framework which would suit them as both cultural outsiders and overseers. The projection of a unified Chinese identity befitted these ends. When Russia tried to establish relations in the late seventeenth century, they had to define an “*imperii sinici*” because the Chinese notion of *tianxia* (all under heaven) was not conceptually suitable for European nations beginning then to theorise the notion of bounded national sovereignty. At the height of European nation-building in the nineteenth century, when the Western imperial powers struggled to come to a coherent agreement with China on how they could separately conduct trade

relations with Beijing, the categorization of China also served their ends. Following this “century of humiliation” and the collapse of the empire and the Mandarin bureaucracy, post-Qing intellectual were left only with this foreign-endowed notion of “China,” what Hayton calls “*tianxia* with passport controls,” with which to rebuild their identity.

From here, chapters three and four deal with the complex intersection of nationality with ethnicity. Covering the history of Chinese emigration to Southeast Asia and the West, Hayton explicates the distinction between long-term and short-term overseas Chinese (*huayi* and *huaqiao*), as well as the invention of the “Yellow Race,” which has its roots in Late Qing intellectuals’ misguided engagement with politicised Darwinian thinking from nineteenth-century Europe. This leads to the notion of ancestral lineage, *zu*, being reappropriated into the term *minzu* to mean something akin to ethnic groupings and to the construction of the Han Chinese majority elite, surrounded by smaller minorities. We eventually arrive at the foundation of the “five-thousand year” myth, conjured by Liang Qichao, who argued that a *zhongguo minzu*, defined by a *tianxia*, has existed in borders of the late-nineteenth century Qing empire, providing a justification for a more-or-less eternally existing nation.

Chapters five to nine are ones of pragmatism, reflecting on the multitude of ways in which these old ideas justify present political programmes. We see, after the Qing Empire’s collapse, the transition from the notion of five ethnic groupings (Han, Hui, Mongolian, Tibetan and Manchu) to the delineation of the PRC’s fifty-six minority groups, as well as the development of a uniform *putonghua* Mandarin dialect. At the end, he argues that, despite rhetoric of “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” Xi Jinping is instead aiming at developing “national-socialism with Chinese characteristics,” in which a surveillance state presides over a homogenised nation unified by corporatist economic policy. This echoes arguments that the type of hard nationalism which has emerged under Xi mirrors that which emerged in late Weimar Germany.

There is little in the way of new research, the book rather tying together various threads from branches of modern Chinese studies to tell the story of the creation of Chinese nationhood. While the constructed-ness of Chinese identity is obvious to sinologists, this point is lost on many supposed China aficionados. In perusing the writings of major modern China scholars like Arif Dirlik, Peter Zarrow and John Fitzgerald, Hayton is therefore trying to close a gap between popular understandings of China and overlooked scholarship from the ivory tower. In order for this broad thematic approach to remain narratively coherent, it overlooks some important subjects. For example, the book does not adequately engage with the territorial problems faced by the Beiyang and KMT regimes in Manchuria and the occupation by the Kwantung Army during the late twenties and early thirties, something which looms large in Beijing’s territorial thinking, anti-Japanese sentiment being a core feature of Chinese nationalism. The same goes for the “War of Resistance,” which is a central pillar of the patriotic education system and the paradoxical preservation of Mao’s status as liberator and tyrant, as well as the history of federalism in the Republican period, which would have further illustrated the intellectual heterogeneity of post-Qing China.

One feels that the motivation underpinning Hayton’s decision to review this history is that, as a correspondent for the BBC, he has often wondered why these questions about Chinese nationalism rarely permeate the boundaries of public

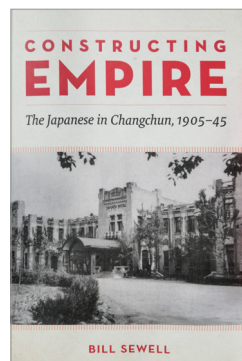
discourse, beyond the closed circuit of academic sinology. Indeed, the finger-wagging rhetoric of “five thousand years of history” is often used by politicians outside China as a justification for not pushing back on Beijing’s unpalatable policies towards its immediate neighbours and border regions. Here, Hayton has simply cut through the noise, showing how a highly loaded political concept has come to be treated as an amoral aesthetic form of imagined community. By encouraging readers to think more sceptically when they encounter these historicist clichés, he hopes they will understand them more as rhetorical diversions which aim to evade reasonable questions about how China’s view of itself fits within a rules-based global order.

Reviewed by WILL PEYTON

Bill Sewell. *Constructing Empire: the Japanese in Changchun, 1905–1945*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019. Xv +295 pages, maps. ISBN: 978-0-7748-3653-1 (e-versions also available)

This monograph on Changchun complements the existing English-language literature on the Japanese imperial rule in north-east China – Dongbei – often referred to in English (and accordingly used here) as Manchuria.

Sewell’s study covers two periods – 1905–1931, years when southern Manchuria was a Japanese sphere of influence, gained after Japan’s defeat of Russia in the 1904–05 war, and 1931–45, when the Japanese annexed the whole of Manchuria, setting up the satellite state of Manchukuo and making Changchun a ‘new capital’ i.e., Xinjing (Shinkyō in Japanese).



In chapters one and two the study examines the planning and building of both the rail town (or ‘treaty port’) and Xinjing, the new capital city. The array of facilities in the latter – stadiums, botanical gardens, a zoo with open enclosures not bars – befitted a modern city, as did the large number of parks, collectively 250 ha by the end of 1936 and over 610 ha by 1940 (Central Park in New York City is 341 ha).

These discussions of the town and cityscape and of the built environment are the most assured in the book, suggesting Sewell’s ease with, and interest in, architectural and town planning history. Sewell argues that the planners and architects recruited successively by the South Manchuria Railway (Mantetsu) and by the Manchukuo government’s Capital Construction Bureau were most influenced by international and modernist styles, thus reflecting the outlook of the youthful architectural profession of early 20th century Japan. Planners and architects may have been encouraged to adopt (East) Asian architectural expressions, but ‘Xinjing’s fidelity to pan-Asianism was superficial’ (p. 52).

The town and city building endeavours are framed in the context of coercive Japanese rule in Manchuria, in two ways. First, although Chinese were a majority of the population they had few rights. Yet in the 1920s, warlordism and banditry plagued

or threatened the Chinese as much if not more than the Japanese, as did outbreaks of pneumonic plague and cholera. Second, Chinese played little role in the making of the town, then the capital; in the 1930s: although Chinese and Japanese shared Xinjing, ‘they lived in parallel worlds’ (p. 169). Sewell cites a French observer describing ‘a kind of Asian New York, reserved just about exclusively for Japanese and foreigners; the former [railway town], half-Japanese, half-Chinese; and the Chinese city’ (p. 170). Chinese were also victimised by the promotion of opium consumption and, during wartime, by horrific medical experiments carried out in a nearby facility by the Imperial Japanese Army (pp. 170–71).

Against this stratified, power-saturated cityscape the monograph is insightful in detailing the ways the Japanese media, and the pages of the MNNS (*Manshu Nichi Nichi Shinbun*, aka. *Manchuria Daily News*) in particular, conveyed ‘not only a sense of pride and empire, but also a ‘sense of normalcy, portraying Japanese society in Changchun as much like Japanese communities elsewhere’ (p. 148). MNNS reported on baseball and other sports; gatherings of the Mantetsu Employees Club and other social events; ran advertising from restaurants, department stores and cinemas.

Overall Sewell’s approach reinforces the argument made by other scholars of the interpenetration of empire and modernity, with Xinjing a particularly convincing case study. Sewell also explains in the first pages of the book that it will explore the way that ‘constructing empire was a mundane and popularly imagined affair as well as a diplomatic, political and military one’; he seeks to explore the ‘civilian contribution to empire’ (pp. 9–10). The book’s discrete discussions, especially those about town and city planning and architecture, contribute to this but the personal, the ethnographic, facet of such an endeavour is mostly absent.

Finally, two broader contexts, which could not have been expected to be accorded extended discussion, given the specific focus of the monograph, nonetheless repay reflection by the reader.

First, the ‘normalcy’ of colonial modernity was played out in city after city across Asia and beyond in the early 20th century, be it in the guise of tennis-playing French in Saigon or Algiers, Filipino jazz bands in Shanghai or Singapore, or the denizens of hill stations in the Subcontinent or Southeast Asia. That Japan’s internationally unrecognised rule in Manchuria should be as much a participant in imperial modernity as were Europeans and Americans in their colonial ‘possessions’ or indeed New Zealanders, in their dealings with Samoans, will come as no surprise to specialist scholars but will be educative for others.

Second, there are the palpable commonalities in capital construction projects, be it in Xinjing’s own time, as New Delhi (mentioned briefly) and Canberra; or in the later 20th century, for example Brasilia, Abuja, Putra Jaya, Naypyidaw and Nur-Sultan (aka. Astana). All might be the capitals of ‘authentic’ nation states (unlike Manchukuo) but the top-down nature of the endeavours suggests parallels with Xinjing’s energetic but doomed imperial modernity.

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