Book Reviews


As a scholar of high Renaissance Venetian history, Robert Finlay appears, at first glance, an unlikely author of a history of porcelain. Upon reflection, however, fascination with one of the first globally traded manufactured commodities is perfectly consistent with a professional interest in *La Serenissima*, a city whose fortunes rose and fell with the ebb and flow of international trade coursing through its canals. As gateway of Asian and Indian Ocean trade into Europe, Venice provides the perfect vantage point from which to witness the patterns and complexities of early international commerce. In *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History*, Finlay has turned away from the Venetian lagoon and taken up a commodity whose appearance in Europe heralded the arrival of a new economic era in which Dutch and Iberian merchants charted the first truly global trade routes. While recent monographs exploring the impact of specific commodities on world history have been popularized by authors such as Mark Kurlansky, the story of porcelain represents a special case. Porcelain manufacturing influenced and assimilated the cultural changes of producers and purchasers, both locally and internationally, to a degree unequaled by commercially traded raw materials. In *The Pilgrim Art*, Finlay uses porcelain’s unique position within the burgeoning global marketplace to ponder the growing interconnectivity of world history.

Finlay’s first chapter, “The Porcelain City,” introduces the book’s themes of shifting domestic and international policies, advancing technologies, and social stratification as viewed through the lens of Chinese ceramic production, all cleverly illustrated and punctuated by the observations of the Jesuit master of industrial espionage, Francois-Xavier Dentrecolles. Of particular interest is the sense of divine influence, whether Chinese, Buddhist, or Christian, upon the almost magical production of porcelain. Finlay’s introduction continues into the second chapter, “The Secrets of Porcelain,” in which he reviews the origins of Europe’s fascination and frustration with the elegant ceramic. The discussion focuses on the financial drain created by the obsession with porcelain and most everything Asian, termed by some the “porcelain disease,” and the various attempts to remedy this illness through domestic production. Despite both foreign es-
pionage and native “scientific” research, the secret to porcelain production would elude Europe for centuries.

The next three chapters trace the development of Chinese ceramic manufacturing from its origins in the fortuitous earth of the Middle Kingdom to the famous blue-and-white pieces of the later Chinese dynasties. While covering the technical aspects of this evolution, Finlay is primarily interested in the exploration of the various socio-economic themes that impacted porcelain production. He explores metallurgy and money, the terrestrial emphasis of Tang China and the expansion of the Silk Road, the maritime perspective of Song China and growth of Indo-Pacific trade, the impact of Confucian ideology and Islamic/Mongol expansion, and changes in the decorative and functional aspects of porcelain in response to tastes at home and within the larger Southeast and Southwest Asian marketplaces. Most interesting are the unifying themes of objectification of social status and the growing awareness of cultural heritage. According to Finlay, preoccupation with both bronze and ceramic antiques, fluctuating attitudes toward opulent silver and lacquer wares, and changes in food and dining habits all played a significant role in the types and amounts of porcelain produced for the Chinese domestic market. Yet no single factor may have changed Chinese porcelain usage as much as the adoption of tea as the unofficial national drink of China. Tea’s popularity led to the popularization of porcelain among the masses.

The final three chapters explore the pinnacle of porcelain production in Ming and early Qing China, as well as its precipitous fall during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While Finlay considers internal factors impacting the porcelain trade, especially Chinese self-perceptions as illustrated by the voyages of Zheng He, the main focus of this last section is the contextualization of porcelain within the larger global market. For this reason, students of world history may find this portion of Finlay’s account most interesting. Chapter six reviews the “porcelain cultures” of East Asia. According to Finlay, Korea’s domestic ceramic production and porcelain importation reflected the strong, centralized, well-defined, aristocratic structure of Korean society, in which the privileged few had “access to fine vessels and the lower echelons [made] due with bamboo platters, terra-cotta, and crude stoneware” (179). This stringent societal control meant that Korean ceramics were especially susceptible to changes in aristocratic fashion and ideology, as best exemplified by the austere ceramics of the radically Confucian Choson dynasty. In striking contrast to Korean ceramics, Japan’s ceramic culture revolved around Buddhist monasteries, urban merchant houses, and local ruling courts. Finlay uses the development of the tea ceremony in Japan to illustrate this interaction. Introduced to Japan by Zen Buddhist monks, the consumption of tea would become a high art in Japan, promoted by the merchant class and perfected by the Daimyo elite.
Zen ideals of “spontaneity, irregularity, and the natural” (189) led the Japanese to value these qualities in their ceramics. The most prized pieces were often defective or irregular in form or glazing and even marred by cracks and repairs. For the Chinese, who strived for perfection in all that they manufactured, avid Japanese consumption of their imperfect rejects was a happy and thoroughly bewildering business arrangement. In the remainder of chapter six, Finlay discusses the more direct Chinese stylistic influences on Southeast Asian pottery.

Chapter seven explores the role of Chinese porcelain in the Indian Ocean and Southwest Asian trade network. After a review of the impact of Zheng He’s famous voyages, Finlay turns to the cultural perceptions of porcelain in maritime Southeast Asia, where imported ceramics often took on a ceremonial role in births and burials. Likewise, Finlay explores the impact of porcelain on the merchant cultures of the Swahili Coast and Southwest Asia, especially in the synthesis of Islamic and Chinese decoration. Perhaps the most enlightening revelation of this chapter is not the embrace of porcelain, but its rejection. Despite the nearly universal obsession with the wonders of porcelain, India remained uniquely skeptical. Finlay attributes this anomaly to strict Hindu precepts of cleanliness and pollution. Because Hindus believed pottery could absorb impurity, “scrupulous Hindus shunned all ceramic wares and instead used metal dishes or improvised receptacles” (239). Pottery exposed to “pollution” of any kind was immediately broken. Naturally, the exorbitant expense of imported porcelain made this tradition cost-prohibitive. As a result, Hindu India remained uniquely immune to the “porcelain disease.”

The final chapter chronicles both the zenith and demise of Chinese porcelain in Europe. Finlay contextualizes the European fascination with porcelain within the shift from communal to individual dining and the chinoiserie collection craze. He clarifies that the collapse of the Chinese porcelain market in Europe was not solely related to the cracking of the “secret” of porcelain and production of European domestic porcelain items. Rather, the decline reflected second thoughts about the Chinese aesthetic and the rebirth of Eurocentric pride reflected in a neo-classical obsession with the glories of ancient Europe, a preoccupation reflected in the ceramic wares of Josiah Wedgwood.

The Pilgrim Art grew out of Finlay’s eponymous 1998 article in the Journal of World History (9:2, 141–87). In the intervening years, Finlay has developed even deeper insight into the domestic cultures of the porcelain ecumene through literary sources and cultural patterning. The result is an eminently accessible and readable study of one of the most important manufactured commodities of early global society. The Pilgrim Art might be faulted for its penchant to wander tangential paths, but readers will eagerly follow Finlay on these meanderings, which explore myriad captivating top-
ics and consistently loop back to form yet another enlightening element in the story of porcelain. Finlay demonstrates what art historians and rabid porcelain collectors have known for years: porcelain is more than a pretty bauble that mesmerized Europeans who could produce only cruder wares. Each shard of porcelain is a window on the complex cultural interactions of politics, ideology, economics, technology, and trade.

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David Kang, professor of international relations and business and director of USC's Korean Studies Institute, entitles the concluding chapter of *East Asia Before the West* “Lessons: History Forward and Backward.” This is a play on a Soren Kierkegaard (1813–55) quotation: “Life can only be understood backward; but it must be lived forward.” The quotation reflects the primary purposes of Kang's book. Kang's history of East Asian relations before Western colonialism is not simply a historical narrative but a focused attempt to inform readers about a regional system predicated on different cultural assumptions than those of the West. This is an important goal because traces of these differing perspectives still linger and matter.

The book is part of Columbia University Press’ series *Contemporary Asia in the World*, which Kang co-edits with Victor Cha. The book achieves the series’ avowed aim of addressing the gap in public policy and scholarly discussion about Asia. Scholars, policy wonks, and lay people interested in Asia should find the book informative. In his systematic treatment of East Asia’s China-centered tribute system, complemented by intermittent comparisons with Europe’s post-1648 Peace of Westphalia international order, Kang provides a rich cultural, historical, and political context vital for understanding East Asia’s past and how it might inform its present and future. The book is clearly-written, concise, and thoroughly documented. Kang has created an excellent pedagogical tool that can be used in undergraduate and advanced secondary school courses, including world history, international relations, comparative politics, and introduction to East Asia.

Kang begins the book with a brief discussion of the 1592–98 Imjin War, a major conflict in pre-modern history that pitted Korea and China against Japan, which had seriously challenged the East Asian status quo by invading Korea. The author then asks why, for approximately three hundred years before and three hundred years after this traumatic event, China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan enjoyed relatively consistent stability. From 1598
until 1841, for example, there was only one other war involving East Asian states (China and Vietnam). Europe, by comparison, was mired in perpetual conflict. Kang then introduces the book’s themes, including the historical and cultural roots of Chinese hegemony, an examination of the tribute system that accentuates not only its symbolic but also its practical importance for East Asian states, China’s relation to other Sinic states as well as various Southeast Asian polities, the demise of the Sino-centric tribute system, and what all this means for better understanding contemporary international relations.

In the ensuing chapter Kang describes the concepts of hierarchy, status, and hegemony, and explains why they are important in international relations theory and particularly in understanding the evolution of East Asia’s international relations. In chapter three, he provides a historical overview of East Asia that focuses upon China’s ascent primarily as a result of its earlier cultural achievements, including the development of a written language and accompanying literary, philosophical, and historical canon, and the creation of effective public and private institutions in conjunction with the establishment of coherent and functional belief systems including, most notably, Confucianism.

In a particularly well-argued chapter, the author elaborates upon the East Asian tribute system that China, with the cooperation of Korea, Vietnam, and a more ambivalent Japan, created and maintained for almost six centuries. The system also encompassed, to varying degrees, the Ryukyu Islands and parts of Southeast Asia. This Sino-centric system was based upon subordinate states formally recognizing China’s cultural (but not political) hegemony. The tribute system clearly contrasted with the basic theoretical foundation created by the architects of the Peace of Westphalia according to which the European states shared the same footing. China conceived itself as culturally superior and expected subordinate states to behave accordingly through a tributary system that involved diplomacy, material gifts, and assent to China’s dicta about when, and how many, official and sometimes non-official trade interactions could occur. Kang emphasizes a crucial point about the tribute system: in return for recognizing its dominant role in the East Asian order, Imperial China respected the political sovereignty of subordinate states on fundamental issues ranging from borders to government institutions, economics, and legal systems.

Korea, Vietnam, and Japan largely admired key elements of Chinese culture and embraced Chinese political and cultural models. This was most evident in Korea and Vietnam. Both states eventually institutionalized Confucianism as much if not more than China. Korea began using Confucian examinations in the eighth century and after the rise of Neo-Confucianism had ten times more Confucian scholars per capita than China. By the thirteenth century, Vietnam had a Confucian examination system in
place. By the fifteenth century, 30,000 Vietnamese were taking the regional examinations annually and the number continued to grow in succeeding centuries. In the course of describing subordinate state relations with China, Kang avoids overemphasizing China’s influence on Korea and Vietnam; in both states and probably even more in Japan, indigenous belief systems, cultural proclivities, and customs also shaped the social and political order.

Japan was the most conflicted about subordinating itself to China and terminated its formal tributary status at the end of the Imjin War, but China and Japan soon reestablished a trade relationship. The Tokugawa shogunate was partially based upon Chinese legal and institutional models. Demand in Japan for Chinese literature remained high during much of the so-called closed years of the Tokugawa period, and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Japanese imported more than one thousand Chinese manuscripts annually. Through the port of Nagasaki during the Tokugawa period, Japan engaged in far more trade with China than with the Dutch. Although accorded lower status by China than Korea or Vietnam, Japan remained an integral part of the pre-modern East Asian system.

In his chapter on war, Kang draws on Chinese records as well as the work of a variety of East Asian and Western scholars to categorize armed conflict by type and make a strong empirical case for the peace and stability that existed between East Asian states for so long. Kang’s chapter on trade focuses on both Sinic state interactions and interactions with Southeast Asia. If some readers conceptuallyize East Asia states as historically isolated, the author’s nice job of synthesizing scholarship that proves pre-modern East Asian states and some Southeast Asian polities were active participants in a regional and extra-regional economic order will be thought provoking. East Asian countries were involved in trade both with each other and with Siam, Java, other parts of Southeast Asia, and even with South Asia. Tribute trade was the tip of the iceberg and private official trade occurred as well. During periods such as the late Ming, the early Qing, and the middle and latter Tokugawa, when governments attempted to stop trade, unofficial trade flourished, often assisted by local officials.

In a chapter on nomads and frontiers, Kang discusses the dysfunctional aspect of China’s international relations and its complex problems with a variety of nomadic peoples beyond its borders. The author avoids oversimplication of the issue of force, noting that Chinese were inherently no more peaceful than Europeans but had different security concerns, one of which was dealing with nomads determined to trade in Chinese goods. The Great Wall and continual Chinese military actions on and beyond the imperial northern and western borders are evidence of this perpetual pre-modern security concern.

In conclusion, the author posits that although contemporary East Asians want many of the same things as some Westerners, and the “balance
of power” approach is now operative in the region, the former Sinic states are unsurprised by China’s recent rise. Although unsure of Beijing’s intentions and cold to the notion of a hegemonic China, East Asians seem not to be particularly anxious about China’s ascendance. Unlike Westerners, many East Asians understand the history of the region and China’s place in that narrative. Kang also chronicles how controversies over possession of Taiwan, Dokodo, and the Senkakus, never an issue until the latter part of the twentieth century, disturb the region, and he delves into the disputants’ probably pointless quest to rewrite their national histories to prove ownership.

A variety of readers will finish Kang’s book with a better historical and contemporary sense of both East Asia and, due to the author’s deft comparisons, the West as well.

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Introductory-level courses usually form the bulk – or even the extent – of the offerings in many post-secondary Asian studies programs. Although they may provide entrée to majors or careers, these courses are more often students’ only classroom exposure to Asia. Instructors are thus charged with giving comprehensive overviews to their students and ensuring that they grasp the historical and contemporary import of the cultures and civilizations of Asia: no small feat, especially when instructors are likely to be specialists, not generalists.

The task is less intimidating when instructors have excellent resources at their disposal. Enter these three volumes in the Asia in Focus series published by ABC-CLIO. Targeting “intelligent readers who often get lost in the flurry of publications in today’s book market” (LaFleur 2010, xvii), these books are intended for readers with little or no previous knowledge of Asia: advanced high school students, undergraduates, and curious adults, including educators, travelers, and businesspeople — “virtually anyone who wants to know more about” any of these three cultures (Ellington 2009, xiv). Supplemented by primary-source readings and audio-visual media, the
three texts in this series would serve nicely as core textbooks for lower-level undergraduate survey courses.¹

These volumes are essentially revised and expanded versions of volumes that appeared in Global Studies: Asia, an earlier series published by ABC-CLIO (Connor 2002; Ellington 2002; LaFleur, Palmer, Rapp, Robson, and Hamlish 2003). Those slimmer volumes (approximately three hundred pages apiece) contain similar material but are somewhat differently organized. In addition to being set in a more readable typeface and having a crisper, more appealing design, the earlier volumes contain two features that I wish had been retained: historical timelines and paragraph-long, encyclopedia-style entries on significant people, events, and places. I also wish the volumes reviewed here acknowledged somewhere, anywhere – their previous incarnations. If, in another seven years or so, these volumes are revised and updated again, I hope the new works will be identified as second editions, not recast as new titles in an ostensibly new series.

Like volumes in many of the series published by ABC-CLIO (including the Global School Room series and Food Culture around the World series that I have previously reviewed in this journal),² the revised volumes in Asia in Focus each follow the same template. The contents focus on material relevant to an introductory course on these East Asian cultures: geography (including political maps), history, government and politics, economy, society (religion and thought, social classes and ethnicity, women and marriage, education), culture (language, etiquette, literature, art, music, food, sports and leisure), and contemporary issues. The only deviations from this outline are additions: the volume on the Koreas includes material about architecture; the volume on China includes a subsection on popular culture and traditional beliefs. “Etiquette” strikes me as the only unexpected inclusion, but, of course, this book is intended for businesspeople and travelers as well as students. I appreciate Ellington’s perspective at the outset of his section on etiquette: “language, culture, and etiquette are impossible to separate” (235). Likewise, LaFleur reminds readers that “act[ing] with composure in Chinese social situations” requires “understand[ing] the role of the family and an individual’s wider social context” (244). And Connor discusses etiquette in relation to certain Confucian concepts and values (241–43).

Each volume includes extensive back matter that amounts to over a quarter of the total number of pages: a glossary, an almanac-like compendium of facts and figures, lists and descriptions of holidays and organizations (government, business, cultural, educational, and touristic), annotated bibliographies, and both thematic and subject indexes. (Because the books are thematically organized, the thematic indexes – which add over twenty pages – seem almost redundant.) Glossaries include terms, concepts, locations, historical events, phrases, and acronyms. The gazetteer material –
charts, tables, and figures pertaining to demographics, rulers, economic and workforce statistics, information on ethnic groups, and much more – seems unnecessary in the age of the Internet. Such material becomes outdated quickly. Still, students may have trouble finding reliable statistics and data themselves, so this material may benefit them. Helping matters, many of the sources are websites that students can visit for updates and additional materials. The annotated bibliographies are organized by themes corresponding to those of the texts. They complement the reference lists that follow each thematic section and point to additional materials that should be accessible to readers. Although the bibliographies in Ellington’s and LaFleur’s volumes focus on print materials, the bibliography in Connor’s volume also includes an extensive list of relevant Internet resources.

The text is sometimes repetitious, but its repetitions serve as reinforcements. If the material is new to students or readers, mentioning, for example, the eighth-century Tōdai Temple 東大寺 in Nara, Japan, in both the history and religion sections (over one hundred pages apart) is certainly appropriate. Indeed, pretending that a civilization or culture can be neatly parsed into separate thematic sections without overlap is an organizational conceit. As those of us who have organized syllabi for introductory survey courses know firsthand, concepts such as history, society, and “culture” are inextricably intertwined; those who have been brave enough to write textbooks such as these know these difficulties even more intimately (and LaFleur acknowledges them in the introduction to his volume).

Our guides on these cultural journeys include one who should be familiar to readers of the Southeast Review of Asian Studies: Lucien Ellington, UC Foundation Professor of Education at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Who could be more qualified to author an introductory book on Japan than the founding editor of Education About Asia? Ellington is also the only author to tackle his project – at least the writing portion – on his own. Mary Connor, a longtime secondary school educator and co-founder and president of the Korea Academy for Educators, penned three-quarters of The Koreas but called on specialist contributors for the sections on language, literature, art and architecture, music, and leisure and sports. China is the most collaborative venture. Edited by Robert André LaFleur, chair of the Asian studies program and professor of history and anthropology at Beloit College, China draws on eight additional contributors from within and beyond the Asian studies program at Beloit. Several sections are coauthored. Throughout, though, the voice is remarkably consistent. Notably, LaFleur and his associates employ motifs that later resurface: for example, the ideas of imaginative geography, the natural and supernatural in Chinese art, and the “continuity, discontinuity, and diversity” of Chinese literature.

All three volumes are big, hardbound specimens, and they come with high list prices. Japan and The Koreas retail for US$95; China, for US$85.
At these prices, I would have liked better illustrations. The illustrations – approximately one hundred per volume – are entirely monochrome; many come from stock image providers and seem generic. Among the most interesting images are those provided by the authors themselves: Connor wins on that front, with most of the photographs in her volume provided by herself or her acquaintances. Ellington, especially, has made sure that his image captions add value. (I do appreciate being able to flip through a book and learn something by merely perusing the images and their captions.) He has also – perhaps intentionally – introduced captions that leave some questions unanswered, encouraging a hunt to find answers. For example: “Although sake is not contemporary Japan’s most popular alcoholic beverage, it has the mythical status of rice and green tea” (290). So what’s Japan’s most popular alcoholic beverage? The answer: beer (299, 343). And: “To-daiji Temple in Nara houses one of Japan’s two great Buddhas” (29). What and where is the second? The answer: the Kamakura Buddha in Kamakura (155–56). All three volumes also include numerous callout text boxes that highlight individuals, events, issues, and concepts.

These volumes are, of course, not perfect. Some of the copyediting issues, for example, would be noticed only by copyeditors familiar with the content or proficient in East Asian languages. Experts are almost certain to identify material that has been oversimplified or omitted. But one does not produce a comprehensive volume on one of the great cultures of East Asia expecting to satisfy everyone. The goal is to create an approachable, useful, thorough, intelligent, up-to-date guide that will inspire and enrich its inexperienced readers. On these counts, Connor, Ellington, and LaFleur succeed. They and their contributors are clearly passionate about the material and passionate about educating others. The next time you teach “Introduction to China,” “Introduction to Japan,” or “Introduction to Korea,” by all means consider adopting the relevant volume in the ABC-CLIO Asia in Focus series. Perhaps, to the great relief of students, these volumes will someday appear in paperback.

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**Notes**

1 Nearly two decades ago, as an undergraduate, I took a course entitled “Introduction to Japan.” Reischauer (1988) was a core text. A decade later, I served as a teaching assistant for “Introduction to Japanese Culture” at a different institution, where the enlarged edition of the Reischauer book – by that time Reischauer and Jansen (1995) – was still a core text. It was supplemented (and eventually replaced) by then more current works by Hendry (2003), Varley (2000), and others. Similar courses on China have frequently been built around Patricia Ebrey’s beautifully illustrated *Cambridge Illustrated*
History of China, now in its second edition (2010); but similar courses on Korea, which, alas, I presume are not as ubiquitous as courses on Japan or China, seem to have had fewer options. Armstrong (2007) or Buzo (2008) might be a place to start. For primary-source material, the numerous volumes edited by de Bary and others in the Introduction to Asian Civilizations series remain valuable (see, e.g., Ch’oe, Lee, and de Bary 2000; de Bary and Bloom 1999; de Bary, Keene, Tanabe, and Varley 2001–5; de Bary and Lufrano 2000; Lee and de Bary 1997).


3Only Japan includes a list of legendary and historical emperors. Both Japan and The Koreas include lists of political leaders (prime ministers for Japan, presidents for South Korea, and general secretaries of the Korean Workers’ Party for North Korea). None of these titles, however, includes what I would consider the most valuable resource to beginning students of Asia: a chronology of the respective historic eras (periods, dynasties, kingdoms, states).

4The works differ in their treatments of diacritics. Japan includes none (as noted, albeit inexplicably, in the preface); China includes diacritics in the language section (and Chinese characters even occur – inline – in a couple of instances); and The Koreas, although essentially following the McCune-Reischauer system, has omitted the breves (even in the language section, which includes inline hangul).

References


Even though over 80 percent of the tea consumed in the United States is iced (Saberi 2010, 120), interest in tea has been heating up – not cooling down – since I last reviewed a selection of tea-related books for this journal (Gump 2008). In the United States, annual sales of tea have risen from less than $1 billion before 1990 to an estimated $6 billion in 2009. In 2011, according to Helen Saberi, tea sales are expected to exceed $10 billion (121). Following the organic and artisanal booms, much of the “dynamic growth” has been in “specialty teas”: organic teas, fair-trade teas, and origin-specific teas (121–22) — teas that Mary Lou Heiss and Robert Heiss call “premium teas.” The new generation of tea connoisseurs passionately imbibes not only the world’s finest teas but also the story of tea, which, as Saberi writes, “is steeped in ritual and religion, adventure and enterprise, smuggling and revolution, literature and social change” (8). Recent books like Laura Martin’s Tea: The Drink That Changed the World (2007) and Sarah Rose’s For All the Tea in China: How England Stole the World’s Favorite Drink and Changed History (2010) were aimed at popular readerships and became best-sellers, helping promote tea’s “scandalous history and glorious culture” (Heiss and Heiss 2010, 8).

Tea, of course, is an Asian contribution to the world. Processing technique interplays with terroir (inherent characteristics of provenance) to transform leaves of Camellia sinensis varieties – native to northeastern India, southern China, and northern Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand – into teas of enormous variety that are now produced in some fifty tropical and semitropical countries on six continents. This chemical and physical process is also a human process, and tea touches upon numerous disciplines and fields of interest: geography, agronomy, botany, chemistry, nutrition, medicine, engineering, art, architecture, aesthetics, gastronomy, literature, material culture, history, religion, political science, economics, and more. The books reviewed here address tea from different perspectives. They consider tea as a choice beverage; as a historic and cultural commodity imbued with numerous layers of meaning; and as an important economic resource, the production of which deserves detailed description and analysis.
Understanding & Appreciating Tea

In my earlier review, I evaluated Mary Lou Heiss and Robert Heiss’s encyclopedic *Story of Tea: A Cultural History and Drinking Guide* (2007). Their *Tea Enthusiast’s Handbook: A Guide to Enjoying the World’s Best Teas* is, on some levels, a condensed version. The reader they have in mind is the North American consumer of tea — but not just any tea. As the subtitle indicates, this book is not about the ordinary; tea bags and most blended or flavored teas have no place (Jasmine tea, however, is afforded three pages). Just so the parameters are crystal clear, the phrase “premium tea” shows up four times on the first page of the introduction alone.

Retailers of premium tea since 1974, the Heisses are also intrepid travelers, food writers, and educators. Here, they are to be lauded for their straightforward presentation of the six classes of tea: green, yellow, white, oolong, black, and Pu-erh 普洱. The central chapter that sequentially covers each tea class occupies two-thirds of the book. All teas begin as freshly plucked leaf from *Camellia sinensis* bushes or trees, with processing largely determining their final character. Depending on the intended class of tea (as well as geography and other considerations), production may be largely mechanized or manual. And teas plucked at different times of the year – and plucked in different ways – yield finished teas with different qualities. Grading is not standardized. The Heisses liken grading tea to grading wine, cheese, coffee, and olive oil: commodities that, like tea, are produced around the world and vary with terroir and processing technique. For the uninitiated, then, and on the most basic level:

- **Green teas** (the best of which are primarily produced in China and Japan) are minimally processed; they are heated (or steamed) to de-enzyme and prevent oxidization before being shaped and dried.

- **Yellow teas** (produced in Anhui, Hunan, and Sichuan, China) are processed like green teas with one additional step, “smothering,” that reduces astringency and enhances aromatics.

- **White teas** (mostly produced in Fujian, China) are withered and bake-dried; unlike green teas, they are not heated or steamed at the outset of processing and thus oxidize slightly.

- **Oolong teas** (produced in Taiwan and in Fujian and Guangdong, China) are withered, tossed and bruised (to promote oxidation), allowed to rest, and then roasted.

- **Black teas** (produced in India, Sri Lanka, China, and throughout Africa) are withered, rolled, broken, sifted, oxidized, and dried.
• **Pu-erh teas** (produced only in Yunnan, China) are heated, rolled, dried, and fermented (a process that involves steaming, drying, and aging). They are often formed into cakes and, if stored properly, can mature (and increase in value) for decades.

Nuances of culture, consumption, climate, and geography figure in the Heisses’ account of plucking styles, annual harvest cycles, and specific production methods.

Clearly intended for the tea drinker, this book also includes chapters on purchasing, steeping, and storing tea. The core chapter on the classes of tea includes a “gallery” of between two and thirteen teas per class. These entries detail origin, history, production methods, steeping procedures, uses, and popularity. Entries are color-coded by class, and a flush thumb index helps the reader navigate the six classes. Supplemental materials include a glossary of eighty-three entries (covering qualities and characteristics of tea, types of pluckings, production methods, tea implements, and other tea-related concepts), a buyer’s guide that profiles twelve North American vendors who “are particularly passionate about their tea” (191),

a refreshingly informative acknowledgments page, and a basic index. Some terms are used but not defined, however, including pekoe, orange pekoe, and souchong. And, perhaps to simplify, the Heisses do not mention that most black teas are termed “red” teas in East Asia. Beyond their handbook, then, the taxonomy and nomenclature of the “six classes” are not absolute.

The handbook is nicely illustrated with sixty-six color photographs, thirty-eight of which are of particular specialty teas. In what I suppose was a design decision, the images (which will look familiar to owners of *The Story of Tea*) were unfortunately not captioned, though many are relatively obvious given the context. New to the handbook are six maps – one for each class of tea – that show the locations of tea-producing countries and, where relevant, provinces. I would like to think that my comment about the absence of maps in my review of *The Story of Tea* catalyzed their inclusion here; but the image on page 22 (of a wholesale tea market in Shanghai) remains inverted, just as it was in the Heisses’ earlier book — and as I mentioned in the same review. Perhaps this recurring oversight can be addressed if *The Tea Enthusiast’s Handbook* goes into a second edition.

### Considering the Cultural History of Tea

Helen Saberi’s *Tea: A Global History* is a recent volume in the fascinating and ever-expanding Edible series from Reaktion Press (for comments on the series see Gump 2010). As research editor for the second edition of Alan Davidson’s distinguished *Oxford Companion to Food* (2006), regular participant in the annual Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery, contributor to the food studies journal *Petits Propos Culinaires*, and cookbook author,
Saberi is well qualified to contribute to a series exploring the global histories of food and drink.

Consistent with other books in the series, Saberi’s Tea offers a concise, engaging presentation. After a brief introduction to the etymology and worldwide significance of tea, seven chapters treat the subject from various geographic and historical perspectives. The first chapter defines tea; offers the legends of its “discovery” as a stimulating drink nearly five thousand years ago by mythical Chinese Emperor Shen Nong 神農 and, much later, by Bodhidharma (ca. early fifth century C.E.); presents the same six classes of tea identified by the Heisses; describes where tea grows and how it is produced; and gives due coverage to the importance of blending (a topic not addressed in much detail by the Heisses, since they focus on unblended varieties). Though this chapter – call it Tea 101 – is essentially an abridged version of the Heiss and Heiss volume, Saberi manages to touch on details not mentioned by the Heisses, including the East Asian concept of “red” tea and the nomenclature of pekoe and orange pekoe. In one departure from the Heisses’ account, she describes oolong teas as “semi-fermented” (14) and black teas as “completely fermented” (15). The Heisses would challenge these descriptions, although they are commonplace in other tea literature. It is more accurate to say that oolong teas are semi-oxidized; black teas, completely. As I understand the Heisses’ definition, only Pu-erh is truly fermented via microbial zymolysis, thanks to the activity of a host of bacteria, molds, and fungi that occur naturally or are artificially introduced (Heiss and Heiss 2010, 151).

The chapters that follow consider tea more or less geographically throughout history, as it pertains to China, the rest of East Asia, inner and mainland Southeast Asia, the West, and South Asia and Indonesia. Tea-related customs, traditions, material culture, art, dance, music, and more are explored somewhat eclectically but always interestingly. Saberi’s final chapter looks to the future of tea and is followed by a selection of historical and contemporary recipes involving or invoking tea (clearly penned for a British audience: the recipe for “Tea Cup Trifle” calls for both “boudoir biscuits” and “thick custard”). A fifty-item glossary (that includes entries for such non-teas as chrysanthemum tea and yerba maté), a list of fifteen international tea suppliers and organizations, and an adequate index round out the book.

A standout chapter concerns Inner Asia and mainland Southeast Asia (including Burma, Vietnam, and Thailand). Although many books on tea mention the importance of the Silk Road, fewer consider either the ancient Chamado 茶馬道 (the “Tea Horse Road,” also known as the Southern Silk Road) that linked China to civilizations in the west (present-day India and Nepal) and south (Burma, Laos, Vietnam) over one thousand years ago, or the later Tea Road, established in the late seventeenth century to link
China with Russia via Siberia. Saberi also discusses the history and traditions of tea in Central Asia. Most of these regions are usually ignored in discussions of tea history. The attention Saberi gives to these regions will, I hope, stimulate further investigation.

Though focusing on history, *Tea* also has a contemporary angle, addressing recent developments and trends: bubble tea, originally from Taiwan (54–56); “red tea shops” that serve non-alcoholic “tea cocktails” in Vietnam (64); and “apple tea” in Turkey (80). Nicely illustrated, with seventy-seven well-captioned, mostly color images, the book, alas, is completely devoid of maps. Saberi mentions, for example, Assam, Sichuan, and Yunnan on page 11 — without initially giving any sense of where in India or China they are located. (Geographical descriptors are later offered for Assam and Yunnan, but maps would have been more straightforward.) Her translation of *cha no yu* 茶の湯 as “hot-water-tea” (42) seems to imply, incorrectly, a strict character-to-word translation between Japanese and English. Most of the copyediting errors are of a type that I attribute to on-screen editing, but an attentive copyeditor should have noticed the two different dates given for when the British East India Company lost its monopoly on trade with China (on pages 94 and 127). More understandable is the anachronism in the caption to the photograph on page 111. The photograph is World War II era, but the Women’s Royal Voluntary Service did not exist under that name until 1966. These quibbles aside, Saberi’s *Tea* remains a welcome contribution to the literature — and a most enjoyable *tour d’horizon* of the worldwide phenomenon of tea.

**Exploring Technicalities of Tea Production**

*The Tea Enthusiast’s Handbook* by the Heisses and Saberi’s *Tea* both aim at general audiences and cover the vast world of tea. S. Samarasingham’s contribution, *A Complete Book on Black Tea Manufacture*, provides a specialized portrait of just one type of tea in one tea-producing country – Sri Lanka – and targets a much more specialized audience: manufacturers of black tea. The book is basically a textbook and is replete with diagrams, figures, tables, graphs, and formulas, and only a handful of photographs. But the book is also helpful to laypeople. Tea leaves are hand-picked in Sri Lanka, and Samarasingham shows how human the production of black tea is, even if much of the remainder of the physical processing is mechanized. He sheds light on the management of tea estates, pointing out that the field and factory, although complementary, actually function independently (24–25). He has more than twenty-seven years of experience in tea processing and research, and his insider’s view is both thorough and trustworthy.

The book includes fifteen chapters; the middle eleven chapters describe what goes on in the processing facility, from start (withering) to finish
(packing). The bookend material provides a contextual history of tea (both in general and in Sri Lanka in particular), a botanical introduction to tea plants, and methods for leaf analysis as affected by harvesting conditions and technique. On the origin of tea, Samarasingham mentions a Darjeeling planter who once remarked that the subject “gave rise to as much speculation as the origin of man. Much of it is wrapped up in legend and mysticism, and thereby furnishes an almost inexhaustible supply of fantastic theories for exploitation by writers of fiction” (2). Luckily, the history of tea cultivation in Sri Lanka, which dates only to the mid-nineteenth century, is well documented. After several decades of trial and error, the first batch of twenty-three pounds of processed tea was exported from Colombo to London in 1883, just six years before Sri Lanka’s production of coffee collapsed due to disease and fires. Three decades later, some 215 million pounds of tea were being exported annually. In recent years, Sri Lanka has consistently ranked fourth in the world in annual tea production, behind China, India, and Kenya.

The core of the book takes the reader on a virtual tour of a manufacturing facility that produces black tea according to the two principal methods: orthodox and CTC (“cut–tear–curl”). Each of the processing stages – withering, rolling, fermenting, drying, and grading – is treated in at least one but as many as four chapters. Yes, fermenting. The Heisses would call this stage oxidizing. Who is correct? Samarasingham clarifies matters when he describes “the controlled duration for the enzyme induced chemical changes commonly referred to as fermentation” (vii, my emphasis). As I now understand the process, tea producers may, in fact, refer to oxidation as “fermentation,” since they are referring to what is, technically, unorganized fermentation (that is, enzyme fermentation). To tea producers, oolong teas may thus be seen as semi-fermented; black teas, as fully fermented. Along these lines, Pu-erh teas are considered post-fermented, a process that involves microbial activity, or, technically, organized fermentation.

The penultimate chapter considers sampling, tasting, and grading, with the final chapter providing tips for preparing tea, a recipe for black tea cider (called kombucha, a natural health drink that has nothing to do with the Japanese kelp “tea” of the same name), and – a true find – instructions for preparing both black tea and green tea at home from tea leaves plucked from your own garden (265–67). Apparently, all that is needed is a large mat, a heat source, a long-handled stirring utensil, and a large cast-iron wok. I am tempted to photocopy these pages and send them to Liza Dalby, who tried, unsuccessfully, to make tea at home from her own camellia bush several years ago.

Back matter includes an index and a bibliography of some 250 entries, half of which were issued by the Tea Research Institute of Sri Lanka, established in 1926. Appendices include conversion tables, schedules for main-
taining factory machinery, and “noteworthy points to keep in mind,” in-
cluding the following from John Ruskin (1819–1900): “Quality is never an
accident. It is always the result of intelligent effort. There must be the will
to produce a superior thing” (284). In sum, then, Samarasingham’s book
describes the desirable attributes of black tea and how best to work with the
tea leaves themselves to produce quality teas.

Deepening the Interest in Tea & Asia

Water aside, people consume more tea than any other beverage on the
planet. Helen Saberi’s *Tea* helps explain how a commodity that originated
in Asia came to be prized around the world. S. Samarasingham’s *Complete
Book on Black Tea Manufacture* details how black tea, still the most com-
monly consumed tea in the West, is prepared for market (that is, export) in
Sri Lanka. And Mary Lou Heiss and Robert Heiss’s *Tea Enthusiast’s Hand-
book* showcases premium teas of all classes – green, yellow, white, oolong,
black, and Pu-erh – available in North America, in hope, it seems, of foster-
ing a culture of tea connoisseurship akin to that of wine appreciation. This
goal certainly seems plausible. Even though oenophiles realize that some of
the world’s best wines are today produced in the New World, Europe re-
mains the cradle of winemaking, with France considered the “undisputed
mistress of the vine” (Johnson and Robinson 2005, 52) and “the country
that produces more fine wine than any other” (Robinson 2006, 279). Simi-
larly, China is the cradle of tea culture. It is the only country to produce all
classes of tea. Given that “there are more kinds of tea in China alone than
there are wines in France” (Griffiths 2007, 10), doesn’t even greater interest
in tea among North Americans seem conceivable? I can easily envision
such a development — and the concomitant, and welcome, interest in Asia
that it should also inspire.

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Notes

1 In a volume that I learned about too late to incorporate into this review, Marla
Berns emphasizes the emergence of scholarly rather than popular works: “The astonis-
ishing growth of the market for quality teas in the United States in the past few years has
been matched, it seems, by a similar increase in the quantity and quality of scholarship
on the subject” (Berns 2009, 7). The volume, edited by Beatrice Hohenegger (2009), is a
truly informative and beautiful catalog of an exhibition held at the Fowler Museum at
UCLA. I encourage anybody interested in tea-related art and wares to track down a copy.

2 The Heisses include a link to their website, www.teatrekker.com, and information
about their store in Northampton, Massachusetts. An incorrect URL is given for only
one vendor, Den’s Tea; try www.denstea.com instead.
Correspondingly, publications on the Silk Road mention the importance of tea. For a recent example, see O’Mara (2010).

Kenya is even newer to tea cultivation than Sri Lanka: the first tea bushes were planted in Kenya in 1903.

These are the words of P. Sivapalan.

If I am mistaken, I would welcome clarification from a microbiologist or food scientist.

See Dalby (2007), 221–22. Of course, Dalby seems to have been using freshly picked leaves from a Camellia sasanqua, not a Camellia sinensis.

Already, indeed, “the presence of Chinese culture looms ever larger in Western lives” (Kirby 2011, 9). The growing interest in premium Chinese teas is but one of many manifestations of this phenomenon. And in his delightful piece in this volume, Alexis Littlefield (2011) offers a personal story of what led him to become a tea connoisseur. Along the way, he questions what one can learn of tea by mere reading, thus underlying a message of the books in this review: Yes, tea should be understood; but it should also be enjoyed.

References

Dalby, Liza. 2007. East wind melts the ice: A memoir through the seasons. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.

Here is a rare find: a book that makes me wish I were once again an undergraduate. Issued in partnership with Thames & Hudson of London, Jim Masselos’s *The Great Empires of Asia* is a gorgeous book – an oversize hardback with over two hundred mostly full-color images – sturdily bound and printed on thick, glossy paper. When coupled with additional readings (some of which could be conveniently culled from the “Further Reading” section in the back matter), the volume would make a lovely textbook for an upper-level undergraduate seminar on the empires of Asia. The volume includes seven chapters that could be used in their entirety or, as interest and the desire for depth allow, selectively. Contributors are an international cast from Australia, Europe, and North America and include SEC/AAS participant and SERAS author Timothy May of North Georgia College and State University, a renowned expert on Central Asian history.¹ The editor and many of the contributors are specialists in visual culture, art history, or architecture, a fact that perhaps helps to explain the visual appeal of the work.²

The fourteen-page introduction by Masselos (University of Sydney) provides an excellent foundation for and synthesis of the material to come. I found its perspective so helpful that I reread the introduction after finishing the volume. The book emphasizes empire as “an Asian experience and as an Asian enterprise” (7), and Masselos whets readers’ appetites for the presentations that follow. Like the remainder of the book, the introduction is lavishly illustrated with photographs of architecture and art (scrolls, paintings, illustrated manuscripts, engravings, sculptures, bas-reliefs, and more). Masselos points out that the Asian empires, at their heights, produced some of the grandest structures in the world: the Great Wall of China, the Taj Mahal, Angkor Wat, the great mosques of Persia. Photographs of these and other structures are offered later in the book. A helpful two-page timeline clarifies the chronology of the seven empires covered and makes it easier to establish religious, commercial, and diplomatic interconnections among these great multicultural empires.

At the heart of the volume are seven chapters that take up the empires of the Mongols (1206–1405), the Ming (1368–1644), the Khmer (802–1566), the Ottomans (1281–1922), the Safavids (1501–1722), the Mughals (1526–1858), and the Japanese (1868–1945). Each chapter opens with a map showing the geographical extent of the empire (some with fairly indistinct gradations that outline the empire as it evolved at key points in time).³ Timelines of key dates follow, the dates relating to what subsequent material covers.

May’s chapter on the Mongol Empire – “the largest contiguous empire in history” (23) – details how the Mongolian army was able to control, at
the empire’s peak, some fourteen million square miles, an area larger than Africa. This emphasis on military and administrative structures includes a detailed section on the organization of the army, an explanation of the rule of law (the Yasa), an introduction to the yam system (an early Pony Express), and commentary on the remarkable religious toleration under the Mongols. May skillfully introduces excerpts from primary sources, including Marco Polo (ca. 1254–1324) and the Persian chronicler Juwayni (1226–83). He even explains, in an endnote, how Chinggis Khan (1162–1227), founder of the Mongol Empire, came to be called “Genghis” Khan in the eighteenth century. (Some contributors are rather heavy-handed with such explanatory notes, offering as many as fifty-two; May is more restrained, offering just sixteen.)

J.A.G. Roberts’s (University of Huddersfield, England) chapter on the Ming builds on May’s chapter, since Hongwu 洪武, the first Ming emperor (r. 1368–98), retained features of government introduced by the Mongols. Trade is a central theme in this chapter: Ming China was, after all, the economic center of the world in 1600. Roberts introduces much material that could become fodder for productive classroom discussions: the revival of the examination system for civil service, the relocation of the capital from Nanjing to present-day Beijing, the building of the Forbidden City, the maritime explorations of Zheng He 鄭和 (1371–1435), the building and extension of the Great Wall, the role of eunuchs, the practice of footbinding, the artistic influence of the painter and calligrapher Dong Qichang 董其昌 (1555–1636), the emergence of popular literature and Chinese opera, including Tang Xianzu’s 湯顯祖 (1550–1616) Mudan ting 牡丹亭 (The Peony Pavilion), and the impact of Ming contact with the West.

In her chapter on the Khmer of Southeast Asia, Helen Ibbitson Jessup (an independent scholar and curator) presents a visual feast of temple architecture, culminating with a description and contextualization of the twelfth-century Angkor Wat, the largest religious monument in the world. Although the Khmer developed remarkable mastery over water resources, their “extraordinary art and architecture” is their “greatest legacy” (75). Because no other written records from the Khmer survive, reliefs and inscriptions at numerous temple sites provide the bulk of what is known about Khmer society. They offer “invaluable information about armies, weapons, vehicles, dress, ceremonial materials, animals and vegetation” during the Khmer rule (98). Jessup’s chapter is perhaps unnecessarily encyclopedic in its description of the centuries preceding the empire, but the chapter admirably draws connections between text and image: Readers get a crash course in architectural history, though they are left to their own devices to determine the precise meanings of terms such as false story, lintel, and colonette. (The quincunx scheme of tower architecture, used at Angkor Wat and elsewhere, however, is clearly described.)
Gábor Ágoston’s (Georgetown University) chapter on the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Ottoman Empire emphasizes political history but ends with a brief and captivating section on Ottoman architecture, calligraphy, painting, textiles, education, medicine, and bathing culture. After the consumption of coffee became widespread in the second half of the sixteenth century, coffee-houses became incubators of political and literary subcultures throughout the empire. Ágoston unfortunately makes no mention of the remarkable development of food culture under the Ottomans, particularly under Mehmed II (1432–81), the conqueror of Constantinople. In her chapter on the Safavids of the Middle East and Central Asia, Sussan Babaie (a Fulbright Regional Scholar of Egypt and Syria), does mention the importance of feasting in the company of the shahs as “a hallmark of the royal ceremonies in Isfahan” (159), the Persian city whose remarkable cosmopolitanism during the seventeenth century Babaie makes tangible for her readers. Babaie also does a commendable job of interweaving the cultural with the political throughout her chapter.

In her chapter on the Mughals, Catherine Asher (University of Minnesota) skillfully compares administrative strategies of the Mughals with those of the Ottomans and Safavids. She also effectively integrates the political with the cultural and artistic, giving particular attention to illustrated manuscripts. Akbar (1542–1605), who reigned for nearly fifty years, is, appropriately, a key actor in the chapter. In addition to describing the import of his concept of the state and patronage of the arts, Asher shares some interesting trivia: for example, that Akbar was illiterate; that he had a fondness for elephants; and that he was genuinely interested in religion.

I am curious why Elise Kurashige Tipton’s (University of Sydney) chapter on the Japanese Empire is subtitled “The Meiji Restoration.” One could say that the journey toward empire began with the Meiji Restoration in 1868, in which case the restoration was an imperial precursor, not the empire itself. Nevertheless, Tipton’s chapter focuses almost entirely on the militaristic empire, leaving the reader to wonder what other forms of “empire,” cultural or otherwise, Japan embodied during this incredibly transformative period. Tipton’s portrayal of Taiwan (occupied in 1895 after the defeat of China in the Sino-Japanese War) as a “‘laboratory’ for Japan’s experiment in colonial modernization” (206) is astute. Education, for example, succeeded in creating “loyal” Japanese subjects in Taiwan but subsequently failed miserably in Korea (formally annexed as a colony in 1910). Considering possible explanations, Tipton explores complex issues of colonialism, imperialism, and nationalism — “modern” concepts that are out of place in analyses of most other Asian empires.

Finally, Masselos’s brief conclusion explores Asian empires in the European imagination, considers the legacies and demises of these empires, and concludes with a portentous forecast: “if much of the last thousand
years was the time for Asian achievement, why should not most of the coming millennium be again Asia’s time?" (227). The Great Empires of Asia takes the reader on a grand tour – both temporally and geographically – of much of the past millennium in the Eastern hemisphere. I marvel at the list price – under US$35 – for such a beautifully produced, informative, and thought-provoking book.

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Notes

1See, for example, May (2008).

2Pamela Winfield of Elon University – another SEC/AAS participant – pointed out (2010) that much interdisciplinary historical scholarship (scholarship that embraces perspectives from politics, religion, economics, literature, gender relations, and more) seems to have emerged from art history. Indeed, a visual approach makes sense when – as is the case with the Khmer Empire – we are left with little more than art or architecture on which to base our internal analyses and understandings.

3The various maps are at different scales; but scales are unfortunately not given on any of them.

4Mehmed II was apparently quite a gourmet. See, for example, the relevant essays sprinkled throughout Wright (1999) or Roger’s fascinating entry in The Cambridge World History of Food (2000), especially page 1148.

References


I expect art books to be beautiful; catalogs of museum exhibitions, informative. Combine the beautiful and informative and you have a paragon of both genres. Adriana Proser’s Pilgrimage and Buddhist Art, published in conjunction with a spring 2010 exhibition at the Asia Society Museum in New
York City, is such a book. Impressive to behold – the oversize volume includes over 130 mostly full-color images – the work is also erudite, with essays and catalogue entries by leading and up-and-coming scholars of Asian pilgrimage in the English-speaking world: Sherry Fowler (University of Kansas), Janice Leoshko (University of Texas, Austin), D. Max Moerman (Barnard College), Ian Reader (University of Manchester), Robert Stoddard (University of Nebraska–Lincoln), Chün-fang Yü (Columbia University), and several others. Proser, the editor, is the John H. Foster Curator of Traditional Asian Art at the Asia Society Museum. In her words, the volume aims to demonstrate “how Buddhist pilgrimage practice relates to the historical Buddha’s quest for enlightenment, regional developments in the pilgrimage tradition, the role of landscape in Buddhist pilgrimage, and how Buddhist pilgrimage has affected art — and how art, in turn, has influenced Buddhist pilgrimage” (ix).1 By examining material culture, the volume explores the meaning and symbolism of religious sites and objects in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, China, Korea, and Japan — a veritable grand tour of Asia.

The catalogue is prefaced by eight short essays. The two opening essays offer helpful contextualization: Stoddard describes the geography and the spatial component of Buddhist pilgrimage; Moerman elucidates the meanings of pilgrimage within Buddhism. These two essays succinctly explain why pilgrimage – both contemplative and peripatetic – is a common form of Buddhist devotional practice, how various understandings of pilgrimage arose, how particular sites have become imbued with meaning (and how these meanings may have changed over time), and how pilgrimage inspires art. The six following essays each pertain to an individual site or pilgrimage context: Leoshko considers Bodh Gaya, the site of the historical Buddha’s enlightenment in India — and the most important of the four major pilgrimage sites related to the Buddha’s life; Katherine Anne Paul (Newark Museum) connects Tibetan Buddhist pilgrimage with popular media, including images, recited texts, and dance and music performances; Donald Swearer (Harvard University) describes pilgrimage in northern Thailand; Yü comments on the import of mountains in Buddhist pilgrimage in China; Susan Beningson (City University of New York) profiles the earliest surviving Buddhist cave-chapels in China at Dunhuang 敦煌; and Reader discusses Buddhist pilgrimage in Japan. That the essayists include not only art historians but also scholars of anthropology and religious studies adds both depth and variety to the presentations.

Reader’s essay on pilgrimage in Japan – the content with which I am most familiar – explores the syncretism of pilgrimage that arose in Japan from the beginning of the Heian era (794–1185). Reader focuses on popular route pilgrimages, including the Shikoku 四国 pilgrimage to eighty-eight temples on the island of Shikoku and the Saikoku 西国 pilgrimage to thirty-
three temples in Western Japan (which I completed in spurts between 1996 and 1998). He briefly describes the role of their foundation legends (engi 縁起) within the sacred landscape, the purpose of miniaturized pilgrimage routes, the reasons pilgrimages flourished historically and continue to be popular today, the transformations that have affected pilgrimage in recent generations, and the connections between pilgrimage sites and artistic and cultural heritage. Reader particularly succeeds in portraying Japanese pilgrimage as a living tradition (his essay is illustrated with five of his own photographs, taken between 1987 and 2007). As a whole, the book emphasizes the importance of pilgrimage not only in history but also in contemporary Asia. The artifacts reproduced and described in the catalogue – statuary, reliquaries, stupa miniatures, votive models and plaques, portraits, manuscripts, woodblock prints, wall hangings, scrolls, mandalas, prayer wheels, amulet boxes, portable shrines, and more – date from as early as the second century but include items from as late as the twentieth century as well.

Proser has thoughtfully organized the catalogue portion of the book, which fills two-thirds of the volume, into three sections: “The Buddha and the Sacred Site” (twenty artifacts), “The Journey” (fifty-two artifacts), and “Merit, Mementos, and Sacred Bonds” (twenty-one artifacts). Each section begins with a brief introduction by the editor that frames the theme and introduces many of the artifacts. Within each section, artifacts are ordered not by age or origin or type. Rather, each section unfolds as if one were meandering through a museum, discovering pieces from disparate times and places that speak to Buddhism and Buddhist pilgrimage.

Catalogue entries include descriptive titles (or, in the case of the few contemporary pieces, the artists’ names and designated names for their pieces), origins, ages, materials, dimensions, and source collections. (All the materials in the exhibit and, thus, the book came from collections in North America.) These particulars allow readers-as-viewers to consider the images comparatively; the dimensions enable readers to grasp the impressive detail of the miniatures and imagine the magnificence of, for example, the six-panel Japanese folding screen from the early seventeenth century that measures nearly 5 × 11½ feet. Notes about each artifact contextualize and edify: the Japanese screen shows pilgrims to Chion Temple 智恩寺 and Amanohashidate 天橋立, located on the Japan Sea coast northwest of Kyoto. Readers learn that the “screen represents the transitional moment between sacred landscape and tourist attraction” and are encouraged to look for “earnest pilgrims” and “jolly groups picnicking under the cherry blossoms” (111).

Supplemental materials include maps; a vertical timeline of key events related to Buddhist pilgrimage that is ingeniously arranged both chronologically and geographically; a helpful glossary of names and terms (that
also provides linguistic origins but no native scripts); a generous listing of resources, including articles, books, and two websites (I counted over 230 entries in English, Chinese, French, Japanese, and Thai); and a very thorough index. No corners were cut in the preparation of these appendices.

The hardback volume is worth its US$65 list price, but it is perhaps priced out of reach for use as a supplemental textbook in undergraduate courses on Buddhism or Asian art. A copy could certainly be put on reserve in the university library; or, in technology-equipped classrooms, images from the book could be projected on a screen. Additional media options are available, though: the Asia Society, the nonprofit educational organization that sponsored the exhibition, also produced a two-hour documentary, *The Buddha*, that aired on PBS. Moreover—and I saw no notice of this marvelous resource in the book itself—an interactive website presents the ninety-three images in the book with abbreviated descriptions and includes videos, additional essays, lesson plans, and other resources that provide further context and add to the educational value and potential of the material.

I was not able to see the “Pilgrimage and Buddhist Art” exhibit in New York in 2010, but its legacy lives on in this book and through the multimedia resources prepared by the Asia Society. I hope educators will take advantage of these resources and help meet the goals of the project: bringing “a greater awareness and appreciation of the contributions of religious practices and intercultural exchange to the fabric of Asia’s diverse cultures,” in the words of society president Vishakha N. Desai (vii). At the same time, these materials show that Buddhist pilgrimage—a tradition dating back more than two millennia—is alive and well throughout much of Asia today.

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Notes

1 Picking up on the latter issue, Yü offers the following: “Pilgrimage is not only an outward physical journey to a specific place, but also an inward spiritual journey to one’s existential being. . . . The art that prepares the pilgrim—and that is sometimes created by him or her—has much to inform us about the physical and spiritual worlds that the pilgrim inhabits. Pilgrimage creates art; art, in turn, inspires pilgrimage” (25).

2 I have not seen this film. The curious, though, will find DVDs available here: http://www.pbs.org/thebuddha/.

3 See http://pilgrimage.asiasociety.org/.

This is an intelligent volume of quality scholarly essays that, collectively, provide pragmatic pedagogical wisdom on the infusion of Asian studies into college curricula. The biased – yet arguably correct – position of the editors is that Asian thought and practice ought to be an essential part of any college education. Their text reflects this view, providing non-specialists interpretive access to the primary philosophical and religious traditions of India, China, and Japan, along with common and well-tested pedagogical strategies for presenting this material to Western students.

The book is divided into three parts: “Encountering Asian Philosophies and Religions,” “Texts,” and “Contexts.” “Encountering Asian Philosophies and Religions” includes only two essays, but they are both substantial contributions, written by prolific scholars of Asian Studies, John M. Koller and Roger T. Ames. In “The Importance of Asian Philosophy in the Curriculum,” Koller gives four reasons for including Asian philosophy in undergraduate curricula: first, knowledge of Asian philosophies is necessary for anyone who wants to understand the diverse ways in which a majority of the human race continue to understand themselves, others, and their world; second, Asian philosophies can help one cultivate self-understanding; third, Asian philosophies provide resources for developing one’s own philosophical orientations; finally, a study of Asian philosophy enhances our ability to engage and develop alternative ways of constructing our worldviews. Koller then proceeds to introduce the basics of Indian and Chinese thought before offering one of the pinnacles of the volume: a list of ten questions to help educators select text for use in the classroom.

In the second essay in this section, “The Confucian Worldview: Uncommon Assumptions, Common Misconceptions,” Roger Ames begins with a thought experiment, inviting his readers to imagine what the world would be like had the Chinese Empire engaged in the same extensive imperialist activities of the Western powers over the past three millennia. He concludes that this scenario would have resulted in a world guided by the ancient insights of Confucian thought instead of the Judeo-Christian epistemes that currently shape much of our global discourse and politics. In particular, Ames observes that over and against the dominant Western view of the person as singular and distinct from his or her environment, Confucian thought emphasizes the understanding of the individual as a “process” dynamically interwoven within a network of relations that define the individual as an inseparable part of a living, ever-changing, interconnected cosmos. His thoughtful essay teases out how this alternative conception of the “self” can be taught in the classroom.
“Texts” and “Contexts” discuss the two basic approaches by which teachers can introduce Asian philosophies and religions. “Texts” takes up three primary regions: India, China, and Japan. Essays on India include Vrinda Dalmiya’s discussion of Bhagavad Gītā, Jeffrey Dippmann’s discussion of the Buddhist text Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra, and Tom Pynn’s discussion of the essential texts, ontologies, and transformative disciplines of Sāmkhy and Yoga philosophy. All three authors are careful to tease out the intriguing parallels and distinctions between the ideas expressed in their respective texts and those of similar texts and traditions from the West, Dalmiya focusing on ethical decision making, Dippmann on the “human condition,” and Pynn on the relationship of worldview to spiritual discipline and self-understanding. In the China section, Ronnie Littlejohn argues that the Daodejing is “too twisted” by historically contingent meaning and the attempt to validate standard philosophical preconceptions, and that we must learn to grasp it on its own self-referential terms. Littlejohn offers a brief sample of what such an authentic measurement might look like. Robin R. Wang next provides an analysis of the Daodejing in relation to Zhuangzi and Sunzi (The Art of War), arguing that these three texts are a valuable study in their own right, but also a means of shedding light on Asian thought and culture more broadly. In the final essay of the section, Xinyan Jiang focuses on Mencius, with particular attention to his interpretation of human nature as innately good. Jiang, perhaps boldly, suggests that this reading may help students cultivate their own innate goodness, a view perhaps shared by many who teach the central ethical texts of Asian philosophy.

Paralleling the historical spread of Buddhism, the book shifts from China to Japan, beginning with an essay by Brian Schroeder on Zen textual sources. Schroeder argues that a careful study of Dōgen, the twelfth-century pioneer of Japanese Buddhist thought and practice, conveys the unique “way” that is Zen. In the next essay, Gereon Kopf proposes that the works of Nishida Kitaro, the founder of the Kyoto School of Buddhism, make a particularly excellent undergraduate introduction to Japanese thought and culture. “Texts” concludes with Jason M. Wirth’s rich comparison of the Kyoto School and German idealism. He argues effectively that these great philosophical traditions similarly espoused a “great doubt” that leads to a “great death” and ultimately to a revitalized sense of self grounded in a deeper state of ontological integrity and self-awareness.

“Contexts” provides valuable insight into the multiple contexts – historical, artistic, philosophical, and religious – that birthed and shaped Asia’s primary systems of thought and culture. Like “Texts,” “Contexts” is divided into three parts: “Frameworks,” “Art,” and “Philosophy.” In the first “Frameworks” essay, historian John A. Tucker argues, rightly in my opinion, that teachers need to present their students with “global perspec-
tives” that enable them to see specific ideologies in relation to the “world systems” from which all major ideologies arise. Francis Brassard continues this argument in the next essay, challenging potential teachers of Asian thought to “ask the right questions” regarding the historical and cross-cultural contexts in which Buddhist texts have evolved over the centuries. According to Brassard, the right questions are those that lead to a deeper appreciation of religious texts as practical manuals for fruitful life. Shige-nori Nagatomo next provides an intriguing examination of the Diamond Sūtra. Nagatomo demonstrates that this Buddhist text is grounded in a non-typical (from a Western standpoint) logic of self-denial that characterizes the Buddhist ontology of non-self (anātman). When taught in Western classrooms, Nagatomo shares, this self-negating logic provides intriguing alternative ways of thinking about “self” in relationship to both “others” and the natural world. In the next subsection, “Art,” Hariette D. Grissom presents and examines the religious art at Ellora in India as an effective way of penetrating the religious archetypes of Hinduism and Buddhism. Stephen J. Goldberg then examines Chinese visual art as a medium that has been utilized to both express and challenge normative cultural values.

The final subsection is unimaginatively — but efficiently — titled “Religion and Philosophy.” Mary I. Bockover begins this section with an essay on “Teaching Chinese Philosophy from the Outside In,” in which she articulates the standard benefits of approaching ancient texts — in her case, the Daodejing — from an informed outsider’s position. Such a position, she insists, sheds light on foreign texts and illumines them in ways that might otherwise go unnoticed by an initiate, such as their historical origins or unspoken political undercurrents. She concludes that by helping students to see the diverse streams that shape the narrative currents of great philosophical texts, the teacher enables them to rethink their own religious and philosophical assumptions, and, ultimately, engage contemporary political issues in a way that reflects a growing global perspective. James Peterman concludes the book with a comparative essay in which he reflects on the merits of teaching Plato’s Euthyphro and Confucius’ Analects as comparable gateways to the core themes of their respective traditions. According to Peterman, this tandem textual approach illuminates how “being comparative” makes one more “cosmopolitan.”

The editors of this fine volume claim that while “written with the non-specialist in mind,” the volume’s “creative edge” should interest specialists as well. As one such specialist, I can say that the volume is more than interesting. It provides insights and pedagogical strategies — not to mention specific essays — that I plan to incorporate in my future Asian studies courses.

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At the peak of the recession in 2008 and 2009, the Malaysian government deported many Bangladeshi migrants to reduce the burden on the recession-hit economy. The migrants were shipped to Bangladesh in small boats ill-equipped to cross the churning Bay of Bengal. The expulsion recalled fifteenth-century Europe, when the mad and unemployed were loaded onto the proverbial “ship of fools” and similarly expelled (Foucault 2001, 19). For Bangladeshi laborers who migrate to Southeast and East Asian countries such as Malaysia and Hong Kong, the globalized world is not flat, but dangerously spiky. The journey from the villages of Bangladesh to these industrial hubs begins with the expectation of a better future, but the migrants, mostly male villagers, soon encounter so many hurdles and so much hardship that one wonders why they decided to migrate in the first place. Reading *Rationalizing Migration Decisions: Labor Migrants in East and South-East Asia* is a good way to begin the quest for an answer.

Travails of transnational labor migration get short shrift in the micro-credit and NGO-centered discussions of globalization and development in East and Southeast Asia. As an economist, Ahsan Ullah breaks new ground by trying to comprehend the decision-making and rationalizing processes that precede and follow migration episodes, utilizing various economic and social science paradigms. Notwithstanding his small sample of respondents, he amassed a formidable amount of qualitative data that helps us empathize with the plight of migrants.

This approach goes beyond the hackneyed push-pull narratives that seek to explain migration in terms of push from sites of origin and pull at destination-sites. Studies that use push-pull logic usually emphasize high population and poverty as determining push factors. While he concedes that Bangladesh’s dense population and poverty are solid indicators of the migratory impulse, Ullah contends that such factors cannot explain the entire picture. Poverty may create pressure, but it does not, in itself, catalyze migration. He argues that migration must be understood in a broader context that looks not only at wage rates and capital formation but at the agency of the individuals who migrate, an action-oriented approach that is lacking in most of the literature on migration in Bangladesh. Ullah’s book, then, does not analyze the factors that influence migrants; rather, it investigates how migrants rationalize decisions they have already made. Wearing almost an anthropologist’s hat, Ullah focuses on how migrants communicate their migration experiences to others, potentially inducing them, in turn, to migrate. He comments that it is particularly challenging to meas-
ure rationalization because it is associated with subjective understanding of situations (18).

Necessarily, then, the author’s study is based on qualitative data, supplemented by relevant quantitative data. The primary source of qualitative data is interviews with migrant workers conducted through open-ended and closed-ended questionnaires over a period of one and half years. Apart from descriptive statistics to represent the data, the author also uses inferential statistics to model causes and effects of migration. Among the variables predicting migration, the author includes many unquantifiable and subjective variables, such as “desire to settle abroad,” “stubborn desire to work overseas,” and “reluctance to work in the paddy fields” (55). The author draws on the theoretical work of sociologists, philosophers, and rational choice theorists such as Max Weber, Jurgen Habermas and Jon Elster to argue that migration is a rational decision that expresses certain beliefs and desires. Following the sociologists, he calls this process rationalization, defined as the justification of a decision that has been arrived at through less strict mental processes, such as opinion, desire, and belief.

The author, however, does not ask certain deeper questions about migrant decision-making because they would take him beyond the purview of his disciplinary loyalty to economics and rational choice theory. The psychological origins of these opinions, desires, and beliefs – how and why are they form – may not be amenable to quantitative and schematic analysis, though such matters may be at the root of the migration mystery. Moreover, the author assumes a strict separation between the mental and the practical when it comes to understanding the decision-making of migrants. In reality, the mental and the practical may not be as separable as they seem; they may in fact be utterly entwined. Capturing the tension between the two might require long village stays and more probing observation. While he did not intend to conduct a rigorous ethnographic study, Ullah might have answered his own questions more effectively by taking something like this approach.

Nonetheless, *Rationalizing Migration Decisions* is an important contribution to the scholarship on migration, development studies, and policy studies. Anthropologists and cultural sociologists will also find much that is worthwhile in this book.

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**Reference**


With Americans on the constant lookout for the newest threat posed by an increasingly militant Muslim world, *The Next Front: Southeast Asia and the Road to Global Peace with Islam*, is particularly relevant. Retired Senator Christopher Bond (R–Missourri) and journalist Lewis Simons have identified a trend of growing religious-inspired violence moving from the Middle East, through Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, and onward to Southeast Asia. While it is home to the largest population of Muslims in the world, Southeast Asia has received comparatively little attention in discussions about Islamic fundamentalism and terrorist activity.

Bond and Simons are concerned that this inattention to the changing political and religious situation in much of Southeast Asia, combined with the continued implementation of flawed and self-interested policies by the United States, will lead to a new “front” in the global conflict with Muslim extremism. The authors claim that American policymaking with respect to Southeast Asia is flawed by an imperious and arrogant attitude and ill-informed generalizations about Muslim extremism. Allowing foreign policy decisions to be informed by these biases is dangerous and has prompted the authors to call for immediate reform to encourage a better relationship with Muslim Southeast Asia and perhaps the wider Islamic world.

*The Next Front* is a compelling and important book that is geared toward an audience with an interest in U.S. foreign relations, but without a vast knowledge of the issues. It aims to uncover the causes behind recent shifts toward extremism in Southeast Asia and their importance in the larger global struggle with Islamic fundamentalism. The book contains in-depth profiles of the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore and brings their political and religious situations to life through case studies and interviews with a variety of individuals including self-professed Jihadis, victims of religious violence, American expatriates, and heads of state such as Filipino President Gloria Arroyo. While the scope and diversity of this source material is a strong aspect of the work, the fragmented interviews do not fully capture the more prevalent and more moderate attitudes among Muslims in Southeast Asia.

The reputations of the authors in the field of International Studies no doubt gave them access to these privileged interviews—Missouri Republican senator Christopher Bond and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Lewis Simons make a formidable pair. While their political affiliations are not emphasized in the text, it is clear that they have very specific perspectives. Senator Bond, for instance, advocates a peaceful and diplomatic strategy in Southeast Asia but has taken a strong pro-war stance on recent
American engagements, including the Iraq war. Somewhat problematically, the title of the book evokes the powerful, militaristic image of a war front, even while the content calls for diplomacy over violence.

In their efforts to identify shifts toward religious extremism and its causes in Southeast Asia, Bond and Simons look into local factors that sway Muslims toward increased fundamentalism. Ansyad Mbaï, Indonesia’s head of counterterrorism operations, states that the combination of corruption, globalization, history, and poverty creates an environment that fosters terrorism. These destructive factors limit opportunities and yield a disenchanted population susceptible to the lure of terrorist groups and fundamentalist ideologies. According to liberal Indonesian headmaster Hussein Mohammed, lack of education is one of the primary causes of violent Islamist movements. The notion that poverty and undereducation contribute to Islamic extremism is a popular concept in the field of International Studies and has inspired development and literacy projects in an attempt to combat the problem. Bond and Simons suggest the implementation of U.S. foreign policy that is guided by the “soft power” of “diplomatic, economic, educational and personal outreach” (263) instead of a militaristic approach.

While some militant groups can be mollified by ameliorating local problems like illiteracy, many violent Islamic extremist movements in Southeast Asia are harder to combat because they are fueled by an imported radicalism. The book tells the story of the Filipino leader of the Abu Sayyaf terrorist group, who studied fundamentalist Islam in Libya, Syria, and Saudi Arabia. He was further inspired by the fight of the mujahideen in the 1980s and was educated in a religious academy among radical jihadists including Osama bin Ladin on the Afghanistan/Pakistan border. The influence of the global network of religious extremism that radiates outward from the Middle East is one of the most compelling themes in The Next Front. Bond and Simons assert that the cultural gap that once separated Southeast Asian Muslims and Arab Muslims seems to be gradually closing as Arab practices are adopted and are increasingly viewed as a more pure and legitimate interpretation of Islam. In Indonesia and Malaysia, for example, Sharia law now has legal precedence over secular law in certain communities. It is becoming apparent that “although the Muslims of Southeast Asia begin from a very different theological place than the Arabs, they increasingly are heading towards a religious junction with them” (8).

This sense of transnational Muslim solidarity has important political implications because it transforms small, contained conflicts into global issues. Events that are perceived as threats against the Islamic umma, or nation, provoke strong reactions worldwide. Bond and Simons point to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the invasion of Iraq as particularly incendiary issues that have inspired resentment and frustration in Muslims the
world over. One Indonesian Jihadi, Farihan Ibnu, states in an interview that “President Bush declared a crusade against Islam. This means that the United States considers all Muslims to be terrorists and intends to kill us all” (102). This statement shows the extent to which some Southeast Asian Muslims have internalized the anti-Western, Jihadist ideology of Middle Eastern radical groups. According to the authors, Muslims around the world are becoming more unified under an Arab ideology and consider themselves loyal to the umma rather than to specific states.

The overwhelming message of The Next Front is that the United States’ relationship with Southeast Asia’s Muslim population is informed by archaic biases, outdated foreign policy, and ignorant misunderstandings. Bond and Simons are critical of the United States’ decisions in the region:

The United States remains locked into a foreign policy essentially unchanged from the Cold War era. God-obsessed Islamists have replaced godless Communists as our preeminent enemies, but our guiding strategy has stayed the same: overwhelm the enemy with massive armed force, then bow out as a gratefully liberated nation clicks smoothly into Jeffersonian democracy. (257)

Furthermore, the United States is often viewed in Southeast Asia as an arrogant bully that forces its influence on foreign nations the world over. The legacy of the Vietnam war remains fresh in the minds of many Southeast Asians and acts as a constant reminder of the destructive consequences of U.S. interference. The authors strongly advocate a complete reform in American policy toward Southeast Asia because its reputation is so badly damaged and its foreign policies are regarded with suspicion. This is especially important if the United States intends to confront terrorist threats in a region that has the potential to be the next “front” against violent Islamic extremism.

Is the situation really so dire and does the U.S. have the moral authority to assume a leading role in the fight against terrorism in the region? Bond and Simons present the problems in Southeast Asia with a sense of urgency that perhaps overstates the tensions in the region. In their desire to generate concern about growing Islamist threats in Southeast Asia, the authors tend to portray the situation as more pressing than it is. While their call for more attention to the region is justified, they deemphasize the fact that the majority of Southeast Asian Muslims remain religiously moderate and committed to combatting terrorism. Perhaps the authors hope that their forceful argument will lead to the prevention of fundamentalist violence in Southeast Asia that could indeed make it the newest frontline in a global conflict. It can also be argued, however, that too much of our recent foreign and domestic policy has been motivated by exaggerated fear. Assumptions that Southeast Asian militancy is related to a global Jihadi conspiracy are not entirely true, and perpetuate misinformed policy decisions.
Does this book provide useful new insight or does it perpetuate the U.S. government’s tendency to take responsibility for problems that are beyond its control? Lumping together isolated incidents of Muslim militancy creates an artificial “clash of civilizations” scenario in which an alliance of secular, Western states are responsible for confronting a unified Jihadist movement. This is a sensationalized and oversimplified portrayal of the situation of exactly the kind that the authors warn against.

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**Erika Lee & Judy Yung, Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America.**  

Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty are popularly imaged as beacons welcoming seemingly endless droves of European immigrants to the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s. My own German great-grandfather was typical. He left Hamburg as a young man to escape Bismarck’s mandatory military draft and embark on a promising banking career on Wall Street. He entered through Ellis Island, subjected only to a cursory medical exam, and was welcomed into his new country.

Immigrants from Europe were generally well received in New York and all were admitted save those with severe medical problems. These immigrants spent little time on Ellis Island, perhaps a few hours or a few days for those requiring more extensive medical tests. Ellis Island, then, made a positive impression on many immigrants. It was the door by which they entered America and began their quest to experience the American dream.

The Angel Island Immigration Station, located on Angel Island in San Francisco Bay, is less iconic. It processed up to a million people entering or departing the United States between 1910 and 1940. Two-thirds of these immigrants were from East Asia, mainly Chinese and Japanese with a smattering of Koreans, but there were also substantial numbers of South Asians, Filipinos, Mexicans, Russians, European Jews, and other refugees.

Their fascinating history is the subject of Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America by historians Erika Lee and Judy Yung, both descendents of Angel Island immigrants, and published on the occasion of the station’s hundredth anniversary. Lee and Yung’s work is incredibly detailed, carefully researched and scrupulously objective. It includes a kaleidoscope of immigrant portraits and presents a vivid contrast to Ellis Island.

Yung and Lee point out very early in their work that rather than operating as a kind of welcome center for immigrants, a major goal of the Angel Island Immigration Station was to exclude would-be immigrants from Asia,
especially Chinese. The arrival of nearly a half-million Chinese in California and neighboring states set off a wave of racist anti-Chinese hysteria in the American West and led to the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and a more severe immigration law in 1924. These laws set rigid guidelines for Chinese immigrants, admitting only diplomats, ethnic Chinese born in the U.S., wives and children of legal immigrants, merchants, and students on short-term visas.

Immigration officials were required to screen every entrant to determine whether he or she was eligible. Since many immigrants purported to be eligible when in fact they were not, there often ensued a lengthy interview process that sometimes kept the would-be immigrant imprisoned on Angel Island for many months or for over a year in a few extreme cases. Ultimately, over 90 percent of Chinese applicants gained admission because they had the backing of Chinese immigration groups and highly trained immigration lawyers who supported them. Japanese had fewer problems because they had the backing of their highly respected government, but immigrants from British-held lands in South Asia lacked any real support mechanisms and had a rejection rate of about 50 percent.

Lee and Yung carefully document the overtly racist attitude of American immigration policy before World War II. When ships arrived in San Francisco, Caucasian immigrants from Europe, Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere were generally processed and released while Chinese were automatically taken on the ferry to Angel Island along with other Asians. Chinese and other non-Japanese Asians were herded together in special dormitories while non-Asians at the facility stayed in better quarters, were processed faster, and were given better food. The gloom felt by the Chinese is reflected in the many poems they carved into the walls complaining about their lonely imprisonment at the station.

I feel a personal tie to the Immigration Station because my daughter, Katie Métraux, was an integral member of a small team of California State Park curators and conservationists who restored the station for its grand reopening as a museum in 2010. Anybody visiting San Francisco should include Angel Island on their itinerary. Before visiting, reading Lee and Yung’s book is a must. It covers not only the history of the station but also the history of Asian immigration to the United States before World War II. This work is a readable and useful addition to any Asian studies collection.

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In Chicago on September 11, 1893, Sri Ramakrishna’s principle disciple and ambassador to the West, Swami Vivekananda, addressed the first Parliament of World Religions. Witnessing America’s interest in Asia, he proclaimed that “India is in the air.” Michael C. Brannigan begins his preface to the revised edition of *Striking a Balance: A Primer of Traditional Asian Values* by noting a similar phenomenon: “These days, Asian countries find their way into headlines” (ix). More often than not, however, this fascination is with the fleeting shadows of the topical and not with the deep and abiding cultures of the region. Brannigan notes, “We tend to view these sorts of ‘breaking’ developments within a limited context of immediacy, dismissing the bigger picture . . .” (x). Traditional Asian values, however, “occur within a profusely rich texture and legacy of deep-rooted values and beliefs, values and beliefs that have carved an ineradicable path upon which Asia’s destiny unfolds” (x). To the extent that we focus exclusively on economic and military issues, our perception and understanding of Asia becomes dangerously restricted and shallow (x).

*Striking a Balance* is a welcome attempt to establish a deeper context, in which (to a borrow a notion from Michael Walzer) thin concepts thicken into accounts and experiences of intentions, values, and actions the closer we get to the lived experience of human beings within their cultural situations. Despite the current attention to globalization, there are few texts about Asian values written for Westerners. When I teach world philosophy, I seek texts that look beyond the Western tradition. I am shocked by my limited choices. Brannigan has written three of these texts.

**Some Comments Regarding the “Introduction”**

We have indeed come far from Hegel’s assertion that Oriental philosophy is not really philosophy at all, but “a distant approximation of conceptual understanding . . . not yet philosophy” and Husserl’s comment that China and India “are empirical or anthropological specimens” (1997, 300–1). Many contemporary philosophers have repudiated this kind of ethnocentrism. Still, there is a divide between the Enlightenment model of thinking, valuing, and relating and the various traditions of Asian thought. In this regard three comments in Brannigan’s introduction stand out.

First, Brannigan claims that “Westerners need to make an earnest effort to understand Asian worldviews” (xiii). We need, in effect, to be able “to see reality from various Asian perspectives” (xiv). What can this mean? Of course, Westerners and Asians tend to think, value, feel, and act in very
different ways. This is uncontroversial. Yet how can we understand this difference? Worldviews, or cultural orientations, as Thomas P. Kasulis (2002) points out in *Intimacy or Integrity: Philosophy and Cultural Difference*, are not mutually exclusive. There are multiple ways of relating to others, the world, and ourselves; the question is which way of relating is dominant, in the foreground of consciousness, and which tends to be marginalized. As Westerners, Kasulis explains, we tend to see others, the world, and ourselves in terms of integrity: as free, autonomous, self-interested individuals in a competitive society. Asians tend to see others, the world, and themselves in terms of intimacy: responsive, interrelated, and other-interested members of a trust-oriented community. The important point is that both orientations are available to Westerners and Asians. This is to say, Westerners tend to foreground integrity and background intimacy, while Asians tend to foreground intimacy and background integrity. In our daily lives as Americans, integrity dominates, but we sometimes find ourselves in an intimate mode, as when we lose a loved one. Kasulis concludes that we can and ought to be bi-orientational.

This leads to another of Brannigan’s important claims, that “we have much to learn from Asian values” (xiv). What exactly must we learn? The author cites “Asia’s emphasis upon family, social interdependence and the priority of communal well-being over individual self-interests” (xiv). It seems to me, however, that we are very familiar with these emphases, and that they often arise in our public discourse (which is not to say that we have a consensus on their relative merits and value). Philosophically, however, I think what we can learn from Asia runs deeper still. Maurice Merleau-Ponty was not one blithely to accept his mentor’s views. Writing in 1964, he corrects the ethnocentric element in Husserl’s thinking:

> Indian and Chinese philosophies have tried not so much to dominate existence as to be the echo or the sounding board of our relationship to being. Western philosophy can learn from them to rediscover the relationship to being and the initial option which gave it birth, and to estimate the possibilities that we have shut ourselves off from in becoming “westerners” and perhaps reopen them. (1964, 139)

If Kasulis is right that cultural orientations involve different ways of valuing, intending, and acting – and I think he is – then Merleau-Ponty’s comment may illuminate what has been pushed to the background of Western cultural consciousness. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty suggests a deepening rift between transcendence and immanence that remains profoundly problematic for Western philosophers and for all of us, in every area of our lives. He notes the Enlightenment evasion of the self, the reduction of transcendence to a gross and inert materiality malleable to instrumental reason, and a denial of interdependence that is much more encompassing than the so-
cial interdependence Brannigan identifies. To complicate matters, the Enlightenment’s ideology of mechanistic dualism and instrumental reason threatens the very life of the planet.

A third point arises from Brannigan’s provocative question: “[I]s there such a thing as Asian ethics?” This question calls attention to the all-too-often unexamined belief, as articulated by Hegel and others, that European and American intellectual discourse is superior to all other forms of discourse. Brannigan observes that a common complaint about Asian traditions of thought, often condescendingly demoted to the status of “wisdom traditions,” is that Asian traditions lack intellectual rigor. This prejudice is not only informed by white supremacist ideology but also displays unabashed ignorance of the Asian traditions. No doubt there is difference between Western and non-Western ways of relating, valuing, and acting. We observe that Western traditions tend to privilege clarity, comprehensiveness, and consistency while non-Western traditions tend to favor suggestiveness, ambiguity, and holism. I would also add that intellectual playfulness is downplayed in the dominant Western tradition, while it is highly valued in some Asian traditions. Perhaps Brannigan’s question cedes too much to those operating under the dominant Western tradition. I propose that those of us who are intrigued by non-Western traditions and understand what they have to offer dispense with apologies (I am not suggesting that Brannigan is engaging in an apologetics of Asian traditions) and mount a sustained critique of the Enlightenment worldview. One might also want to familiarize oneself with the Western writers and thinkers who have found inspiration, edification, and intellectual challenge within Asian traditions.

**Traditional Values & the Challenge of Neo-Liberal Globalization**

In 1958 John Blofeld observed that

> Zen has begun to appeal to these people in the West who are torn between the modern tradition of skepticism and the need for a profound doctrine which will give meaning to their existence . . . [Zen teachings and practice] satisfy certain deep spiritual needs. (1958, 13)

His observation alerts us to the complex phenomenon of cross-cultural engagement and its two-fold movement of accommodation and advocacy. Recall, for instance, the extensive and oftentimes contentious debate in Meiji-era Japan as to how much of the encroaching American culture Japanese should accept and on what terms. Part of this complexity is that in both Western and non-Western cultures there are lingering biases that frustrate constructive encounters. Such biases include xenophobia, ethnocentrism, racism, anthropocentrism, nihilism, and militarism. Compounding the al-
ready difficult task at hand is the tendency to confuse the existential (what we do) with the essential (who we are). Furthermore, when offered the opportunity to engage another culture, we tend to operate from a hermeneutics of suspicion rather than trust.

The process of cross-cultural engagement also needs criticism. Are we engaging the “Other” by identifying either divergences or convergences or are we undertaking the arduous task of educating ourselves as to how cultures both diverge and converge? If we only acknowledge divergences between cultures, we run the risk of a profound alienation and incomensurability that may lead to violence and war. If we acknowledge only the convergences among cultural orientations, we run the equally devastating risks of selectivity, blind universalism, and the humiliation of silence imposed upon the Other. We must also be ready to face the likely outcome of our process of education. As the philosopher Slavoj Zizek (2002) has argued, it may be that what we have in common is internal instability, i.e., that a living tradition is a tradition always already in tension with itself.

Striking a Balance helps us pose one of the most important questions today for both East and West: How viable are our respective traditions in the face of a globalized modernity that expands to include more and more of our daily activities? Nowhere does this seem more apropos and delicate than in the relationship between China and the United States. At the end of his chapter on the Confucian traditions, Brannigan indicates the challenges posed to the dominant ethical, social, and political ideology of Confucianism, and shows how proponents of traditional Confucianism are under tremendous pressure to re-read their own tradition. In their mutual contact, the West and China are challenged to take a serious look at their own commitments to the underlying assumptions of capitalism and human rights, as well as racial, environmental, and feminist concerns. Encountering the Other within a particular cultural horizon or life-world allows for conflict resolution by understanding the other culture’s resources to deal with conflict. The peace that might be achieved under such auspices would have a very real probability of being a lasting peace rather than a temporary lapse in direct violence and war that sustains the conditions for future violence and war.

Brannigan’s work in cross-cultural philosophy and religion, beginning with his book Everywhere and Nowhere: The Path of Alan Watts (1988), has been sustained for over twenty years. He has continually demonstrated a facility and depth of understanding that is crucial to a deep reading and understanding of non-Western traditions. The particular strengths of Striking a Balance are myriad, making it a valuable text in any cross-cultural philosophy or religion course. Its language is accessible, its inclusion of passages from primary texts is influenced by a thoroughgoing knowledge of the
relevant traditions, and the inclusion of review questions and bibliography will assist both teacher and student.

Having said this, *Striking a Balance* has a few shortcomings as a classroom text: (1) Brannigan chooses excerpts that are much shorter than in his *Ethics across Cultures* (2004), and (2) his brief excerpts from Western philosophical classics lack discussion of general cultural context and cross-cultural significance. What is a teacher with little experience in cross-cultural philosophy to do with such passages?

Brannigan writes that Hinduism, Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism “exhort us to strike a balance between who we are and what we do, between self and other, between individual and community. Cultivating this balance constitutes the fundamental cornerstone for moral activity and a just society” (xv). Brannigan’s argument for “striking a balance” is compelling and provocative but the principle itself may not be as universally applicable or appropriate. It is debatable that the Vedic tradition can be raised to the level of the East Asian traditions in the above regard. The rapprochement between the monastic and householder paths in Northern Vedic culture seems consistent with Brannigan’s notion, but certainly the impetus at the root of Vedic culture, including the heterodox positions of Jainism and early Buddhism, is much more individualistic and world effacing. Furthermore – and perhaps this is simply a quibble – Brannigan’s criteria do not constitute a just society but the conditions for the possibility of a minimally just society. Engagement in day-to-day life and the ways in which each tradition addresses injustice is always an on-going struggle, especially as globalization intensifies.

My biggest concern is the omission of the Korean traditions and of the *Son* tradition in particular. This is not simply a comment about Brannigan’s book, but also a criticism of the cross-cultural tradition as it continues to develop in the West. Westerners have not given adequate attention to Korea. Wonhyo (617–86) and Chinul (1158–1210), for example, are the most important figures in the transition from Chinese to Korean Buddhism, as they resolve key disputes within Chinese Buddhism. It has even been suggested that the appearance in Japan of Ch’an may owe more to Japan’s encounter with Korea than with China, at least during the early medieval period. To his credit, Brannigan at least acknowledges Korea’s importance in the transmission of the Confucian traditions to Japan.

I do think that Brannigan misses a golden opportunity to address the identity and limit of tradition. Specifically, he misses the chance to explore how Western and non-Western traditions differently understand the nature and identity of a tradition. In the West we are prone to treat traditions as static even when we admit the value of dialogue with other traditions and within these traditions. The East, however, has tended to treat traditions as
dynamic, renewable, and on-going. Such a difference gives rise to very different forms of hermeneutics and processes of valuation.

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**References**


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*Journeys East: Isabella Stewart Gardner and Asia* recalls the spirit of Gardner’s great museum-palazzo. It is a jumbled and brimming array, full of appealing crannies, rounded into arguable cohesion only by Gardner’s formidable personality and distinctive taste, well worth perambulating in a mood of naïve wonder. This handsome coffee-table volume is both a catalogue of a 2009 exhibition that highlighted the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum’s Asian collection and a voluminous – surely definitive – study of Gardner’s evolution as a devotee of Asian culture.

For starters, *Journeys East* corrects the impression that Gardner (1840–1924) was a strict Europhile. This misunderstanding largely owes to the demise of her “Chinese Room,” which she installed in the basement of her Boston museum in 1902. Wanting more space and weary of caring for objects it considered not quite first rate, the museum de-accessioned most of the room’s contents in 1971 (46). As photographs tell the story, the room provided a small but densely packed dose of the Chinoiserie and *Japonisme* that flourished in *fin-de-siècle* Boston, energetically promoted by the likes of physician-collector William Sturgis Bigelow (1850–1926), scholar-curator Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908), artist John La Farge (1835–1910), Harvard
art professor Denman Ross (1853–1935), and self-appointed cultural ambassador Okakura Kakuzō (1862–1913), author of the famed *Book of Tea* (1906) and mentor to Gardner in all things Japanese. Trying to exculpate its own folly, the museum is now restoring the architecture of the Chinese room and may eventually reestablish some version of the original display.

Though she could be a dogged stalker of objects, Gardner did not especially exploit the Silk Road connecting Beacon Hill and points East. What is left of her collection of Japanese screens, stone Buddhas, lacquered boxes, and snuff bottles pales in comparison to her European painting collection, with its firework display of Bellini, Botticelli, Raphael, Titian, and Rembrandt. *Journeys East* catalogues dozens of objects that remain in the museum’s collection, but it reasonably enough declines to dwell on them. Its real gist is Gardner’s engagement with Asia as collector, impresario, traveler, and student. In all of these guises, she embodied the earnest and problematic dilettantism by which the West began to court what it considered the wisdom and beauty of the East during the late nineteenth century; in these guises as well, she helped in her small way to stimulate the Orientalizing modernism whose chief avatars were Whistler, Yeats, and Pound (famously the legatee of Fenollosa’s papers). Gardner’s “Chinese room” was a minor curiosity compared to the resplendent travesty of Whistler’s Peacock Room, which now graces the Freer Gallery, but it reflected the same moment and impulse.

Leaving no atom unturned in its conscientious micro-scholarship, *Journeys East* provides the last word on Gardner’s Asianism. Alan Chong’s introductory essay “Journeys East” anchors the volume, providing an overview Gardner’s ambitious Asian jaunt of 1883–84; the laying of the Japanese garden at her home in Brookline, which anticipated the cultural theatrics of her museum; the founding of her museum at Fenway Court; her crucial friendship with Okakura Kakuzō, who functioned as tutor in Japanese art much as Bernard Berenson (1865–1959) functioned as tutor in Italian art; and the installation of the “Chinese Room.” Succeeding essays flesh out the details of Gardner’s tireless campaign of a life, sometimes with more than a little overlap. These essays are by turns academic and curatorial, at once bland and informative, prone to slight political genuflexions (“Yet it would be misleading to identify an individual tourist like Mrs. Gardner with the whole of Western imperialism” — merely “misleading”?), and given to scholarly boilerplate (“The alterity—the otherness—of Oriental art and women in the masculine world of Western art collecting was a fact Gardner simultaneously embraced and challenged . . .”).

The pinnacle of Gardner’s Asian activities was her pan-Asian tour of 1883 and 1884. This jaunt was not quite the stuff of Indiana Jones, but nor was it a matter of sipping tea and nibbling *canapés* on shaded verandas. In the company of her husband Jack, a staunch Sancho Panza, Gardner visited
Japan, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Java, Singapore, Malaya, Burma, and India. Cities like Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Shanghai were modernized and Westernized enough, but much of the Gardner’s journey led through rough, hot, poor, and politically unsettled terrain. Cambodia, which had burst upon the Western imagination with the first published accounts of Angkor Wat in the 1860s, was a particularly exotic and remote destination. Buried deep in the jungle, it was approachable only by elephant and “bullock cart” amid potentially colossal rains. Gardner and her husband may have been an “archetypal high-bourgeois tourist couple, people of wealth and culture unwittingly advancing Western imperialism” (423), in Greg M. Thomas’ somewhat stern judgment, but give them credit for intrepidity. A broken leg or viral fever in the middle of the Cambodian jungle would have been no small thing, and the Gardners, whose lives were charmed in everything save the death of their son, had much to lose. Gardner herself was nearly ideal as a traveler: tireless, fearless, curious, uncomplaining, and respectful. In his essay “Dust and Filth and Every Kind of Picturesque and Interesting Thing: Gardner’s Aesthetic Response to China,” Thomas gives the idea:

[She] appears constantly interested in observing odd and exotic characters not as justifications of Western moral superiority – a standard trope of travel writing – but as examples of cultural and ethnic difference, which she embraces as a primary source of touristic pleasure and meaning. Without any taint of condescension, she enjoys “naked children,” singing boat crews, processions of brides and funerals, Buddhist monks in “such strange yellow hats” and Daoist priests with coiled hair, bare-chested men throwing quoits, a boatwoman with a baby on her back, and children with silver hoops around their necks. (427)

Gardner reminds us that the nineteenth century’s reputation for fainting and finger-wagging was largely a self-justifying invention of the modernists and later a lazy cliché of Hollywood; the era’s true essence was adventurous, expansive, and eager, as its empires and inventions should suggest. 

Journeys East’s three-hundred-page core – its beating heart – reprints Gardner’s running commentary, both diaristic and epistolary, on her long Asian journey. As a writer, Gardner was sufficiently concrete, observant, and lively, but she was no Edith Wharton or Isak Dinesen: her matronly guise did not conceal a furtive belles-lettrism. Gardner is likeably unpretentious in this regard, but at the same time three-hundred pages of what amounts to a lightly ornamented travel itinerary runs a little dry. Additionally memorializing her tour, Gardner filled six scrapbooks with photos she purchased from the Western-run studios along the route of her journey that catered to tourists in an age when cameras were cumbersome and difficult to use. Journeys East reproduces hundreds of these gorgeous, sepia-toned mementos, making the volume a significant trove of vintage travel photography. As a body, the photos powerfully evoke the alien beauty and squalor of pre-modern Asia, reminding us that an Asian journey of a hundred or
more years ago was a veritable trip to the moon and that the contemporary Western traveler can never equivalently leave home.

The volume's principal flaws are organizational. The essays are not grouped with much apparent logic; the origins and locations of the catalogued objects remain hazy; and the scope and nature of the accompanying museum exhibition are not clearly detailed. Did the exhibition re-aggregate the items that the museum de-accessioned in 1971 and reconstitute the “Chinese room” on its original pattern? Or did it merely highlight remaining items in the collection and document Gardner’s Asian influences and interests? The reader must infer as best he can. These flaws, however, are consistent with Gardner’s own spirit, which was charmingly ad hoc.

Students of museum culture, nineteenth-century travel writing, and proto-modernist Orientalism will discover much to interest them in these pages. The real fascination, however, is Gardner herself. Journeys East commemorates her ardor and a certain nineteenth-century sinew long since gone soft.

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Note

†For the classic account of Boston’s nineteenth-century Asian percolation, see Van Wyck Brooks’ 1962 volume, Ernest Fenollosa and His Circle.


Guohua 國畫 or Chinese ink brush painting is inseparable from the literati discipline of penmanship, that is, from the spontaneous expression of an inner mounting energy and from all the Daoist metaphysics and Confucian ethics that make sense of this exercise in poised frenzy. In the floating world of global information networks and disembodied digital text, mastery of the brush may seem as pertinent as mastery of the spindle or catapult. The calligraphic tradition’s grimly parodic terminus is what’s called “character amnesia.” In August 2008, the French wire service AFP published an article on the phenomenon titled “Wired Youth Forget How to Write in China and Japan.” It begins with this depressing silhouette:

Like every Chinese child, Li Hanwei spent her schooldays memorising thousands of the intricate characters that make up the Chinese writing system.
Yet aged just 21 and now a university student in Hong Kong, Li already finds that when she picks up a pen to write, the characters for words as simple as “embarrassed” have slipped from her mind.

“I can remember the shape, but I can’t remember the strokes that you need to write it,” she says. “It’s a bit of a problem.”

It’s no easy thing to engage in the “spontaneous expression of an inner mounting energy” when one can’t remember which stroke goes where.

In a world in which the ink brush has become an unfamiliar – practically an extraterrestrial – implement, what conceivable future exists for ink painting? Millennia of culture, it turns out, have a stubborn inertia. As *Chinese Ink Painting Now* documents, the *guohua* tradition staggers forward, not exactly in good shape, but still eliciting interest and husbanding enough life to sputter toward self-reinvention.

*Chinese Ink Painting Now* presents a cross-section of trends and styles, reproducing representative pieces by each of thirty Chinese and Taiwanese artists born between 1932 and 1976. The volume is text-light and image-heavy, but what text there is – Jason C. Kuo’s introductory essay and brief biographical paragraphs about each of the artists – is useful. A professor at the University of Maryland, Kuo describes the tensions between the traditional and the modern, the political and the aesthetic, the national and the global, that made the twentieth century such a treacherous navigation for ink painters (as for all Chinese artists and indeed for all Chinese). Though knowledgeable and pertinent, Kuo’s account gums its subject, shifting it from cheek to cheek; what’s lacking is the incisor of an organizing thesis or insight, a sharp sense of some kind. Also irking is the phrase “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.” The full honorific seems a little rich in a book devoted to a tradition that the revolution did its best to annihilate.

The book’s sections – “Departures,” “Abstraction,” “Ink as Medium,” “New Expressionism,” “Revival of the Blue-and-Green Tradition,” and “Social Commentary” – represent an attempt to taxonomize recent ink painting, but they suffer from blurry definition and confusing overlap. “Departures” seems to trace the evolution from a strict to a notional traditionalism, but this is nowhere explained. “Abstraction” includes images that are patently representational, while “Departures,” “Ink as Medium,” and “New Expressionism” include images that are patently abstract. As a heading, “Ink as Medium” is baffling: ink is indeed the medium, but so too in every other section. The scheme proposed by Pi Daojian, a contemporary critic whom Kuo paraphrases, is less elaborate but more to the point: “[S]ince the 1990s Chinese ink painting has consisted of three types: the brush-and-ink-applying technique school that purely follows the tradition, the academic school which makes use of western [sic] realistic painting and the modern language of painting, and experimental ink painting, which
appropriates western modern and postmodern artistic experience” (22). This scheme more or less accounts for the paintings reproduced in *Chinese Ink Painting Now*, though the neo-traditionalists are almost never entirely traditional, the realists seem to be in retreat, and the experimentalists seem divided – as Kuo’s categories indicate – between abstraction, impish travesty, and political point-making.

Kuo naturally plumps for the genre. He credits contemporary ink painting with a “highly accomplished pictorial and graphic technique allied to attention to serious conceptual content” and contrasts it with “the often hasty, slapdash, and ostentatious productions of Chinese artists working in styles more obviously derived from contemporary global art” (15). Insulated by the historical consciousness inseparable from its method, ink painting does tend to escape some of the pitfalls of post-modernity: the posturing, the self-promotion, the commodified “subversion.” The question is whether the ink brush tradition “expands and lives in the warm day like corn and melons” (to borrow from Emerson) or merely persists as a function of nostalgia and irony.

The evidence of *Chinese Ink Painting Now* is equivocal. In my partisan opinion, the neo-traditionalists make the strongest showing. The book’s selection of pieces by Liu Kuo-sung 劉國松 (b. 1932), Gao Xingjian 高行健 (b. 1940), Li Xubai 李虛白 (b. 1940), Jia Youfu 賈又福 (b. 1942), Li Huayi 李华弋 (b. 1948), and Wang Jia’nan 王迦南 (b. 1955) do not necessarily arouse acquisitive lust and related fantasies of dot-com wealth, but they do seize one’s attention. Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian, a Parisian since 1987, particularly stands out. Though he won the world’s top literature prize in 2000, somehow superseding the likes of Kundera, Pynchon, Roth, and Updike, Gao arguably paints better than he writes. His art is not always consummate, but it is always serious, always striving to render some dim but genuine apprehension, always faithful to its own shadowy vision. He utilizes washes of black and grey to evoke – just barely – the outline of figures and landscapes. The result feels very French. His most characteristic pieces are nocturnes of fleeting melancholy and brooding suggestion, at once poetic and somehow existential, like scenes from early Godard or Truffaut replayed in one’s darker dreams. Two of the three paintings reproduced here – *A Lonely Man* (2008) and *Sublimation* (2007) – have resonant cross-cultural connotations. The former evokes the Arc de Triomphe in the Parisian rain, while the latter evokes both Caspar David Friedrich’s iconic *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) and Fu Baoshu’s famous depiction of a scholar playing the *guqin* as a chevron of geese breast a desolate expanse of sand and sky (1956).¹

If Gao is liminal, Jia Youfu, a disciple of Li Keran 李可染 (1907–89),² is operatic. The two paintings reproduced here are towering, dusky mountainscapes rendered in lustrous washes of black and gold. Jia’s mountains
billow like plumes of dark smoke, intimating something of modern catastrophe – of burning villages and scorched earth far below – as drovers and their cattle traverse a dwarfish monstrosity of peaks and ledges. These paintings are wonderfully free of postmodern self-qualification, but they are perhaps romantic and ethereal to excess. As Li Keran knew, real poignancy depends on a certain counterpoint, on a certain ground-tether. In contrast, Li Xubai reinterprets the traditional mountain scenery as a stylized geometry. Kuo writes that Li “maintains his connection with the contemporary world by creating a seemingly flat pictorial space and a pixilated effect reminiscent of digital media” (36). To my mind, Li’s topography is less pixilated than gemmed or crystallized, as if attempting to imagine the kind of art – the kind of world – that preceded perspective and anatomy. As it were, Li’s art longs to reverse our modern fall from the spirit of stone. C.C. Wang (1907–2003), who fled China in 1949 and reinvented himself as a cultural arbiter in New York, painted in this manner. Call it Chinese pre-Raphaelitism. Burne-Jones would have understood it entirely.

The section on “Social Commentary” inevitably tests one’s tolerance for the outré and the campy. I could do without Fay Ku’s joy Rides (2008), which depicts a Western sexpot having her way with an alarmed horse. I could equally dispense with Wei Dong’s Old Teahouse (1997), which is remarkable for its sheer ugliness. Pasty, squat figures – the women’s breasts luridly exposed – take tea amid a traditional blue-and-green landscape (qinglü shanshui 青綠山水) in a grotesque version of the “literati idyll” (wenren yaji 文人雅集). The figures’ revolutionary garb suggests an anti-Maoist burlesque. However justified, this critique seems little more than name-calling. Qiu Jie 邱节 (b. 1961) makes a more involved version of the same point. In Mao in the Cotton Field (2007), a feline decked in military garb and angel wings (apparently punning on the homonyms “Mao” 毛 and “cat” 貓) offers a hamburger to a breast-bearing ’50s-vintage pinup girl or underwear model, suggesting that the Maoist program betrayed not only the Chinese heritage but its own communist ideology. Trading on equally cheap irony are Wei Qingji’s icons of Western capitalism (the McDonald’s arch, the Coke bottle, the Hollywood sign) sketched in calligraphic black. Wei’s point is well taken, though fifty years after Andy Warhol, not exactly startling.

Zhang Huan’s 张洹 untitled drawing (2006) of a parakeet perched on a twig poking from a bundle of banded sticks is far more effective as social commentary. With all its rich classical associations, the bird functions as a synecdoche of traditional Chinese art. Its reduced circumstance – the loss of its blossoming plum bough – symbolizes the culture’s loss. Read naturalistically, the bird symbolizes environmental dislocation amid dwindling habitats and resources. What elevates the drawing is the difficult nuance of the homely sticks. Far from scapegoating industrial capitalism and Western-
style consumerism in the approved fashion, the twigs acknowledge basic human need. The bundler is not a corporate oligarch, but a peasant requiring warmth, with the possible implication that modernity's world-raping enterprises represent this same need writ large. This image asks difficult questions. Who to blame? What, if anything, to do? Shall we do without wood for our fires – for that matter, without the electrical plants that now serve in place of our fires?

Amid all this political editorializing, Zhang Chun Hong’s 张春红 (b. 1971) Twin Strands (2008) is notable for its sinuousness and wit. According to Kuo, “Twin Strands, featuring thick and resplendent hair seen from behind, not only represents a pictorial autobiography of [Zhang] and her twin sister but is also a meditation on the universal reality of changes in the human life cycle” (218). I detect no evidence of “pictorial autobiography” or “changes in the human life cycle,” unless Kuo alludes to what may be a few strands of grey. I do discern the sly appropriation and charming feminization of classic landscape tropes. Zhang reimagines the meandering mountain path – or perhaps the precipitous rock-winding river – as a derrière-fanning ponytail, as if to say, “I mythologize the reality of myself, as women must, because no one else is going to.” The association of the mountain river and woman’s hair has, incidentally, an illustrious precedent: in Praeterita (1858), John Ruskin caps one of the greatest flights of English prose by metaphorizing the Rhone as the “the flung tresses of the witch of the Alps.”

The general problem is that ink painting has consciously or unconsciously adopted the premises of modern Anglo-European art — namely the artist’s mandate to innovate and express, to throw off the constraints of tradition, to assert the self-conscious claims of the awakened ego. On these premises, art becomes the antennae of the increasingly individuated consciousness. The ink brush tradition, by contrast, derives its strength from its adherence to inherited form and theme. Its energy is the simultaneously self-repressive and self-transcendent ecstasy of joining the glancing mood to the eternal scene. In a 1937 introduction to an unpublished edition of his work, W.B. Yeats (1865–1939) articulates the mindset governing all traditional art, Western and Asian equally:

If I wrote of personal love or sorrow in free verse, or in any rhythm that left it unchanged, amid all its accident, I would be full of self-contempt because of my egotism and indiscretion, and I foresee the boredom of my reader. I must choose a traditional stanza, even what I alter must seem traditional. I commit my emotion to shepherds, herdsmen, camel-drivers, learned men, Milton’s or Shelley’s Platonist, that tower Palmer drew. Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. (Yeats 1961, 522)

Contemporary ink painting is fraught with contradiction: it wants to carry forward the ink brush tradition while rejecting its basic discipline, its “tra-
ditional stanza.” Kuo implicitly retorts that Chinese art in the twentieth century is largely the story of modernizers in a variety of Western modes (16–19). Yes, but the greatest of these modernizers – Lin Fengmian 林風眠 (1900–91), Zhang Daqian 張大千 (1899–1983) – retained a core spiritual attachment to the guohua essence, its defining poetry and worldview. Most of the artists represented here, by contrast, take up the ink brush in a mood of irony, their true theme the incongruity between traditional forms and contemporary experience. Their art is essentially satirical, not poetic. Wielded in this fashion, the ink brush documents its own futility and demise.

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Notes

1For the painting, see Fu 2008, III, 168. For a full discussion of Fu Baoshi, see Ross 2009, 331–34.
2For a full discussion of Li Keran, see Hsiao and Ross 2010, 137–45.

References


France’s most celebrated Chinese expatriate may be the Nobel laureate Gao Xingjian 高行健 (b. 1940), but its most accomplished is Zao Wou-Ki 趙無極 (b. 1920), who stands with his friend I.M. Pei (b. 1917) at the vanguard of the Chinese artistic diaspora. An instinctive modernist who seems never to have felt entirely at home in his native land, the Beijing-born, Shanghai-raised abstractionist immigrated to France in 1948 and settled in Paris. In the subsequent half-century, he evolved a mental topography that equally
embodies Western intensities of color and Eastern evaporation of form into mystic formlessness. His career has now entered the phase of terminal crowns and garlands. *Zao Wou-Ki: 1935–2008*, a gleaming folio-sized retrospective with a long introductory essay by former French Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, is a radiant canonization, while *Zao Wou-Ki: Works, Writings, Interviews* is a lower wattage version of the same.

Zao was born into a Shanghai banking family. His father, a businessman who painted on the side, encouraged his son’s artistic enthusiasm. In 1935, Zao began six years of intensive training at the Hangzhou School of Fine Arts, which was headed by Lin Fengmian 林風眠 (1900–91), another great syncretist of Eastern and Western tradition. From a young age, Zao developed a passionate and romantic identification with the modern art of the West. As he explains, “My uncle . . . had studied political sciences in Paris and he brought back with him lots of reproductions of paintings on postcards and in art journals: Rembrandt, David, Poussin, Matisse, Renoir, Picasso and even Modigliani. I leafed through all these journals, which fascinated me, and it was there that I found my points of reference” (Frèches 2007, 101). After completing his studies in 1941, Zao joined the faculty of his alma mater. While waiting for a break in the stormy political weather and the chance to escape to France, Zao attempted to formulate a style. Cézanne and Matisse were safe trial influences. Lin Fengmian’s moody landscape art, on the other hand, may have been uncomfortably compelling. Lin’s influence is discernible in certain early paintings (see Frèches 2007, 27–29), but Zao quashed the threat to his artistic autonomy almost immediately.

With his young wife in tow and $30,000 in gold sewn into the lining of his coat, Zao left for Paris in February 1948 (Frèches 2007, 29). He had no intention of ever returning to China, which seems to have made almost no impression on his imagination, or rather made an impression that had to be repressed for reasons best theorized by Harold Bloom. Within a few hours of arriving in France, Zao made a beeline for the Louvre (Frèches 2007, 138) and spent the next ten years acculturating himself: learning French, gathering a circle of formidable protégés (Jean Dubuffet, Alberto Giacometti, Henry Michaux, Jean-Paul Riopelle), absorbing Western art wholesale. During this Parisian apprenticeship, he succumbed to – and then fought free of – the influence of Paul Klee (1879–1940), whose arachnid webbing of line could not accommodate the tumults that were beginning to grip Zao’s mind and eye. In 1954, Zao adopted a wider brush and began to experiment with pseudo-calligraphic, Klee-like scratchings set against moody planes of color (Frèches 2007, 42). Before long, however, Zao’s ideograms began simultaneously to dissolve into abstraction and to assume dimensionality and monumentality. In the most forward-looking works of this period, what is left of Zao’s ideograms seem to crimp his color fields
into mountainous visionary topography or to suture monumental tears in the fabric of reality. In its main current, Zao’s mature work is a perennial reinterpretation of this oracular vision. Its abstraction is only partial; the lineaments of sea and rock in the throes of some metaphysical drama are always discernible.

Zao’s expatriatism raises the question: Is his art French or Chinese? His diffidence about China is extreme. In a provocative passage from his 1983 autobiography *Autoportrait*, he writes:

As I see it, Chinese painting stopped being creative after the sixteenth century. From then on, all painters did was to copy what the great Han and Song traditions had invented. Chinese painting became a series of recipes for production, beauty became confused with technical skill. Hand gestures and brush movements became coded. There was no longer room for imagination and the unexpected.

Even since I was a child I’ve felt that tradition as a coat of armour I had to break free from. The need to leave China and settle in France was the first surgical move taken on my own culture to begin to solve this problem once and for all. (Frèches 2007, 83)

Zao’s penchant for iridescent oil effects suggests his break with China, but otherwise his emigration seems a doomed flight from his own shadow, as both Frèches and Villedon in some manner realize, though they are ready enough credit Zao’s eccentric and reductive critique of Chinese art history. The most basic link to China is that Zao’s paintings, as Villedon observes, “are all landscapes” (26). More to the point, they are distinctly Chinese landscapes in their wild geology, vertiginous poetry, and subjective vision. Properly speaking, they are not landscapes but mindscapes that borrow the tropes of landscape. In this respect, Zao recalls twentieth-century traditionalists like Huang Binhong 黄宾虹 (1865–1955), Zhang Daqian 张大千 (1899–1983), and Lu Yanshao 陆俨少 (1909–93), all of whom were capable of pressing the conventions of landscape to the point of pure abstraction and dissolution. Zhang’s late landscapes are a particular point of reference and possible influence. With his capacity for fine-tipped brush-work going the way of his eyes, Zhang took to spilling and disbursing ink in massive, aleatory tides, creating enormous semi-abstract landscapes that are among the most prized works of modern Chinese art.

In one respect, Zao really did break with Chinese tradition. For all its air of spontaneous geomorphic violence, Zao’s work spurns the improvisatory and calligraphic basis of traditional Chinese art. The Chinese brush moves swiftly and carelessly to create a genuine kinetics and to register the passing mood, but Zao’s art slowly accretes a static grandeur. In a 1994 interview, Zao makes this clear:

You see that painting over there? I’ve been working on it for four years and I still don’t know how to finish it. . . . Yes, everybody has their own way of
working. Everybody has their own character, their own habits. I've nothing against quick painting. For example, Jean-Paul Riopelle, a great friend of mine, paints his canvases in a single session and I think the results are formidable. But my nature is different . . . . (Frèches 2007, 119)

In Western art historical terms, Zao is an abstractionist but not an expressionist. This observation may explain Zao’s popularity in France and lesser popularity in the U.S.1 Isn’t French culture at heart classical? Isn’t Anglo-American culture, with its free-form romantic odes, Whitmanian dithyrambs, jazz solos, and drunken bouts of action painting, at heart something else, something, in fact, closer to the Chinese calligraphic tradition that Zao was so desperate to evade? The early influence of Klee is telling in this regard. For all its childlike charm, Klee’s art depends on calculation and calibration, on certain obscure ratios of space and tensions of color. Klee’s mode is essentially classical, embodying a lineage that runs all the way back to Vitruvius and Pythagoras; the spontaneous surge of qi – energy, feeling, impulse – has no place in it.

In the 1970s, Zao began a gradual reconciliation with Chinese tradition, producing a series of free-form, pseudo-calligraphic images on a massive scale. Rendered in Indian ink on paper – in some cases even mounted on folding screens – these images do not represent specific characters, but they are patently calligraphic: spontaneous flourishes of brush-textured ink. These images specifically recall the feibai 飛白 (flying-white) school of calligraphy, the hallmark of which is the thick, ragged line streaked with white. The streaks give the impression of spontaneity, accident, and informality. Other Western-aligned artists have grasped the connection between Western abstraction and calligraphy – Franz Kline (1910–62) and Brice Marden (b. 1938)2 come to mind – but Zao has the advantage of actual training as a calligrapher and the further advantage, one suspects, of a certain deep emotion bound up with the recuperation of his own tradition. Why this late return? Perhaps Zao could approach what he had left behind only in the confidence of his complete escape. Call this the James Joyce theory.

_Zao Wou-Ki, 1935–2008_ and _Zao Wou-Ki: Works, Writings, Interviews_ are feasts of image, but they leave much to be desired in terms of text. Rumored to be a contender for the French presidency in 2012, Villepin is a surprising exegete of Franco-Chinese art, but not all surprises are pleasant. As prime minister, the “Byronically coiffed Gallic smoothie” (pundit Mark Steyn’s phrase) intensely annoyed certain factions of the Anglosphere, and one begins to understand why. At least in translation, his forty-page introductory essay is a preening peacock’s tail of painfully unidiomatic and largely unreadable pseudo-poetry. Here’s Villepin in full flower:

The sign pursues its adventure, from painting to painting. Zao Wou-Ki has found his essential bullfighting, this fight between soul and body that is the
union of opposites and the origin of movement. He rescues the sign from dilution, from explosion, from fraying. Little by little, emergency gives precedence to experiences. The sign is fragile, but the verdict of its vanishing seems suspended. And there, new surprises await us. The sign is able to re-create the world of appearances. The passage exists. As if matter were organizing itself, starting from the sense, without any rupture comparable to the one that had to be endured to get free from appearances. (35)

Zao’s art is an open invitation to subjective rhapsody, but Villepin is no Walter Pater. My advice is to skip Villepin’s commentary and proceed directly to the images. Frèches is a former director of the newspaper group Midi Libri and the author of numerous Chinese-themed historical novels. He helpfully places Zao’s art in a biographical frame, but he too has his rhapsodic moments:

At first the canvas is empty. That emptiness will have to be filled, filled to the brim, but also, sometimes one will have to preserve and reserve. Exalt emptiness, fill emptiness… Transfer the non-existent through shapes and colours onto a canvas which without a doubt exists… A canvas – an object! –, which the artist challenges, with which he will get entangled in a quarrel, grabbing it by the throat, scratching it, sometimes caressing it and whispering sweet nothings to it… like a woman one wants to seduce…. (14; the ellipses are Frèches’)

The metaphorical slippage from strangulation to seduction is a bit too seamless for my bourgeois taste, but nobody can accuse Villepin or Frèches of slingling dull academic clichés. These critics are aficionados in the etymological sense: men of afición or passion.

The foibles of these commentators hardly matter. The images speak for themselves. At once epic and precise, they geologize the grinding tectonics of reality and seem to glimpse a beauty through or beyond the ruction.

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Notes

1In his introduction to a 2003 catalogue of Zao’s work, Jonathan Hay enumerates several reasons for Zao’s relative obscurity in the U.S.: “the conceptual turn that painting took here in the 1960s, a concomitant suspicion of transcendentalist ambition in painting that could only be confirmed by the discourse around Zao’s work, a more general sidelining of Paris-based artists, and the more limited prevalence in New York of the intense fascination for China from which Zao benefited in France” (5).


Reference


Anyone riding trains in Japan in the last decade has noticed newly ubiquitous posters delineating polite behavior. They admonish riders to keep headphone volume low and to offer seats to elderly people or pregnant women. They designate special areas in each car as “cell phone–free” zones, presumably to assist passengers who might have pacemakers irritated by cellular signals. Around 2005, I witnessed a man so flagrantly ignoring all these implicit and explicit politeness norms that he made me laugh out loud. This young man, dressed in a baggy suit with highly styled hair, was lounging across the seats reserved for the elderly, eating food out of a McDonald’s bag, and talking loudly – not even texting – on a cell phone that was forbidden by the poster immediately above his shoulder. Then a second cell phone began to ring. Finally the man, still on his first call, pulled the ringing second phone out of his pocket and barked into it, “Urusai 煩い!” (“You’re loud and annoying!”). This was, of course, a perfect summary of his own behavior, and after reading the fascinating collection Manners and Mischief: Gender, Power, and Etiquette in Japan, I found myself reflecting on the entire episode.

My original interpretation was that this man was a hilarious jerk – hilarious precisely because I didn’t have to spend more than a few minutes with him – and I was entertained by the other passengers’ performative non-reactions to his horrible misbehavior. Manners and Mischief suggests that there is quite a bit more meaning in such disregard for social norms and new politeness dicta. In this instance, omnipresent manners reminders gave this man new ways to be rude. Manners and Mischief examines manners guides in contemporary Japan, considering how they reflect on selfhood, gender norms, social change, and class mobility. Each chapter analyzes manners guides in specific contexts; collectively these essays trace the contestable power involved in telling people the right way to behave. Manners and Mischief further argues that these guidebooks reveal disagreement about norms and thereby mark the pressure points of changing social mores. It is an incredibly successful and provocative collection, and I recommend it highly.

The absorbing early chapters examine how manners reflect cultural understandings of nature and selfhood. Manners, after all, seem to oppose nature because they ask people to moderate their “natural” instincts or who they “really” are. Although it is possible to understand manners as a fake patina used to conceal one’s true self, Linda H. Chance, Maki Isaka, and Kelly M. Foreman argue that Japanese norms challenge any clear divide between the real and the fake, instead suggesting that well-mannered be-
Behavior can be learned with enough practice. Guidebooks advise that acting polite – trying to be polite and appropriate even against one’s instincts – will eventually become second nature and can fundamentally change personalities for the better. This dynamic of willful, but genuine, manipulation of self is central to Maki Isaka’s brilliant discussion of guidebooks for onnagata 女形, male actors who play female characters in kabuki. Although these guides are explicitly directed at male actors trying to be feminine, Isaka argues that they also teach female fans what it “really” means to be a woman. Because gender must be performed by everyone all the time, theatrical performance guides dictating gender norms onstage influence the audience as well. Linda H. Chance describes a similar interchange between artistic object and audience in her discussion of readers’ guides to the Tale of Genji. According to Chance, mainstream guides present the canonical work as both civilizing and potentially subverting, as it contains so much about both gender norms and gender transgressions. Guides describe “a realm of the text with which it is proper to be conversant and one that is better left hidden” (41). In another example of how guides for practitioners teach a much larger audience, Kelly M. Foreman traces the etiquette rules shaping geisha’s lives. Successful geisha conform to general artistic forms as well as to particular norms of the house with which they are affiliated. Genuine geishas, therefore, must be particularly adroit role players; what begins as an act becomes instinct.

The next chapters analyze how interactions between Westerners and Japanese produce essentialized “cultural” manners. In his chapter covering English-language guides about Japanese etiquette, Gavin James Campbell traces how characterizations of Japanese culture have changed since the Meiji era. Though guidebooks once engaged in what he labels “a bracing level of condescension” (83), since Japan’s economic rise, they are more likely to highlight business etiquette that positions Japanese culture as “overwhelmingly – even pathologically – complex” (86). In contrast to the Japanese texts analyzed in previous chapters, these English-language guides find duplicity and confusion in etiquette that masks rather than reflects a “true” character; in this we can see a version of Ruth Benedict’s long list of inherent Japanese contradictions. Sally A. Hasting extends the volume’s analysis into the gendering of public interactions between Japan and the West, particularly focusing on diplomatic dinners in Meiji Japan (1868–1912). This fascinating chapter explains how gender and nationalism were simultaneously negotiated by Japanese politicians who saw no place for their wives in professional socializing and by Western diplomats who believed that marital equality demonstrated the conditions of a “modern” state.

The final six chapters deal most explicitly with gender and sexual norms as they are reflected, taught, and contested in contemporary manners guides. Jan Bardsley examines how male office behavior is prescribed.
Older men (oyaji 親父) now bear the brunt of as many warnings about social misbehavior as working women once did, although Bardsley suggests that men might have more success if they refuse to conform. Hiroko Hirakawa examines the same issues as they pertain to women. Hirakawa’s chapter is at once fascinating and depressing. She observes that many guides promote the idea that being “lovable” – i.e., attractive and non-threatening – is the key to success. Even guides that resist this notion seem to conceive freedom and happiness as mutually exclusive. Pregnancy guides, as analyzed by Amanda C. Seaman, reflect class mobility as well as a shift in the social meaning of children themselves. In contemporary society, Seaman writes, “pregnant women are still valued as producers, but now the product of their labor(s) is perceived less as future soldiers, workers, and wives than as future consumers” (168).

As Janet S. Shibamoto-Smith shows, letters to the advice column in the Asahi newspaper similarly reveal generational differences, as well as how actions speak louder than words. Advice columnists instruct that people should _do something_ – anything, almost – rather than over-think or wait passively for a solution. Hideko Abe extends the literature on queer Japan by analyzing advice columns in gay and lesbian publications. As in Isaka’s chapter on gender performance on the kabuki stage, a primary debate concerns the firmness of categories. Some column writers suggest there are strict ways to be “appropriately” queer in terms of dress, lifestyle, family, or language, while others consider flexibility inherent in queer identity. Finally, Laura Miller’s engaging chapter examines iconographic representations of good and bad behavior that crop up in advertising on trains and in guidebooks. Labeling manners a “slippery knowledge” (245), she suggests that such images are attractive because they reassuringly suggest an operative moral code. When you put on makeup on the train, these posters seem to suggest, you upset other people, even if you don’t notice it.

This thoughtful and compelling collection will be of obvious interest not only to students and scholars of Japanese studies but also to those in anthropology, gender studies, history, and literature. I imagine that many of the chapters could be productively paired with Michel Foucault in any theory course as demonstrations of how the panopticon has morphed into mirrors cautiously held up by women applying mascara on the train.

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Based on personal interviews of sixteen young Japanese mothers (four of which form the book’s focal point) in the Osaka area, Susan D. Holloway, a psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley, illuminates how these women deal with the daily challenges of motherhood. Holloway’s work is concerned with the relationship between the women’s perception of their own effectiveness as mothers (called “self-efficacy”) and various other factors, such as their own childhood experiences, methods of self-reflection (hansei 反省), the availability of support mechanisms (spousal and other), their expectations for their children, and their involvement in the workforce. Holloway notes that Japanese mothers tend to hold themselves to very high standards and to be very hard on themselves. As a result, many mothers perceive themselves as inadequate (what Holloway calls “low efficacy mothers”). She speculates that this pervasive sense of low efficacy is part of the reason for Japan’s declining birth rate.

Holloway’s work reveals the disturbing degree of gender inequality that persists in contemporary Japanese society, preventing women from pursuing their own dreams. Many of the restrictions stem from a deep-rooted belief in separate spheres for men and women. For example, Chihiro, one of Holloway’s focal mothers, wanted to be an architect, but because her father insisted that she commute from home each day, she was forced to attend a local college and study industrial design rather than architecture. After graduating, she found a job as an industrial designer, but after getting married, she was persuaded by her parents to quit her job for the sake of her husband. Holloway attributes this to the fact that Japanese companies demand so much out of their workers that a woman cannot hold a company job while tending to her family. She points out that Japanese husbands typically contribute very little to household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry (something Holloway does not mention is that many Japanese do laundry nearly every day and hang clothes outside, making it a much more time-consuming task than in the U.S.). Holloway explains that the pressure on women to quit their jobs when they get engaged, married, or become pregnant is so strong that of the sixteen mothers she interviewed, only one (a school teacher) managed to keep a full-time position throughout her life.

The author further illuminates the difficulty of women rejoining the workforce after leaving it. A thirty-five-year-old former preschool teacher was told that she was too old for many of the positions she applied for and was eventually forced to accept a position working the early morning shift at a convenience store. Despite the legal prohibition against age discrimina-
tion, loopholes abound (a quick look at job ads on various Japanese websites confirms that employers impose age limits).

Holloway is careful to examine a wide social stratum. The sixteen mothers interviewed represent a variety of educational backgrounds, economic statuses, and self-efficacy levels, although she seems to lean a bit toward the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum (four are classified low, six as low/medium, five medium/high, and one as high). Having attended Japanese schools in the 1980s, I am surprised that Holloway’s study downplays the phenomenon of the kyōiku mama 教育ママ or overzealous “education mother.” Holloway explains that this type of mothers has become less common in recent years, largely because the media has made of point of blaming them for “focusing on educational achievements to the neglect of social competence, for depriving their sons and daughters of a joyful childhood and stifling their creativity, and for creating a generation of stressed out, socially immature young adults” (148). Holloway’s Japanese mothers have relatively low expectations for their children, and even hope their children will be average rather than exceptional. Holloway’s study does not indicate what type of schools (public or private) the mother’s children attend, but considering the expense associated with private schools, it can be assumed that most of the children attend public schools. It would have been interesting to consider the perspectives of private school children’s mothers, who might have different attitudes than the sixteen mothers included in this study.

Holloway skillfully places these women within the constraints of Japanese tradition, public and corporate policies, and educational institutions. I sincerely hope that Holloway will extend her study to shed yet more light on contemporary Japanese society. While it is reasonable to assume a correlation between delayed marriage, declining birthrate, and mother’s self-efficacy level, as Holloway does, direct investigation of women who choose not to have children would seem more profitable than interviewing mothers. Another area that needs further investigation is the modern Japanese’s conceptions of equality with traditionally rigid paternalistic society. As an outside observer, Holloway is clearly deeply sympathetic to the plight of Japanese women, but I am left wondering if Japanese women themselves perceive the gender inequality that seems so obvious to Western observers.

Legally, Japanese women have enviable protections. The Japanese Constitution is explicit about gender equality (unlike the U.S. Constitution, which does not include an “Equal Rights Amendment”). For example, Article 14 of the Japanese Constitution states that “all of the people are equal under the law and there shall be no discrimination in political, economic or social relations because of race, creed, sex, social status or family origin.” Article 24 stipulates that: “(1) Marriage shall be based only on the mutual consent of both sexes and it shall be maintained through mutual coopera-
tion with the equal rights of husband and wife as a basis; and, (2) With regard to choice of spouse, property rights, inheritance, choice of domicile, divorce, and other matters pertaining to marriage and the family, laws shall be enacted from the standpoint of individual dignity and the essential equality of the sexes.” Such explicit statements, however, may give many Japanese women a sense of equality that does not truly exist.

Women and Family in Contemporary Japan is a well-researched and remarkably readable book even for those without any background in psychology. It offers valuable insight into this underexplored area and it should be read by anyone interested in contemporary Japan or women’s issues. It is suitable for both undergraduate and graduate Asian studies or gender studies courses. I wholeheartedly recommend it.

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Today, Dalat (Đà Lạt), a smallish mountain resort city, is invoked as a realm of romance in countless Vietnamese popular songs. Aside from the well-known “Love is Like the Shadow of a Cloud” (“Tình Yêu Như Bóng Mây”) and “Cherished Memories of the Chilly Realm” (“Thương Về Miền Đất Lạnh”), both of which concern Dalat, there are such titles as “Lonely Dalat” (“Đà Lạt Cô Liêu”), “Sunset Dalat” (“Đà Lạt Hoàng Hôn”), “Love in Dalat” (“Đà Lạt Tình Yêu”), “Rain Flying in Dalat” (“Đà Lạt Mưa Bay”), “Poetic Dalat” (“Đà Lạt Thơ”), “Far Apart in Dalat” (“Đà Lạt xa Nhau”), “Fair Cheeks in Dalat” (“Má Hồng Đà Lạt”), and “Bidding Farewell to Dalat” (“Giả Từ Đà Lạt”). No other Vietnamese city except Huế has been the subject of so many songs. The lyrics of these songs, as well as the images accompanying them in music videos, invoke the distinctive pine-covered mountains and idyllic waterfalls of Dalat’s surroundings. Dalat is also a theme in Vietnamese poetry. In “Dim Moon in Dalat” (“Đà Lạt Trăng Mờ”) by the celebrated Han Mặc Tử (1912–40), we read that in Dalat, “The sky is dreaming in a sky mysterious with dreams; / The moon and stars are passionate in the thin mist / As if welcoming an image in a poem from afar” (“Trời mộng trong cảnh thuộc huyền mơ / Trăng sao đắm đuối trong sương mịt / Như đón từ xa một ý thơ”).

Dalat, in short, is now a part of the fabric of Vietnamese spiritual and aesthetic life. Yet, as the book here under review makes clear, there is no place in Vietnam that was more purely the product of French colonial ambitions.
The resort town owed its genesis entirely to the intolerably high mortality rates suffered by French colonialists in Southeast Asia in the late nineteenth century. The eventual resort city began to coalesce in 1897, when the French governor Paul Doumer ordered his staff to seek a suitable location for a highland sanatorium where plague- and fever-ridden colonists could be sent to recover. It was the doctor and biologist Alexander Yersin – the identifier of the plague bacillus (1894) – who ventured into Vietnam’s interior west of Nha Trang and discovered the expansive Lang-Bian plateau near the central highlands, in a corner of which Dalat would be established in 1901. There were no Vietnamese in the area; the indigenous population consisted of a scattering of tribally organized ethnic groups. The name “Dalat” comes not from Vietnamese, but from the language of the Lat, one of the minorities. “Da” means “river”; hence “Da Lat” was “the river of the Lat.”

Doumer’s thoughts naturally turned to the establishment of a highland sanatorium, for by the time he made his first visit to the Lang Bian plateau, many such facilities existed throughout Europe’s colonies, such as Bogor in Dutch Indonesia (1740s), Penang Hill in British Maylasia (1790s), Ootacamund in British Madras (1820s), Simla in British India (1831), Darjileeng in British Bengal (1830s), Nuwara Eliya in British Ceylon (1830s), Petropolis in Portuguese Brazil (1843), Kodaikanal, founded by Americans in South India (1845), Mamyo in British Burma (1890s), and Baguio in the Philippines (1900). What all these facilities had in common is that they were built on land largely uninhabited until nineteenth-century European colonizers went looking for places to cool off and restore their health. Caucasians, it was believed, needed temperate climates to remain healthy. It became clear over the years, however, that in spite of its pine trees and cooler air, Dalat was not an entirely healthy place. Vietnamese and tribal laborers hired to build roads and rail lines to the area fell ill and died in large numbers, and malaria proved such a problem that great effort had to be invested in draining ponds that bred mosquitoes. Many later residents described Dalat as chilly and humid and complained of chronic colds and bronchitis. Nevertheless, the belief persisted that colonialists could flourish there. The construction of a rail line from coastal Phan Rang to Dalat, which began in the early 1900s, proved expensive and fraught with technical difficulty. The final link at the upper end of this line was not completed until 1932. The songwriter Pham Duy recalls in his Memoirs that when he made this rail trip in 1944, he had to change at Tourcham to a special train, the underside of which was equipped with notched steel bars (crémaillère) that enabled it to climb to lofty Dalat, more than 1,500 meters above sea level.

As access became easier and amenities such as hotels, schools, sporting clubs, athletic fields, dairy farms, European vegetable gardens, and markets
were developed, Dalat gradually became a popular place and attracted a significant Vietnamese as well as European population. Dalat was the residence of choice for Bảo Đại, the last Nguyễn dynasty emperor, who was a hunting enthusiast more comfortable with French than Vietnamese culture. It was also the residence Jean Decoux, governor of Indochina from 1940 to 1945. Due to Dalat’s location (as well as its amenities) plans were made to turn it into a colonial administrative center. One plan was to make Dalat the capital of a semi-autonomous “nation” of highlanders, or minority peoples, whom the French increasingly came to consider one people. Another plan, favored by Decoux, was to make Dalat the capital of the entire Indochinese empire. The city was also advertised by commercial interests as a place where tourists in search of exotic experiences could observe “primitive” peoples while enjoying mountain walks and fine hotel service.

Drawing on archival materials, personal memoirs, and old newspaper clippings, Jenning’s book examines the growth of Dalat from every conceivable perspective. The opening chapters cover early debates among colonizers concerning the genesis and treatment of tropical diseases, the decision to locate a sanatorium on the Lang-Bian plateau, and the first tentative steps to turn Dalat into a hilltop retreat. We read also of Captain Victor Adrien Debay, an early surveyor of the area (1901–2), who, being subject to fits of homicidal rage exacerbated by a sense of power arising from his status as a European among “natives,” frequently subjected Vietnamese and tribal underlings to random, fatal beatings. These crimes, we learn, did not prevent him from gaining, some years later, France’s highest distinction, membership in the Legion of Honor.

In subsequent chapters we read about debates concerning the design of the city, arrangements made for the establishment of European and indigenous residential sectors, and the construction of Lake Hồ Xuân Hương, a large, attractive, crescent-shaped body of water. Attention is devoted to the varied designs of Dalat’s numerous European-style villas, the grand Lang-Bian Hotel (opened in 1922), and the Dalat railway station (completed in 1938). As Dalat was being developed, other Indochinese hill stations came into being. By the 1940s there were nine others: Chapa (Sapa), Tam Dao, and Ba Vì in the North, Bana and Bach Ma in the South, Bockor in Cambodia, and the Bolovens Plateau, Phou Khoun, and Xien Khouan in Laos. None of these other locations, however, could compete with Dalat.

Chapter Nine traces the growth of the Vietnamese population from the founding of Dalat through the 1930s and records several instances of labor unrest, including strikes among tea plantation workers, construction workers, and market vendors. Chapter Ten traces efforts by French administrators to allocate amenities and facilities to the residents based on perceived categories of race and class. In 1939, for example, a military school for Eurasian children, largely abandoned by their French fathers,
was established. It was called the École des Enfants de Troupe Eurasiens de Dalat. These children were expected to join the army on graduation and serve France by drawing on their knowledge of local customs and languages.

Chapter Eleven, "Divine Dalat," provides details concerning Western religious enterprises in Dalat. Between 1914 and 1954, the author says, "Dalat emerged as one of Indochina’s dominant Catholic sites, probably the dominant one per capita." While this discussion of churches and religious schools in Dalat is certainly valuable, the author might have provided a bit of historical perspective by mentioning, for example, the immense cathedral complex at Phát Đèm in Ninh Bình province (some 80 miles south of Hanoi) constructed by Vietnamese under the direction of Phêrô Trần Lực, a Vietnamese priest in the period 1875–98. The diocese of Phát Đèm, as of 2004, still had 31 priests, 65 parishes, and more than 144,000 believers. Also relevant to the discussion is the fact that Ngô Đình Đệm established many purely Catholic towns (xóm đạo; "religious neighborhoods") after 1954 to accommodate the very large numbers of Catholic refugees who had emigrated to the south. Catholicism, it is true, came to have a very strong presence in Dalat, but it never became a purely Catholic city; nor did it ever have any Catholic structures remotely comparable in grandeur of design and execution to the cathedral complex of Phát Đèm.

The following two chapters deal with Dalat during and immediately following the Second World War. Indochina remained a colony under the Vichy government of France, as represented by Governor-General Jean Decoux, but Japan also exercised increasing authority in the region, a tendency that culminated in Japan’s bloody and decisive takeover of the French colonial government on March 9, 1945. Following this takeover, Vietnamese servants in European families and Vietnamese nurses in Dalat’s hospital abruptly left their posts and joined ranks with the Vietnamese resistance, led by Viet Minh party members. More than a hundred members of Decoux’s youth league deserted as well. The Japanese took over all public institutions in Dalat and established a Japanese language school in June. Even after Japan’s August 15 surrender to the Allied powers, the Japanese continued to maintain administrative authority in Dalat throughout the following autumn. A series of armed clashes occurred between Viet Minh and Japanese forces. The Japanese managed by November to quell this opposition, but in the following month, they turned the administration of the city over to returning French forces. Dalat would continue under direct French control for another nine years, until 1954.

The book’s last chapter concerns Dalat during the French Resistance period (1946–54), the Đệm years (1954–63), and the last twelve years of the Southern Republic (1963–75.) During the resistance period, the emperor Bảo Đại became the putative leader of a putatively independent Vietnamese state within a French commonwealth. Dalat was his primary place of resi-
dence throughout this period. An officer’s training school was established in Dalat in 1950. Many subsequent ARVN leaders were products of this school. In the meantime Viet Minh forces took care to demonstrate that Dalat could not be regarded by the French as a secure haven. In 1948 they carried out a highly successful ambush of a two-hundred-vehicle French convoy on a road leading to Dalat, destroying fifty-two vehicles and killing between fifty and eighty people, about twenty per cent of whom were military personnel. In 1950 and 1951 they carried out a series of assassinations of Dalat government functionaries. This provoked an overreaction on the part of Henri Jumeau, the chief of Dalat’s defense forces, who on May 11, 1951, had twenty Vietnamese detainees, who had nothing to do with the assassinations, dragged to the Camly Airfield and shot. This event became an international scandal, provoking much finger-pointing and recrimination. Viet Minh assassinations continued. After the French defeat of 1954 and the establishment of two Vietnams according to the terms of the Geneva Convention, Dalat remained caught up in the struggle against the Viet Minh. The city’s population was swollen by the arrival of some 16,000 refugees by 1968, while many of the indigenous peoples in nearby areas were rounded up into heavily guarded “strategic hamlets,” while their land was sprayed with defoliants to prevent the enemy from making use of them. Dalat’s tranquility was further disturbed during the 1968 Tết offensive. The city was occupied by Viet Minh forces for a week in early February. About a thousand homes and many public structures were destroyed in ensuing battles, and about twenty thousand people were left homeless.

Jenning’s epilogue details Dalat’s current status as a resort and tourist attraction, noting that in 2002, Vietnam spent US$15.8 million upgrading Dalat’s Camly Airfield, making it Vietnam’s fourth international airport, joining those of Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Đà Nẵng.

Certain orthographic idiosyncrasies and a few factual errors must be noted. Vietnamese names and terms are given throughout with no diacritics, except for the circumflex, which appears above the letter “e.” In a few instances, a non-Vietnamese diacritic is introduced in the form of a diaeresis over the letter “i” in words like “môï” (“savage”), which thus becomes “moï.” This approach is presumably meant to prevent the reader from pronouncing the word like the French “moi.” The omission of diacritics is not quite consistent, however; on page 216 the word “Họng” appears, combining a huyên tone mark with a circumflex; and on page 219 we have the word “Ung.” Elsewhere in the book the letters “ư” and “u” are not distinguished. The use of correct Vietnamese orthography would have enhanced the book’s precision and usability. On page 248, Trần Lê Xuân (better known in the U.S. as “Madame Nhu”) is unaccountably referred to as “Le Xuan,” omitting her surname. On page 254, a passage concerning “The Song of the Bach Dang River” comments that the lyrics concern “two Vietnamese vic-
tories over the Chinese in 93 and 1288 A.D.” There are two, or possibly three, errors here, depending on one’s point of view. The year “93” is an error for 938, the year that Ngô Quyền gained lasting independence for Vietnam after a battle with the ephemeral Chinese Southern Han state on the Bạch Đằng River. The battle of 1288 was fought (under the leadership of Trần Hưng Đạo), not against the Chinese, but against the Mongols. There was another Bạch Đằng river victory against the Chinese; it was achieved by Lê Hoàn in a series of encounters with Sòng forces in 981.

These blemishes, however, do not detract from this book’s value as a very rich and very multi-dimensional source of information concerning the genesis and cultural significance of Dalat. This is a book that one can strongly recommend to anyone interested in colonialism, in hill stations, or in Vietnamese political and social history.

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