

REVIEWS

INDIA AND THE WORLD: A HISTORY OF CONNECTIONS, c. 1750-2000

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Claude Markovits, *India and the World: A History of Connections*, c. 1750–2000, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, 275 pp. (ISBN 978-1-316-63745-6).

Claude Markovits' *India and the World: A History of Connections*, c. 1750–2000 is a compelling, wide-ranging examination of India's global interactions over two centuries and a half. Across seven sweeping thematic chapters, Markovits explores India's past through its role in the three-fold global exchange of things (commodities, manufactured goods, cultural productions), people (voluntary migration, indentured labour, military conscription), and ideas (religion, political ideologies, the reception of historical events). The author's aim is to explore Indian history through a broader, connected history framework, drawing on methodologies most notably pioneered by Sanjay Subrahmanyam.¹ The book positions India as an active participant in transoceanic networks sustained through multidirectional connections. As Markovits demonstrates, India influenced and was influenced by the world in a dynamic and reciprocal, if sometimes uneven, manner.

The book's opening chronology provides an excellent indication of what is to come, in terms of the monograph's ambitious thematic scope. The chronology features standard political and military milestones, ranging from the Carnatic Wars of 1746–53 to the Kargil conflict of 1999. It also pinpoints, however, cultural moments, from the publication of William Jones's English translation of Kalidasa's play *Shakuntala* in 1789 to the box-office success of the Tamil masala film *Muthu* in Japan in 1998. The masterful balance between economic, political, social, and cultural history underscores the breadth of Markovits's scholarship, which enables him to situate India not just within the frameworks created by European colonialism but also in global landscapes. This broader scope breaks from the more conventional

1. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges* and *Explorations in Connected History: Mughals and Franks*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005.

focus on India's imperial ties, demonstrating that India's global reach extended well beyond them. Markovits takes the reader on a tour from Japan, where the Sindwork merchants of Sindh's Hyderabad sold Japonaiserie trinkets to affluent North American customers in search of exotica, to Benin, where *vodún* followers incorporated images of Hindu gods imported by Indian traders into their religious practices. It is precisely in charting India's interactions with the non-imperial and the non-European – particularly the rest of Asia, Africa, and the Americas – that the book is most gripping and successful.

Chapter 1 examines India's evolving role within the global economy, largely through the trade in commodities such as cotton, opium, tea, and jute. Markovitz examines India's transition from early modern "workshop of the world" to supplier of raw materials to Western nations and Japan. Indian commodities became particularly crucial to the British empire – especially after 1890 when, under the gold standard, India's export surplus helped offset Britain's growing trade deficit. From 1947 an independent India, no longer tied to British financial obligations, aimed to establish an autonomous economy, under a Nehruvian blueprint that envisioned some controlled participation of the world economy in the Indian economy. Despite notable accomplishments, by around 1990 the country shifted its focus once again, reconnecting with the global economy in the neo-liberal turn. Markovits's exploration of India's engagement with global capitalism through its diverse mercantile communities – Marwari, Gujarati, Chettiar, Sindhi – draws from his previous magisterial work, which established that these trading groups forged deep economic and social ties that transcended political boundaries.²

India's transoceanic economic connections were often linked to vast patterns of human migration. In Chapter 2, Markovits explores how Indian men and women moved from the subcontinent to the rest of the world – a movement that was not always voluntary. More than 1.4 million labourers left India under indenture from 1834 to 1916. This included indenture to the old plantation economies of Mauritius, British Guyana, and Trinidad, but also the development of new plantation economies in Natal and Fiji. The chapter also emphasizes other forms of labour migration from colonial India, such as the *kangani* and *maistry* systems. While the Second World War and Indian independence marked a period of reduced labour migration, the phenomenon surged again from the mid-1960s – this time towards Europe, the United States, Canada, and the Gulf's oil-producing states. An increasing proportion of these diasporic Indians were skilled workers and professionals. Markovits is also attentive to the smaller, lesser-researched

2. Claude Markovits, *Merchants, Traders, Entrepreneurs: Indian Business in the Colonial Era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750-1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

circulation of immigrant labour into India, which primarily arrived from two South Asian neighbours, Nepal and Bangladesh.

Chapter 3 examines India's longstanding engagement in armed conflicts worldwide, focusing on the Indian sepoys who fought outside the subcontinent. Beginning with an expedition to Manila in 1762 and concluding with the involvement of Indian troops in suppressing an anti-Dutch uprising in Java in 1945, the chapter also highlights India's extensively studied contribution to both World Wars. Markovits compellingly recounts how the Indian army of the post-1947 era took on a new role. From 1950 to 2000, India became the single largest contributor of military personnel to UN peacekeeping missions. More than 40,000 Indian men were deployed in conflict zones from Gaza to Lebanon, Sierra Leone, Indochina, and Korea. The chapter puts to excellent use archival sources authored by soldiers deployed abroad, from Thakur Gadadhar Singh's testimony of the Boxer Uprising in China to the soldiers' letters assembled by British military censors in France.³ Through their voices, Markovits unravels how ordinary Indians interacted with foreign lands and peoples.

The book not only charts India's global linkages in the realm of things and people, but also ideas. Chapter 4 focuses largely on religion, beginning with Hinduism. It discusses Hinduism's role as a world religion, examining how Western intellectual was transformed through the influence of figures such as Rammohun Roy, Keshub Chandra Sen, Swami Vivekananda, Jiddu Krishnamurti, and Swami Prabhupada, as well as the politicised ethnic Hinduism best exemplified by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. The chapter turns to the role of the subcontinent's Muslims in Islamic movements that, though rooted in India, attained a transnational reach. From the modernist, reformist drive of Sayyid Ahmad Khan to the orthodox Sunni position of the Deobandi movement, and from the transnational engagement of the Tablighi Jama'at to the unorthodoxy of the Ahmadiyya sect, Markovits reflects on the diversity India's contributions to Islam. He further explores the part that Indians played in the histories of two other world religions, Buddhism and Christianity.

Chapter 5 evaluates the contributions of Indian writers, artists, and cinema professionals to the global cultural sphere. While Indian literature and visual arts seldom reached large international audiences, there were notable exceptions. The chapter traces the remarkable global journey of the ancient Sanskrit play *Shakuntala*. In the nineteenth century, forty-six translations of *Shakuntala* were published in twelve European languages, inspiring ballets and operas. Markovits also highlights the "Tagore craze" that took over the world when the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore won

3. Anand A. Yang (ed.), *Thirteen Months in China: A Subaltern Indian and the Colonial World* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017); Military Department Records, Compilations and Miscellaneous, 'Military Miscellaneous' Series 1754-1944, Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France, IOR, L/MIL/5/ 825-8.

the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 – an infatuation that lasted well into the 1920s, influencing Latin American and Spanish poets in particular. In the domain of cinema, the chapter tracks the rise of India's film industry as a powerful global entertainment force. In the 1950s, the main foreign markets for Indian films were in the Soviet Union, the Middle East, and Africa. To Markovits, this signals the elasticity as a signifier of Indian cinema, onto which these diverse audiences projected their anxieties and aspirations. This argument could have been extended into the 1990s, which saw the emergence of films targeting NRI audiences – most notably, Aditya Chopra's *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) – and the 2000s, when Rajkumar Hirani's *3 Idiots* (2009) became a blockbuster in China. The film's popularity catapulted its lead, Aamir Khan, to stardom in China, echoing Raj Kapoor's rise to fame in the Soviet Union in the 1950s.

Chapter 6 explores the encounters between Indians and others, beginning with the often tense reception that Indian immigrants received in their host countries. Markovits surveys episodes of anti-Indian violence from Burma to Xinjiang and from British Guyana to the United States. He moves on to Indian travel narratives for insights into how Indians perceived the world beyond the subcontinent. These accounts often reveal a narrow perspective, focusing on Indian communities abroad rather than on the local populations among whom they lived. The chapter concludes by discussing how Indians perceived and responded to the foreigners who came to India. Chapter 7 focuses on two pivotal 'global events' in Indian history: the Great Rebellion of 1857 and the Partition of 1947. Markovits establishes that the 1857 uprising had a significant global impact, as evidenced by the extensive writings it inspired in several languages. Partition, in contrast, attracted little contemporary international reaction. He argues that it instead became a subject of comparative analysis for political historians in the decades that followed it.

In the conclusion, Markovits delivers a critique of India's current Hindu nationalist politics, marked by the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) second consecutive victory in the 2019 general elections. He contemplates how this shift relates to India's global history: he sees the BJP's rise as a continuation of a broader global resurgence of right-wing movements but also a significant departure from it, as Hindutva politics seek to define India's past through a unique, a-historical modernity. This vision draws on interpretations of Vedic texts as containing the essence of modern scientific and technological advancements. The chapter closes by pondering what this inward turn in India's global role might mean for the collective future of humanity.

The book's many strengths are offset by a few remarkable absences. The most noteworthy one is the use of gender as an analytical category. Markovits pays close attention to other categories of identity that play a part in India's global connections – most notably class, caste, and religion. In this context, the lack of attention to the circulation of global gender dynamics in

and out of the subcontinent is particularly glaring. These categories could have been further explored through the prism of the body, interrogating how bodily practices connected India with the rest of the world. Fashion, foodways, and physical regimes such as yoga were just some of the arenas in which Indian and non-Indian bodies partook in complex exchanges of cultural practices and representations.⁴ Indian bodies, in particular, at times became symbols of resistance to Western dominance and, at other times, vehicles for the commodification of the exotic “Other”. The Indian princely states were yet another important sphere of interconnection between the subcontinent and the rest of the world, as a growing body of literature on princely patronage, transoceanic travel, and imperial and anticolonial commitments has established. These new connected histories of the princely states have much to add to our understanding of India’s global linkages.⁵

Some Indian regions were much more densely connected with the world than others. Markovits acknowledges this throughout his account: it was Gujarat and Bengal that played major roles in the world economy as producers of textiles; indentured recruitment drew heavily from the Bhojpur region of eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar; mass migration to the Gulf countries predominantly originated from Kerala. More attention, however, could have been paid to these regional disparities. The things, peoples, and ideas that did not travel also have stories to tell. As reverse, negative images of the connectedness that Markovits so expertly explores, they may shed as much light on the contours of global history as the opium trade, the Indian soldiers in the trenches during the First World War, and the writings of religious teachers. Despite these omissions, the book stands as an excellent synthesis of India’s transoceanic interconnections during the early modern and modern periods. Markovits brings together a vast body of research on South Asia and its diasporas, offering a nuanced view of key historiographical debates, particularly around the pivotal events of 1857 and 1947. While the book will undoubtedly appeal to specialists in Modern South Asian Studies, its insightful synthesis of previous scholarship and its clear and engaging prose makes it especially valuable for students and general readers seeking to understand India’s place in world history.

4. Kate Imy, Teresa Segura-Garcia, Elena Valdameri and Erica Wald, eds, *Bodies beyond binaries in colonial and postcolonial Asia* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2024).

5. Teresa Segura-Garcia, “Towards a connected history of the Indian princely states”, *Revue d’histoire du XIXe siècle* 56, no. 1: 132–34, <https://doi.org/10.4000/rh19.5523>, and “The Indian princely states in the global nineteenth century”, *Global Nineteenth-Century Studies* 1, no. 1 (2022): 101–107, <https://doi.org/10.3828/gncs.2022.14>.

IN SEARCH OF CONNECTION WITH SERVICE: CITIZENS, BROKERS, AND CIVIL
SERVANTS

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Adam Auerbach and Tariq Thachil, *Migrants and Machine Politics: How India's Urban Poor Seek Representation and Responsiveness*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023, xi+275 pages (ISBN: e-book 978069 1236100).

Akshay Mangla, *Making Bureaucracy Work: Norms, Education and Public Service Delivery in Rural India*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, xx+420pages (ISBN: 978-1009-25801-2 Hardback).

These books explore how citizens in India at the bottom of the social pyramid make claims on government. They are part of a small and, one hopes, growing group of studies that look at governance arrangements in India from the bottom up. They quite deliberately do not start in New Delhi and look out and down at how government agencies interact with citizens. Instead, they explore what citizens themselves want and how they look for people and institutions that can help them get it.

One of the books examines how citizens in slum settlements make demands for services through brokers and patrons whose fortunes depend on getting results. The other examines what parents of primary school children want from schools and what civil servants responsible for primary school education can do to respond effectively.

Both books are based on extensive fieldwork carried out over extended periods of time. Each book reports carefully chosen case studies, surveys, and interactions with respondents. Both are guided by rigorous methods drawn from US political science. Interviews with respondents were conducted in Hindi, either by authors themselves, or by Hindi speaking research assistants. In each case researchers adopted an ethnographic approach – they spent time with people. Formal interviews were complemented by informal encounters, social meetings with participants, and participant observation. People were also kept informed about what the researchers were doing.

Auerbach and Thachil examined access to municipal services in slums in two Hindi speaking cities – Jaipur and Bhopal. At the time of study (research began in 2014) both cities had two- party systems in which the BJP and the Congress competed. The researchers focused on how citizens made claims for provision of basic infrastructure – sanitation, drainage, paths and roads, and especially water supply. They examined the formation and

drivers of the incentive driven, competitive machine politics that connected slum dwellers to brokers, patrons in local politics, and the municipal authorities from which they sought services.

Mangla examined access by Dalit and other underprivileged parents to effective primary schooling for their children. In field work between 2007-2011 and 2013-2014 he focused on the different ways in which civil servants in apparently similar North Indian states – Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand – responded to the inclusion of parents in decisions about how schools operated. In Himachal Pradesh he argues that bureaucratic norms encouraged civil servants to consult parents whereas in Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh they encouraged legalistic enforcement of rules. He proposes that flexibility in applying rules and deliberation with parents enables civil servants to carry out the complex tasks underpinning effective primary education. He extends his analysis to include comparative perspectives from Kerala and also selected countries in Asia and Europe.

In both books active citizens from less privileged social groups are seen seeking access to government services. Slum residents take action on their own terms. Primary school parents respond to opportunities for consultation. Neither are enmeshed in top-down networks. Rather they take part in significant bottom-up action between elections. Although the results reported are limited in scope and the modest citizen claims examined often remain unmet, the books raise two sets of questions. One is about the implications of bottom-up activism for how political parties manage their organisations and pitch their appeals. The other is about how the institutions of governance could respond more effectively to citizen claims for services and facilities that provide value.

Machine Politics

Auerbach and Thachil's findings show that the politics of claim making by the slum residents starts with the residents themselves. The authors examine how people seeking opportunities not available in their home regions move to cities and make their way. They form squatter settlements of small, disjointed groups of residents from diverse backgrounds. Established social hierarchies in rural districts are absent. The tasks of finding a spot to squat, holding on to it, building shelter and creating basic amenities are hard. Residents live on the margins. They are reluctant to approach officials themselves.

They look for people who can help. Such helpers tend to be people like themselves who have had time to find their way around. Critically they are likely to have earned a reputation as problem solvers. The book's findings suggest that in choosing who to ask for help residents do not look for social and religious compatibility. They look for people who can make

effective claims. In doing so, the authors argue, they give rise to a complex set of interactions that drive «an interlocking set of competitive selections through which urban political networks form». Through such interactions, the authors argue, residents become the architects of the networks that connect them to the state.

Brokers are the first link in a network of «mediated access'. They live in the slums themselves. They are readily accessible. They emerge as brokers in a number of ways. For example, they may help a few people and go on to build a following. Or they may be selected by iterative processes, including elections organised by residents. Brokers tend to be a little more educated than other residents, work outside the slums and have access to office holders in political parties and local government. They need to show residents they are aware of problems, know how to get help and develop a record as problem solvers. Ethnicity is less important than effectiveness. So, in many cases, it is party affiliation. Most brokers are men but women, often widows, emerge as brokers too. However, links between residents and brokers are contingent. Competition between brokers is constant. Residents move away from brokers who are not effective.

Brokers work with patrons who can make official connections. They often hold elected offices as ward councillors or as local leaders of political parties. Patrons generally live outside the slums and earn more than brokers. But socially they are similar. Relationships between brokers and patrons are interdependent. Brokers need patrons to solve residents' problems. Patrons need brokers to muster support within party organisations or at ward elections. Brokers are often politically ambitious. A small position within a political party is a start. It offers the prospect of promotion. And greater recognition among residents. It is worth going to some effort to, as one respondent put it, «sneak myself into the party like a monkey».

Ward councillors need brokers to connect them to slum residents. They recognize that to win elections they need the votes of slum dwellers. Brokers come to their attention, for example, by organising events. In bold tactics, they may contest an election against a potential patron and make them «sweat». As with residents and brokers, relationships between brokers and patrons are contingent. Brokers want patrons who can offer personal opportunities as well as help solve residents' problems; patrons want loyal problem solvers who can bolster their local electoral profiles.

The authors pay particular attention to whom among slum residents actually gets help. They identify a gap. Neither brokers nor patrons can help everyone. They argue that for brokers and patrons claiming credit and tagging tangible benefits are key drivers. They show that, for example, fixing pathways, although important to residents, is hard to claim. However, improving access to water by erecting water tanks is much easier to claim. Tanks are visible; signs can be painted on them claiming credit. Accordingly, there are lots of tanks.

The authors argue that the characteristics of the slum machines in Jaipur and Bhopal have wider implications. The resident activity observed may be significant in other urbanising localities in India. It may be significant too for comparative studies, for example, in other regions where rural people are moving to cities to try to improve their lot. Further, the urban slum machines examined, driven by active residents, contrast with the top-down organisations described in much existing literature on machine politics.

However, on potential impacts they suggest notes of caution. The politics they observed were localised, fragmented and focused on basic physical needs. It was not programmatic. Responses to claims focused on immediate needs where credit could be claimed. Unfulfilled claims remained. Claims for more complex services, for example, in education and health were rare. While organised political activity took place between elections it did not evolve into integrated movements with an extended range of claims. Yet it took place and took place independently of top-down machines.

The book rests on careful research and is thoroughly explained. Survey results were cross-checked with scenarios presented to selected respondents. Scenarios covered different kinds of residents and claims. Quotations from residents, examples of how they made claims and examples of how brokers and patrons responded allow a glimpse of gritty slum life. However, discussion of the preparation and calibration of the cross-checking scenarios tended to be given more space. More extensive accounts of the variety of residents' experiences would have been welcome. It would be useful to know whether, when talking about claims and their resolution, residents, brokers and patrons talked about other matters relevant to slum residents. Nevertheless, a strength of the book is that it invites replication studies. It invites too studies that pick up where it leaves off.

Civil Servants and Primary School Parents

Like Auerbach and Thachil, Mangla examined what happens between citizens and government institutions between elections. He probed what he describes as a chasm between citizen aspirations and services received. Citizens, he states, are engaged in a battle for welfare beyond the polling booth. However, while Auerbach and Thachil began with slum residents, Mangla began with relationships between civil servants and primary school parents.

He adopted this focus after he learned about an unexpected civil service initiative in Himachal Pradesh. At an early stage in his research he heard that civil servants in the Himalayan state had arranged mobile schools for pupils who migrated temporarily, with the seasons, to another state. He asked how such an initiative was possible. He went on to ask questions about how civil servants related to parents in selected other states too.

Mangla found that while parents in the states studied were keen to be consulted about schooling, they often struggled to be heard. In some circumstances civil servants drew parents into schooling arrangements. In others they pushed parents away.

He argues that civil service norms made the difference. Norms that encouraged engagement with parents and a flexible application of rules enabled joint deliberation between parents and civil servants. Deliberation led to improved educational outcomes. However, norms that encouraged legalistic application of rules made deliberation difficult. He found that a culture of legalism and rule following could build schools and enrol students. It encouraged reports focused on enrolment numbers and physical infrastructure. But it did not encourage reports on schooling and learning. It tended not to foster effective teaching.

Mangla first outlines the difficult context in which primary schooling took place. He describes it as one of contested decentralisation. Authorities in Delhi initiated policy. But states had responsibility for implementation. Central initiatives and increases in expenditure took place in increments. Reforms built up in layers. Incentives to improve performance lacked bites. In such a context, he suggests, implementation was not the end of politics but a new beginning.

In educational administration he identified three distinct tasks: codifiable, intensive and complex. He argues that codifiable and intensive tasks could enrol students and build infrastructure. But the ability to carry out complex tasks was essential for deliberation with parents and to support innovative teaching. Civil service norms that encouraged flexibility fostered capability to engage in deliberation.

Case studies of primary school administration in Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Bihar provide detailed findings. In Uttar Pradesh near total coverage of primary school age pupils was accompanied by uneven educational outcomes and primary school education of low quality. He found marginalised citizens and a legalistic application of rules. In a large state with strong and restrictive social hierarchies, civil servants worked in a difficult political environment. Educational administrators faced frequent political intervention. Recourse to rules was a way of keeping politicians at bay.

By contrast in Himachal Pradesh political and civil service elites collaborated. Conditions in a small, poor state comprising many isolated and hilly regions encouraged people in government to work together. In the 1950s the first Chief Minister set an example with regular village visits. He worked closely with civil servants and senior officers accompanied him on visits. On matters that cut across portfolio boundaries ministers and civil servants worked together too. In isolated areas civil servants were often cut off during winter and had to rely on each other. Social hierarchies in the state were less restrictive than in Uttar Pradesh. They facilitated commu-

nity consultation. Networks of village councils existed. So did networks of women's organisations. Citizen organisations met civil servants prepared to consult. Politicians encouraged civil servants to get results. Initiatives in deliberation had multiplier effects. Civil service practice in Himachal Pradesh encouraged a focus on community needs. It allowed rules to be adjusted.

When it separated from Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand tried to learn from experience in neighbouring Himachal Pradesh. But the legacy of legalistic rule application in Uttar Pradesh continued. Consultation with parents, although encouraged, did not thrive. Strong community activism did not make effective connections with authorities. Teachers too were not consulted. In a new state with more politicians than before, fears of «too much access» by politicians reinforced recourse to rules.

In a further case Mangla examined the Mahila Samakhyia in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. This was a centrally formulated program of institutional change designed to empower women. However, he found equivocal impacts. Norms of legalism and rules persisted. Indeed, in Bihar the Chief Minister used legalism and rules to drive major shifts in educational administration. The Chief Minister supported also innovative teaching methods. But they did not attract wide take-up.

In Uttar Pradesh the program had management autonomy. It formed another «layer» in the administration of schools. It fostered deliberation, but within limits. Confident women officials in the program set positive examples. Despite operating in a hierarchical society, the program could mobilise Dalit women. However, for civil servants it demanded also a change in the way they interacted with parents. As he observed, they said it required a «new way of speaking». It also generated a backlash from upper castes. And it was difficult to maintain trust with parents. Although Mangla found that deliberation with parents was possible, the practice did not spill over beyond the program.

To his case studies in North India Mangla appended brief discussions of relations between parents and civil servants in four other cases. In Kerala he noted that strong social movements and experience with democratic decentralisation fostered deliberation and local experiments. Beyond India, in Finland social and institutional arrangements promoted deliberation and local flexibility. Even in China institutional arrangements fostered «adaptive government» and «directed improvisation». However, in France a centralised approach to administration fostered adherence to law and rules.

Mangla's discussion is careful and wide-ranging. His case studies provide challenging insights. He argues throughout for the effectiveness of bureaucratic norms that foster deliberation. However, his cases show that such norms are often scarce. Obstacles to productive relationships are prevalent and powerful. Further, the cases show also how embedded civil service norms are in complex institutional arrangements. In Himachal Pradesh political leaders, civil service leaders, and the context in which residents

and civil servants lived and worked, fostered cooperation. In Uttar Pradesh similar factors militated against it. In Uttarakhand institutional changes designed to foster norms like those in Himachal Pradesh proved insufficient. Restrictive norms formed in Uttar Pradesh persisted.

The outstanding question raised by the book is about how civil service norms that facilitate good relationships with citizens can be created and sustained. His discussion provides suggestive hints. Three stand out. First, the civil service as an institution has significant influence. Its internal dynamics are important. It is desirable that its members are encouraged to think, take the initiative and collaborate. In facing difficult and hard to define problems civil servants should have «room to puzzle».

Second, while the initiatives Mangla examined all came from the centre, he identified that local responsibility for implementation could give rise to new issues. The «contested decentralisation» in which these were handled deserves further exploration. If policy formation is thought of as going through cycles of consideration from problem identification to implementation and review, options for consultation of officials responsible for front line implementation could be built into decision making.

Third, political leadership that enables civil service initiatives is critical. Change within civil services, especially change that encourages bottom-up perspectives, is hard to bring about without the support of political leaders. Mangla's discussion of the example of the influential first Chief Minister of Himachal Pradesh is significant. It suggests that it would be useful to explore further what it might take for such an example to be more widely replicated.

Conclusion

Both books examine citizen activism and the search for services and facilities from the bottom up. In doing so the books illustrate the importance of looking more closely not only at politics between elections but also at wider citizen activism. The books illustrate too the importance of exploring more fully how the institutions of government appear to citizens. Active slum residents creating networks of access to local governments and primary school parents keen to help shape the education of their children show that citizens are keen to do more than vote at elections. Elections give them choices about who forms governments but not about how office holders, once chosen, choose to act. In much analysis of change in India electoral politics has been seen as an essential driver. These books suggest that another driver may be the willingness of citizens to engage with the state, despite the difficulties that that entails.

The books show that for slum residents and primary school parents services and facilities from government institutions have to be claimed. But

claim making is indirect. Intermediaries, brokers and patrons for slum residents and civil servants for primary school parents, have decisive roles. For slum residents, action is incentive based and transactional. Access to services and facilities remains mediated and limited. For primary school parents opportunities for consultation depend on the willingness of civil servants to make it part of

The books suggest that bottom-up activism may have the potential to extend beyond current limits. Should it do so, it may challenge political parties and government institutions to respond to new agendas that make the institutions of governance more accessible to citizens.

For political parties questions arise about how far brokers keen for party positions may be able to climb within party organisations. Questions arise also about what agendas they might bring with them and how parties, with strong top-down histories, might choose to deal with such agendas.

For the institutions of governance questions arise about the capabilities needed to engage more effectively with citizens. Local government institutions, although approachable through intermediaries, are under-endowed with resources and responsibilities. In Auerbach and Thachil's summary words, local government is «anemic». Civil service institutions in Delhi and state capitals are thinly staffed, often with highly skilled people, but organised to drive down decisions. They are rarely organised to enable decentralisation or to relay upwards information about expressed citizen needs.

In both books the analysis presented is reason enough to read them with care. The questions they stimulate provide reasons to ask for more. Such questions go to the nature of the institutions of governance and whether they are able to adapt to meet the needs of an active citizenry wishing to do more than vote. It is to be hoped that others will follow quickly in the directions they have charted.

VIOLENCE OF COMMUNALISM AND FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHY OF PEACE

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Emanuela Mangiarotti, *Feminist Peace and the Violence of Communalism: Community, Gender and Caste in India*, Routledge, 2025, 270 pp. (ISBN: 978-1-032-56605-4; ISBN: 978-1-032-56607-8, ISBN: 978-1-003-43633-1).

Feminist research in general and feminist peace research in particular contend with a range of methodological concerns. Primary among these is the need to be critical and reflexive at the same time – especially in studying situations of «conflict» where the researcher may find herself facing the predicament of representing processes of marginalisation as an interlocutor and also producing feminist knowledge as praxis. The latter is especially significant since it assumes a process of production of knowledge that is «dialectically produced and realised in action» (Shah 2017). Apart from reflexivity and critical scrutiny, the «sensitivities» of a feminist peace researcher entails «attendance to power relations», which when enquired from an ethnographer's lens involves an analytical framing of the everyday, contextualisation of agency, and a careful reading of embodiment and experiences (Björkdahl & Selimovic 2021).

In *Feminist Peace and the Violence of Communalism*, Emanuela Mangiarotti remains true to these commitments. She makes a methodologically sincere and analytically robust study of the historical and contemporary narrative processes through which the epithets «communal», «communally sensitive», and «riot prone» get attached ascriptively to «Old Hyderabad», and frame the «everyday realities» of being a Muslim in the city. While exploring these processes, the author makes a departure from the prevalent understanding of communalism as inter/intra-religious relations. Such an understanding she argues, reproduces the binaries that sustain the paradigms of domination and exclusion, by homogenising communities into containers marked by religion. This then serves as the primary and often the sole axis along which relationship (of hostility) between communities is mapped. Mangiarotti steers clear of such conceptualisation of communalism to look at the ways in which relations between communities are constituted in a social and political space where a «communal paradigm» is produced by political regimes, media, and dominant communities. In such a paradigm the figure of the Muslim is made «hyper-visible» as «communal» marked by a particularity – *religious identity* – constituted through tropes, which in the contemporary context draw from the dominant ideology of Hindutva and the ruling prac-

tices associated with the national security state. In a significant deployment of the analytical framework of «violence of communalism» the author shifts her scrutiny to the processes through which violence becomes part of «community experience». The «material consequences» of being Muslim, women and lower caste, imbricated in ghettoised lives in Old Hyderabad, which even when there is no spectacle of violence witnessed in «riots», produce the effects of stigmatised existence along multiple and intersecting axes of community, gender and caste.

The book makes these processes visible through six meticulously crafted chapters that focus on different dimensions of experiences of the violence of communalism. The chapters are ordered logically and each chapter is structured persuasively – foregrounding the larger argument of the book, but breaking it down into its constituents, and building it piecemeal through narratives from the fields. The first chapter on ethnography of the city of a «communally sensitive city» is, therefore, important for delineating both - the reasons why Hyderabad, specifically the Old City, as «riot prone» site, is appropriate for mapping the historical processes through which the communal paradigm is constituted - and also for comprehending how, amidst pervasive narratives of Hindu-Muslim antagonism and communalisation of public discourse in articulations of Hindu nationalist supremacy in the political and social spheres and ghettoization, has ironically also provided the «interface» for «women's action».

The entrenchment of social boundaries of communities is imperative for the politics of religious difference espoused by Hindu nationalists. The author elaborates in the second chapter how gendered-mythological narratives, present the Muslim body as an absolute «site of difference» entrenching structural violence that occludes other fundamental axes along which social power is constituted. The use of the framework of structural violence by Mangiarotti is important for building an understanding of how violence is structured in society, and its gendered nature. Unlike violence which takes manifest forms in actions of individuals and groups (as collective violence), structural violence is often intangible even when it actively limits people's capacities to live a full life or meet even the most basic of the needs that are minimum requirements for life itself. It can, however, exacerbate to take overt forms as «spectacular» violence. The figure of the Muslim woman becomes integral to the representation of the Muslim community as atavistic and dangerous, giving the proponents of Hindutva, the justification to intervene and rescue her through laws such as the Uniform Civil Code, that reiterate her passivity. It is significant also how «activist» Muslim women could be appropriated within a Hindutva regime (e.g., in the case of Triple Talaq) or rendered disruptive and delegitimised as anti-national when they made spaces like *chowks* and *chaurahs* – part of their familiar life words – into public spaces of appearance and action. Shaheen Bagh was one such familiar place – a neighbourhood – in the proximity of Jamia Millia Islamia,

close to the border of Delhi with NOIDA in Uttar Pradesh. Over the course of the protests, Shaheen Bagh, a place name, became a metaphor for citizen democracy guided by radical empathy, setting in motion a process whereby «the city street» assumed ubiquity as space where «new forms of the social and political [could] be *made*» (Sassen 2011, 574).

In the ethnographic accounts across chapters but especially in Chapters two and six, the author presents the modalities through which the gendered dynamics of the communal paradigm is navigated and also resisted by those who «live and participate» in the «gendered dynamics of conflict cycles». The everyday navigation of social and political power as well as spectacular resistance become performances, making the processes of subjectivation and inhabitation of religiously marked spaces complex. In doing this the author makes important connections between communalism and socio-economic stratification, with caste as its most significant indicator. Narratives of intersections of social experience of caste, class, community and gender, and their framing of lived experiences in the old city, have been presented by the author as ways in which «subjects of communalism» negotiate and enact differential expressions of social belonging, rupturing «communalisation» of experiences. While the imbrication of caste in the process of communalisation is left tantalisingly underexplored, chapter six is a powerful exposition of the polyrhythms of «collective conversations» among women in community development projects in the Old City. Titled «Communal Conflicts and Women's Everyday Life», the chapter gives a compelling account of «interfaith initiatives» in areas characterised by violence. It is in this chapter that Mangiarotti presents a sustained engagement with essentialist gender ideologies, consistent with a «feminist peace perspective». She examines the community as a fraught social space where «women» are located ambivalently as «agents of peace and victims of communal conflict». Drawing upon ethnographic data, Mangiarotti argues that her research participants were conscious of their location within the family/community and everyday realities of marginalisation. At the same time, they professed an unambiguous awareness of the transformative potential of «daily practices in the social space of interfaith relations». Such a space was created through «everyday cooperation» with community development projects led by local NGOs that emerged as a response to and corroded the dominant figuration of the Old City as a conflict-ridden space of adversarial community relations. In these spaces Muslim and lower caste women permeated/perforated the binary logic of separate spaces to produce spaces of «harmony» on a daily basis. In an innovative use of «Centre» – the word used by the local residents to refer to the building of the Henry Martyn Institute (HMI) – as a spatial metaphor indicative of the building's location at the interface of the Hindu and Muslim *zones*, Mangiarotti refers to the «act» of daily movement of people across these zones to the *Centre*, as reinforcing the Centre as a space of interfaith harmony. These acts rupture the spatial

segregation of zones as sites embodying existing and potential conflict, and the Centre at the interface both joining and separating these zones, transcending «the symbolic and physical boundaries between Hindus and Muslims». The daily act of crossing these boundaries is a public act performed by women, making these boundaries permeable, enabling as the author says, the dismantling of walls that prevent the development of «familiarity» and «access» to the lives of others.

As an «intercommunity» site, the Centre builds a «politics of relationship» offering the possibility of political action «located and expressed in the mundane». Mangiarotti argues that the participants in the Centre's activity saw the community as the «locus of experiential knowledge». In particular, it was intimate knowledge of violence that made the community important – «they know the violence, they know what they need» – as one of her participants expressed – which made interfaith activity effective. Yet, quite like the anti-CAA protests, women's «active role in peace» also assumed «public» forms where Muslim and lower caste women, encouraged by civil society organisations, held hands to form a human chain surrounding the iconic Charminar in the Old City, to prevent violence after Friday prayers in March 2010 in a context of bombings, when communal feelings were especially charged. The idea of «sensational action» with the intention of creating a «buffer zone», the author argues, simultaneously exposed and re-signified the positioning of women in the face communal violence. «Taking action» was a constant refrain in women's narratives, which the author argues placed them within a field of «transversal politics», where women transcended and redrew borders of politicised differences by creative protests.

While Chapters Two and Six, are in my opinion, the most important contributions of the study, the significance of the intervening chapters – Three, Four and Five – lies in mapping the politics of occlusion that frames the communal paradigm in which residents of Old City are located. Chapter Three traces the decline of the Old City and contestations over its «Muslim» past that resonated in deeply troubling ways in the movement for a new state of Telangana. These contestations, the author argues have shaped the narratives of the past and present in Hindu Nationalist discourses. Violence, however, takes many forms. In denying people their history it inflicts an ontological wound. Yet, violence is also epistemological in the sense of populating the urban spaces with religious and cultural symbols of aggressive Hindu masculinities which the author terms «Hindutva's changing choreographies of belonging in the urban space». Chapter Four is an elaboration of the cultural tropes that reaffirm Hindutva's claims to the urban space, while marginalising the Muslim body as a violent other. These, as Chapter Five would argue, pave the way for political elision in which the space for articulation of a Muslim political identity is limited by discourses that present it as a community either in need of reform or containment. The contribution of the book lies precisely in providing a persuasive narrative grounded in

historical-anthropological enquiry into the processes through which a communal paradigm of power gets entrenched and the banal and spectacular ways in which feminist solidarities perforate and corrode it. While doing so, the author offers creative insights from the field through narratives of women making sense of power relations in their lives even as they participate in «community development programmes», turning them into spaces for peace activism. It is important to note that the idea of peace as harmony, embodied in the «Centre» as a physical border *and* bridge, is replete with a feminist transversal practice of critical engagement, which is dialogical and continually evolving. Feminist transversal politics in spaces occluded by right wing politics presents challenges to hegemonic cultural meanings and opens up possibilities of political and ideological alliances and solidarities against normalisation of communal politics.

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THE MAKING OF THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST: WHEN THE PERIPHERY
RULES THE CENTRE

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Guillemette Crouzet, *Inventing the Middle East: Britain and the Persian Gulf in the Age of Global Imperialism*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022, 284 pp. (ISBN 978-0-2280-1406-5).

With *Inventing the Middle East*, we are presented with a scientifically rigorous and valuable study. This book offers an insightful interpretation of the events that led the United Kingdom to conceptualise the *Middle East* as a geopolitical entity and to assume a central political and economic role in the region. It is a well-written book, which is a pleasure to read.

Crouzet suggests a new and extended periodisation for the history of the modern Middle East, as a unified region, arguing for an earlier beginning, prior to the discovery of oil in the 1920s and 1930s. She does so by setting forth a different historical perspective, one through which scholars have usually investigated the role of the region in the international system between the late 1780s and the early 1910s.

Thanks to her approach, the author provides a compelling analysis of the political, geopolitical, and cultural factors underpinning British presence in the Middle East, starting from the analysis of the British diplomatic activities in the Gulf from the end of the eighteenth century to the start of the twentieth century. These activities were shaped by French initiatives in the region – such as Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 and Bourbon diplomatic engagements in North Africa and Persia, in the first decades of the nineteenth century – and later by the perceived threat of Russian expansionism (in Central Asia or, again, in Persia aimed at enlarging the Romanoff Empire).

The book's central argument is persuasive: it highlights the inherent tensions and flaws that characterised British India's policy toward the Gulf. The first two chapters demonstrate how, despite attempts at consolidation, the absence of a coherent imperial project hindered British policy in the area during the first half of the nineteenth century. All the difficulties in crushing the Qasimi piracy – which was not only an economic source for the local authorities, but an instrument of political affirmation among populations for the local noble families and which was seen by presidencies in India as a considerable obstruction to trade and stability – illustrate the inconsistencies, in that time interval, of British regional influence.

Crouzet makes this point because, on the one hand, rather than to evaluate the local events through the traditional lens of the Great Powers' chess game in the area and in Asia, placing London's leadership at the centre of the political contacts, she maintains that the Indian periphery, driven by East India Company's political and economic interests, prevailed in inducing the British meddling into the region, until the Company's dissolution after the Indian Rebellion of 1857. On the other, she rightly notes that both before and after the Company's governmental responsibilities were transferred to the Crown, the British authorities and the governors or Viceroy's dictated the political agenda in the Middle East and Persian Gulf; hence the Indian interests often taking precedence over the homeland's concerns, with London playing a more peripheral role in setting the geopolitical agenda.

Thus, Crouzet adheres to the historiographical studies school flourished in the David K. Fieldhouse's stream of analysis (for example in his *Economics and Empire, 1830-1914*, published in the now distant 1973), where Fieldhouse successfully emphasised the existence of a much more articulated relationship between European Great Powers and their colonial or imperial peripheries during the Age of Imperialism, which presided the European expansion in Africa, Asia and (precisely) Middle East. This, according to Crouzet, explains why, for example, the British government made very little effort to enforce the 1807 *Abolition of Slave Trade Act* in the region, where the slave trade and the use of slaves as divers was necessary to maintain the high level of local pearl harvesting (the most precious in the world), the marketing of which was very profitable both for London and for Indian authorities (Chapter 4, "The Globalization of the Gulf Economy").

Crouzet's analysis of the British imperial fragilities, the intricate web of perceived challenges to British India's indirect rule over one of its amphibious border areas, the increasingly aggressive, yet inconsistent, policy toward unruly local power players, the attempts and mistakes, which led to a broader and enduring uses of spectacular military expeditions in the area and its immediate environment bring the reader to the subsequent step, that is the analysis of the cultural shift in the British attitude towards the region.

Actually, the transformation of the Persian Gulf as the gateway to the Middle East into a geopolitical area under British control, directly or (more frequently) indirectly carried out, was in need of such an evolution. We cannot condemn this back-and-forth policy, given the fact that the British themselves had to learn not only how to act in the area, but even the exact geographical reality of it. The author devotes Chapter 3 to the efforts made for the geographical construction of the region by British hydrographers and topographers, who made three explorations of it during the "long nineteenth century", for mapping all the coasts and harbours. The cultural construction of the Middle East and Gulf influenced the decision-making of British and Indian political and commercial elites, who became increasingly

interested in archaeology, ancient history, and the vestiges of local past societies, linking them to the region's future role as a critical component of the route to India. The region was portrayed not only as a place of past glories but also as one that could be revived under the right influence: namely, the Raj's assumed ability to transform unhospitable areas into fertile ones.

This combination of enthusiastic interest in antiquity and a fierce desire to create futuristic utopias makes it clear why the Middle East and Persian Gulf have long been within Britain's sphere of influence.

Another significant contribution of the book lies in its application of the concept of globalization to Gulf history. Crouzet convincingly demonstrates how the end of the old political equilibrium in the Gulf and its reinvention under British control – marked the end of old economic and political ties with the Arabian Peninsula, the Red Sea, the Ottoman Empire, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Ironically, it was these contacts that initially drew the Indian (and later British) authorities in Bombay, Calcutta, and London to the region, where they sought to extract profits. The region's integration into a new web of geopolitical and economic relations laid the foundation for the Gulf's modern identity, which has remained largely unchanged since the post-1945 Cold War period. Particularly, Crouzet provides a detailed analysis of the flows of weapons, pearls, and palm dates that originated, or ended, in the region; and convincingly proves that the area became part of the world wider trading system well before oil and gas changed its economy and revenues.

While *Inventing the Middle East* is a methodologically sound and accessible study, its reliance on British documentary and bibliographical sources is a limitation. Future studies on this theme could benefit from a broader range of sources, such as French and Russian sources, but also, for example, the Wahhabi chronicles, Ottoman archives, Egyptian sources, and Qajar documentation, as well as local oral traditions and archaeological surveys based on newly adopted technological studies (such as the video mapping technology). These additional sources could bring new and fresh information on what the Gulf and its different sites were before the British arrival in the region. All these historical sources could help to better assess the local potentates and population's reaction to the shifting political landscape, in favour of an European power: an unusual transformation, given the fact that the previous relations with the Europeans, which dated to the arrival of Portuguese merchants and sailors in the sixteenth century, had left the regional political condition unchanged.

Nevertheless, *Inventing the Middle East* is an insightful and engaging study of how the British envisioned and shaped the Gulf from the 1780s to the early twentieth century. It carefully deconstructs the political and legal structures that emerged from the British interactions with local authorities, making it an essential read for historians and students of Near Eastern studies, global history, and imperialism.

IMPERIALISM WITHOUT EMPIRE?
THE SWISS AND THEIR LEGACIES OF TRANSIMPERIAL MERCENARISM

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Philipp Krauer, *Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies: A Transimperial History of Military Labour, 1848-1914*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Leiden University Press, 2024, 236 pp. (ISBN 978-9-0872-8414-5).

Due to its political neutrality, economic growth, and multiculturalism, the history of modern Switzerland after 1848 has often been self-characterized as a special case («*Sonderfall*») within the broader dynamics of European history.¹ In contrast to Europe's tainted history of imperialism and colonialism, this distinctiveness seems justified—Switzerland never had a formal colony. However, since the early 2000s, historians such as Patricia Purtschert, Francesca Falk, Harald Fischer-Tiné, and Bernhard Schär, among others, have challenged this view by demonstrating how colonialism, along with the violence and racism that came with it, were integral to the making of modern Switzerland.² Philipp Krauer's *Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies* is a significant contribution to this growing body of work.

At the core of the book are the stories of 5,800 Swiss mercenaries who enlisted in the Royal Dutch East Indies Army (*Koninklijk Nederlands-Indisch Leger*, KNIL) in the Netherlands East Indies. In tracing the stories of these young, mostly underprivileged, Swiss men, Krauer shows how young Swiss actively participated in the European colonial project throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Krauer's approach is situated between two historiographical traditions: the so-called «New Military History» a trend which began in the 1960s, that examines military history through the lens of social, cultural, and economic history; and «New Imperial History» which concep-

1. See Clive H. Church and Randolph C. Head, *A Concise History of Switzerland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), chap. 8; On the *Sonderfall* concept, see Georg Kreis, «*Sonderfall*,» *Historisches Lexikon der Schweiz*, December 20, 2012, <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/de/articles/049556/2012-12-20/>.

2. Patricia Purtschert, Francesca Falk, and Barbara Lüthi, «Switzerland and 'Colonialism without Colonies': Reflections on the Status of Colonial Outsiders,» *Interventions* 18, no. 2 (March 3, 2016): 286–302; Bernhard C. Schär, «Switzerland, Borneo and the Dutch Indies: Towards a New Imperial History of Europe, c. 1770–1850,» *Past & Present* 257, no. 1 (December 31, 2022): 134–67; Patricia Purtschert and Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins*, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

tualizes empires as networks of circulation of people, objects, or ideas. In tackling this multi-pronged approach, the author builds upon Daniel Headrick's framework in *Tools of Empire* (1981) by conceptualizing Swiss mercenaries as «agents of historical entanglements» or, living «tools of empire» within the broader scheme of European imperialisms.³

The book asks three main questions. What was the role of the Swiss mercenaries in the perpetuation of Dutch colonial power? How did these Swiss mercenaries interact with each other, their Dutch masters, and the indigenous population? And following Bernhard C. Schär's conception of the «trans-imperial» what was the role of the Swiss in the construction and perpetuation of a «trans-imperial military labor market» that allowed the Dutch to recruit men for their fledgling imperial wars while also providing care and pensions to their veterans?⁴ Ultimately, Krauer examines how these experiences with imperialism helped shape modern Switzerland [p. 18].

In answering these questions, the book's argument is quite straightforward. Through its participation within the European trans-imperial military labour market, «thousands of Swiss mercenaries were also deployed both outside of Europe and after the founding of the modern federal state in 1848[,]» thus contributing to Dutch imperialism and the violence that came with it» [p. 153]. The book's primary contribution is to reposition the Swiss as active players in European imperialism abroad—and show how this participation shaped the history of the modern Swiss nation-state.

In Chapter II, Krauer provides an overview of the shape and dynamics of the trans-imperial military labour market that emerged in 19th century Europe. He points out that during the second half of the 19th century, the Dutch employed Swiss mercenaries in large numbers. This was due to the Dutch wars of colonial expansion in the Malay Archipelago, namely the costly Java War (1825-1830) and the Aceh Wars (1873-1912). Meanwhile, the European economic crisis of the 1870s also provided a steady supply of young volunteers to the Netherlands [p. 44]. Beyond socioeconomic motivations, Swiss volunteers were drawn by the allure of adventure and the prospect of traveling to the far-flung East Indies [p. 64].

Of course, the life of a colonial soldier was not all adventure, pomp, or glory. In addition to the rigors of military training, Chapter III vividly illustrates how Swiss soldiers encountered the monotony and boredom of military discipline, the social and racial hierarchies in the colonies, the threat of tropical diseases, disillusionment (and insubordination), and ultimately, the nature of colonial violence itself. The author contends that «Swiss mercenaries contributed in various manners to the maintenance and

3. Philipp Krauer, *Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies: A Transimperial History of Military Labour, 1848-1914*, Global Connections: Routes and Roots 9 (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2024), 18.

4. On the notion of the «trans-imperial,» see Schär, «Switzerland, Borneo and the Dutch Indies.»

proliferation of a colonial regime of awe, fear, and violence» [p. 80]. The vivid accounts from Swiss mercenaries – such as Jean Aimé Theodore Humberset, who noted in his diary how his unit burned down several villages during the Borneo War against the Sultanate of Banjarmasin (1859-1863); Karl Schmid, who «praised the courage of a compatriot who sneaked behind enemy lines and set fire to a village» during the Aceh War (1873-1912); or Hans Christoffel, who, as a unit commander in the infamous *Marechausee*, oversaw the violent counterinsurgencies against the Alas and Gayo people during the Aceh War in 1904 [p. 80]. Three years later, in 1907, Christoffel and his unit were deployed to Flores, where they massacred 795 people in a three-month long expedition [p. 82]. Just like the other Europeans in the KNIL, the Swiss recruits originated from the lower strata of society, and they ultimately became perpetrators of colonial violence [p. 83].

In addition to the normal ebb-and-flow of martial life, the author also discusses the Swiss mercenaries' relationships with local concubines (*njai*) and the sexual life of the soldiers. Speaking about the 'vices' of barracks, Krauer explains how concubinage, abolished only in 1913, was often exploitative and abusive [p. 84]. Swiss soldiers recorded their own racialized views of these relationships – Heinrich Brandenberger, for instance, complained how the *njais* «kept up to six men at a time». and Arnold Egloff calls the *njai* was «like a cat», as she «did not remain faithful» and «only loved money, but not the man who would give it» [p. 84]. The mixed-race children of these relationships, often abandoned and/or marginalized, became an underclass within Indies society [p. 85]. However, some Swiss also married their *njais* and brought them back to Switzerland, such as Brandenberger, who married Lina Sampet in 1911, and settled with her in Switzerland in 1920 [p. 85].

One of the book's most interesting aspects is its analysis of how Swiss participation in imperialist projects helped shape Swiss national identity. Quoting historian Rudolf Jaun, the author notes that in the absence of military victories or defeats due to its neutrality, Switzerland instead built its martial-nationalist discourse upon the battles fought by Swiss mercenaries from the 16th to the early 19th centuries.⁵ However, after the formation of the Swiss federal state in 1848, the state distanced itself from the colonial mercenary histories, as they were considered anathema to the self-perceived liberalism of the Swiss political class [p. 65].

The lasting influence of colonialism was also evident in a domain for which Switzerland is renowned for – finance. Central to Chapter IV are the flows of remuneration, from the Dutch colonies and the metropole to the

5. Rudolf Jaun, "Armee Und Nation: Schweizerische Militärdiskurse Des 19. Jahrhunderts Im Widerstreit," in *Die Konstruktion Einer Nation: Nation Und Nationalisierung in Der Schweiz, 18.-20. Jahrhundert*, ed. U. Altermatt, C. Bosshart-Pflugger, and A. Tanner (Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 1998), 150–51; Krauer, *Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies*, 65.

Swiss state, which resulted from the business of mercenaryism. To be fair, colonial soldiers were not a path to wealth. Recruits did accept large signing bonuses when securing their contracts, but most of these funds circulated domestically as they were mostly spent in the colonial training depots of Harderwijk and Nijmegen [p. 97]. In terms of regular pay, however, the levels were quite low – a fact that is well-established in the literature. A soldier's weekly pay was one guilder in 1860, an amount which only increased marginally to 1,65 guilders in 1867 [p. 99]. According to the author, what was important was the constant transmission of pensions and veterans benefits to retired mercenaries in Switzerland. The transfer of these monies depended upon the «trans-imperial labour market» established a century earlier, which consisted of a network of actors and institutions, first the Dutch Consul General in Bern; Dutch private companies J. van Daehne & Co., Furnée & Co., and C.J. Sutterheim; and Swiss Cantonal War Commissioner (such as the one in Basel), and Swiss banking service providers such as Marcuard & Cie [pp. 103-5]. Many of these institutions employed Dutch officials and former Swiss mercenaries or other citizens that had direct experiences in the Dutch colonial sphere. The author suggests that the flow of colonial money from the mercenaries – either from signing bonuses, legal or illegal compensation, or pensions and veterans' disability benefits – supported the livelihoods of the poorer strata of Europeans, even for a country without colonies such as Switzerland.

Ultimately, in chapter V, the author endeavours into post-colonial studies, as he discusses the discursive representation of imperialism and colonialism through the general collective memory of the Swiss nation. Building upon Gloria Wekker's work on the Dutch Empire, the author traces how, through the mercenaries' «colonial gaze» reflected through letters, postcards, memoirs, diaries, and newspaper articles, the Swiss became active participants in the long history of European colonialism.⁶ These personal archives of Swiss mercenaries contain what the author calls the permeation of a «colonial logic» that was built upon a dynamic relationship between the «European self» vis-à-vis the «extra-European other» [p. 128]. The Swiss mercenaries ultimately reproduced the colonial stereotypes of Javanese, Malay, or other «natives» as «simple people», «easily contented», or having a generally «peaceful character».⁷ Meanwhile those from the Outer Islands (Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, or other islands) were considered «savages» the Chinese and Arabs were «untrustworthy», as they were traders – one even compared them with Jews (!), and so on [pp. 130-5]. These stereo-

6. Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Krauer, *Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies*, 121–22.

7. For an excellent discussion on the coloniality of these stereotypes, see Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1977).

types and discourses were distributed and transmitted to the lower classes of urban and rural Switzerland [p. 149]. So much, perhaps, for «*Sonderfall Schweiz*».

While the book makes use of an impressive range of German, French, and Dutch official and private sources – from archives to diaries and photographs – the book's reliance upon European sources means that indigenous perspectives remain largely absent, albeit for a few exceptions. In terms of racial stereotypes, perhaps it would be beneficial to see how the indigenous population viewed the German-speaking members of the KNIL in comparison to their other counterparts. Further, the book could have benefited from the voices of other actors – such as Swiss financiers, traders, engineers, plantation owners, or missionaries. Another interesting path to take is, of course, to examine how other European nation-states benefited from colonial flows of mercenary remuneration such as the case here with the Swiss.

Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies makes a significant contribution towards the historiography of Swiss exceptionalism by revealing Switzerland's entanglements in European imperialism. In tracing the personal accounts of Swiss mercenaries within the KNIL and the networks that they produced, the author offers compelling evidence that Switzerland was an active and complicit actor in Europe's colonial history. The book's strongest contribution lies in its rich multilingual archival work and its ability to connect the Swiss tradition of mercenaryism to the broader debates on the nature and consequences of Dutch and European colonial, racial, and economic entanglements abroad. In this regard, *Swiss Mercenaries in the Dutch East Indies* serves as a crucial addition to the literature on Switzerland's global history and her role in the European global imperial networks.

REPACKAGING COLONIAL VIOLENCE:
RACE, WAR, AND THE MYTH OF BRITISH COUNTERINSURGENCY IN MALAYA

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Kate Imy, *Losing Hearts and Minds: Race, War, and Empire in Singapore and Malaya, 1915-1960*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024, 352 pp. (ISBN: 978-1-5036-3675-3).

Kate Imy's *Losing Hearts and Minds: Race, War, and Empire in Singapore and Malaya, 1915-1960* is a deeply researched and conceptually rich study that interrogates the fraught realities of colonial militarism in Southeast Asia. By centring on the experiences and testimonies of soldiers and civilians across multiple conflicts – including the First World War, the Second World War, and the Malayan Emergency – Imy challenges the often-celebrated narrative of Britain's «successful» counterinsurgency in Malaya. With her analysis extending from the Singapore Mutiny in 1915 to the final years of British colonial rule in the region, she suggests that the famed strategy of «winning hearts and minds,» popularised by Sir Gerald Templer during the Malayan Emergency, was in fact deeply rooted in earlier imperial practices and haunted by persistent failures.¹ The book thus complicates the notion of a singularly triumphant British «model» of counterinsurgency and exposes the racial and gender hierarchies that continually undermined Britain's efforts to secure genuine local support.

Imy's approach blends social, cultural, and military history, illuminating how imperial power operated through overlapping structures of race, class, gender, and faith. Drawing on a remarkably broad source base – letters, diaries, memoirs, court-martial records, propaganda materials, oral histories, and state archives from multiple countries – the book demonstrates that Britain's invocation of «hearts and minds» was far from a benign or purely humanitarian tactic [p. 7]. Rather, it was a mode of colonial governance and warfare that pivoted on the selective inclusion and exclusion of diverse peoples (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Eurasian, and various Commonwealth troops) in a hierarchy that both sought to harness their labour and loyalty yet invariably restricted their access to power. Imy's central argument is that far from decreasing violence, the «hearts-and-minds» rhetoric often

1. Kate Imy, *Losing Hearts and Minds: Race, War, and Empire in Singapore and Malaya, 1915-1960*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024, 2.

intensified colonial oppression, creating a cycle in which civilians and soldiers alike felt betrayed, alienated, and coerced.

A hallmark of strong scholarship lies in its engagement with existing literature and historiographical debates, and *Losing Hearts and Minds* makes significant interventions across multiple fields. In re-examining British Malaya, Imy moves beyond the familiar narrative of a paternalistic colonial administration adept at managing multi-ethnic populations. Rather than accepting the conventional view that Britain's success stemmed from its ability to balance competing interests, she underscores the extent to which racial and gender inequalities were embedded within the structures of colonial rule. Drawing on the work of scholars such as John Newsinger and Karl Hack, she integrates insights from postcolonial theory, particularly the understanding that colonial categories – such as «coloniser» and «colonised», » «white» and «non-white» – were neither fixed nor benign but constituted through violence, exclusion, and contestation.² In her introduction, she explicitly acknowledges a broad historiography that has shaped discussions of the Malayan Emergency as an archetype of counterinsurgency, citing works by C. A. Bayly and Tim Harper, Kumar Ramakrishna, Anthony Short, Richard Stubbs, Leon Comber, David French, and others.³ By weaving these perspectives into her analysis, she challenges the trope of British «success» and highlights how that narrative was sustained by Cold War imperatives and subsequent military doctrines.

This perspective is further reinforced by her approach to the history of war and society, where she departs from traditional military histories that emphasise high-level strategic decisions and diplomatic manoeuvres. Instead, she adopts a bottom-up approach that foregrounds the lived experiences of those who navigated colonial militarisation. Her broad temporal scope, spanning from 1915 to 1960, is especially important in resisting the tendency to treat the Malayan Emergency as an isolated event. By tracing continuities from the early twentieth century, she reveals how ideologies of «martial race», discriminatory labour practices, and racial segregation in military recruitment shaped not only Britain's counterinsurgency strategies

2. John Newsinger, *British Counterinsurgency* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Karl Hack, *Defence and Decolonisation in Southeast Asia: Britain, Malaya and Singapore, 1941–1968* (Richmond, UK: Routledge Curzon, 2001).

3. See C. A. Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: Britain's Asian Empire and the War with Japan* (London: Penguin, 2005); Kumar Ramakrishna, *Emergency Propaganda: The Winning of Malayan Hearts and Minds, 1948–1958* (Richmond, UK: Routledge Curzon, 2002); Anthony Short, *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya, 1948–1960* (London: Muller, 1975); Richard Stubbs, *Hearts and Minds in Guerilla Warfare—the Malayan Emergency, 1948–1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Leon Comber, *Malaya's Secret Police, 1945–60: The Role of the Special Branch in the Malayan Emergency* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, and Australia: Monash Asia Institute, 2008); David French, *The British Way in Counter-Insurgency, 1945–1967* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

but also how colonial subjects perceived imperial rule. Rather than viewing these as distinct phases in British governance, she demonstrates that they were part of a longer history of racialised violence and control.

At the same time, Imy places Singapore and Malaya within a broader transnational and global context. By examining their roles in the First and Second World Wars, the Japanese occupation, and the Cold War, she highlights the extent to which anti-colonial struggles, pan-Asian networks, and inter-imperial conflicts were deeply interconnected. Her analysis aligns with scholars who argue that decolonisation was not a simple shift from colonial empire to local nationalism but rather a process shaped by competing global ideologies and regional struggles. She notes, for instance, the contributions of Christopher E. Goscha and Christian F. Ostermann, situating Singapore and Malaya in the wider context of Cold War fault lines, while also referencing Cheah Boon Kheng, Teng Phee Tan, Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, and others who illuminate the roles of non-European actors [p. 2].⁴ This long-range perspective makes *Losing Hearts and Minds* not only an essential contribution to Southeast Asian history but also a work that speaks to broader questions of empire and its transformations in the twentieth century.

Imy's core argument is that Britain's repeated attempts to bolster its rule by appealing to local «loyalties» rested on a fundamentally unequal foundation. She posits that every incarnation of this strategy—from early colonial policing in the interwar era, to the frantic mobilisation of Asian and Commonwealth soldiers during the Second World War, to the systematic campaign to defeat communist insurgents in the 1950s—was embedded in structural racism and selective recognition of who counted as «loyal». These colonial categories were repeatedly undone by the realities of everyday violence, betrayals, and cultural interaction. As she demonstrates, the gap between the discourse of «hearts and minds» and the lived experiences of individuals was vast. The «hearts-and-minds» approach claimed to foster interracial cooperation but instead reinforced racial hierarchies through forced resettlement, mass internment, and psychological warfare. As seen in colonial policing, where Malay and Chinese officers were reduced to subservient roles to surveil European communists, British counterinsurgency relied on coercion rather than care, leaving many to see colonial rule as repressive rather than legitimate [p. 63].

4. See Christopher E. Goscha and Christian F. Ostermann, *Connecting Histories: Decolonization and the Cold War in Southeast Asia, 1945-1962* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); Cheah Boon Kheng, *Red Star over Malaya: Resistance and Social Conflict during and after the Japanese Occupation of Malaya, 1941-46* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2003); Teng Phee Tan, *Behind Barbed Wire: Chinese New Villages during the Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960* (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2020); Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied, *Radicals: Resistance and Protest in Colonial Malaya* (Delkab: Northern Illinois University Press, 2015).

The book is organised into seven main chapters, each focusing on a different conflict or period, and its structure moves chronologically. The first chapter, *Race War in Singapore*, analyses the 1915 mutiny of Indian troops in Singapore, illustrating how the universalising myth of white British power was shaken by local alliances that crossed expected racial lines. Indian soldiers found willing civilian collaborators from diverse backgrounds – Malay, Chinese, and even some European – challenging British assumptions that whiteness itself guaranteed loyalty or compliance. As Frank Kershaw Wilson reflected on the uprising, he experienced «*an unpleasant consciousness of being a white man*», a sentiment that, as Imy argues, «*laid bare the vulnerability of colonial racial hierarchies and the military state meant to support them*» [p. 13]. The mutiny revealed that British control was more fragile than it appeared, as soldiers and civilians alike defied racial divisions imposed by the colonial order. The second chapter, *Making Enemies between the Wars*, examines the aftermath of the 1915 mutiny, showing how British authorities militarised policing and reinforced racial hierarchies. Chinese and Japanese communities in Singapore found that British gratitude for their wartime support was fleeting. Japanese journalist Koji Tsukuda recalled that the British had «*greatly valued*» Japanese intervention, even claiming they outperformed British forces. Yet, by 1917, the British General Staff dismissed their role, stating that «*the Japanese did not do much*» [p. 47]. This selective recognition of loyalty deepened mistrust and foreshadowed racial tensions that shaped colonial rule in the interwar years.

The following three chapters examine the Second World War and the Japanese occupation. Imy argues that the fall of Singapore in 1942 underscored fundamental British failures to protect the colony. Despite official propaganda, white British soldiers were prioritised for evacuation, while local populations, particularly the Chinese, bore the brunt of Japanese reprisals. Civilians' relationships with the Japanese occupiers varied widely, ranging from forced labour to uneasy cooperation and genuine collaboration. As Imy observes, «*Facing British and then Japanese indifference, many soldiers depended on civilians for survival, further reducing their exalted status as men of arms*», a reliance that «*gave civilians repeated exposure to soldiers' frailties, underlining the loss of British power*» [p. 145]. The experience of Prisoner of War (POW) and internment camps further blurred the lines between friend and foe, though racial ideologies remained deeply entrenched. Attempts to reassert martial-race status or to align with anti-colonial sentiment shaped identities during this time of acute crisis.

The final two chapters focus on the Malayan Emergency (1948–1960), with a particular emphasis on the British-led counterinsurgency campaign against predominantly Chinese communist guerrillas. Imy rejects conventional readings that celebrate Templer's «*hearts-and-minds*» approach as a prime example of enlightened counterinsurgency. Instead, she underscores the campaign's heavy reliance on extrajudicial killings, the forced resettlement

ment of entire Chinese communities into «New Villages», and psychological operations that targeted civilian women's bodies and reproduction as sites of ideological control. Imy writes, «Templer rebranded many aspects of the Emergency without changing its essential components, for instance renaming 'bandits' communist terrorists (CTs) and resettlement areas 'New Villages.' The underlying practice of extreme violence remained» [p. 205]. For Imy, the so-called success of the Malayan Emergency is a myth that persists partly because it has been frequently invoked – especially in American counterinsurgency circles – as a model. Her archival evidence, however, confirms that British efforts to minimise violence by winning over civilian populations were consistently undermined by the same racial biases and gender hierarchies that had defined colonial rule for decades.

One of the book's great strengths is Imy's multifaceted use of sources. She draws on archival collections from Britain, Australia, New Zealand, India, Nepal, Malaysia, and Singapore. Moreover, she underscores the importance of oral histories collected in different languages, and she is candid about the frailties of translation and transcription. By foregrounding these methodological challenges, Imy highlights the interpretative choices she must make in reconstructing local voices – particularly those of individuals marginalised by race, class, or gender. This makes the text not just a historical study but also an exercise in historiographical reflection [p. 9]. Such meticulous engagement with first-hand testimonies – especially diaries, letters, and personal interviews – enables Imy to illuminate the emotional dimensions of war and empire. She is attuned to how fear, betrayal, and aspiration shaped people's decisions to collaborate, resist, or simply survive. Crucially, she does not reduce these choices to a simple binary of «loyal» or «disloyal», «heroic» or «traitorous». Instead, she insists upon the contingent nature of human agency under conditions of extreme stress. The tension between the official archive (military reports, propaganda leaflets, state documents) and personal stories is a central motif throughout the book, giving it a powerful human dimension.

Imy's analysis of «hearts and minds» as a deeply gendered and racialised project is particularly compelling. Building on conceptual insights from Ann Laura Stoler, Homi Bhabha, and other theorists of colonial discourse, the author demonstrates how British rule systematically conflated whiteness with legitimacy and authority.⁵ This conflation explains why, in moments of crisis (e.g., 1915 mutiny, 1942 Japanese invasion), British officers found themselves baffled by the «inexplicable» alliances among Asians—alliances they had dismissed as improbable given the supposedly natural racial hierarchies. Further, the «hearts-and-minds» rhetoric and the paternalistic

5. Ann Laura Stoler, «Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusion in Colonial Southeast Asia», *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34, no. 3 (July 1992): 514–51; Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995).

assumption that British colonial officials could «uplift» or «protect» local populations served to mask the systemic violence intrinsic to the colonial order [p. 69].

Gender likewise emerges as a critical axis of inequality. Women – particularly Chinese and Eurasian women – appear both as the objects of state propaganda and as agents who navigated spaces of forced labour, internment, and resettlement. Imy devotes sustained attention to how the colonial regime, and later Commonwealth forces in the Emergency, used women's bodies and reproductive capacities as symbols of either compliance or subversion. The propaganda images she cites (showing communist women giving birth in the jungle vs. the domestic serenity of women aligned with the colonial state) illustrate how crucial gender tropes were in shaping the rhetorical strategies of British power [p. 234].

Imy's ability to balance theoretical discussions with meticulous historical research ensures that her work remains accessible while deeply engaged with postcolonial critiques of racialised colonial structures. She aligns with postcolonial scholars in her analysis of race, gender, and imperial discourse but never allows theoretical abstraction to overshadow the empirical richness of her study. Instead, she seamlessly integrates conceptual discussions with close readings of textual and oral evidence, producing a work that is both analytically rigorous and grounded in human experiences. Her ethical engagement with the process of scholarship is also evident, particularly in the introduction and acknowledgements, where she reflects on the challenges of academic labour and the impact of institutional constraints. By situating her research within the realities of conducting scholarship during the COVID-19 pandemic, she offers a candid commentary on the intersection of intellectual work and institutional power [p. xi].

There are, however, areas where readers might have wished for further engagement. While her discussion of the Japanese occupation includes perspectives from British, Eurasian, and local Asian actors, one might wonder whether deeper engagement with Japanese-language materials could have provided additional insights. The absence of these sources – perhaps due to linguistic constraints or archival restrictions – may limit the full picture of how the Japanese military understood the shifting loyalties in Singapore and Malaya. Similarly, although the book convincingly situates Singapore and Malaya as key points within a broader imperial network, a more explicit comparison with contemporaneous crises in Burma or the Dutch East Indies could have further reinforced her argument about the continuity of colonial structures. Nonetheless, this focus on Singapore and Malaya is not a weakness but a strategic choice that ensures narrative depth.

Another consideration is the extent to which continuity is emphasised throughout the book. While Imy makes a compelling case for the persistent structures of racialised governance and counterinsurgency, there are moments where greater attention to contingency might have further nuanced

the analysis. The distinct local political dynamics of the 1910s, for example, as compared to the early Cold War era, could have been explored in more detail to highlight not just the continuities but also the transformations in British colonial governance. The book effectively dismantles the triumphalism surrounding the Malayan Emergency, but additional clarity on what specifically changed in governance strategies, beyond the intensification of policing, might have added further depth to her argument.

Imy's work will be vital for scholars of empire, colonial and postcolonial studies, Southeast Asian history, and military historians looking to understand the lived dimensions of war. Graduate students in history, political science, anthropology, and cultural studies will find the book's interdisciplinary methodology – marrying archival work with theoretical insights – particularly instructive. Instructors designing courses on the British Empire, World War II in the Pacific, and decolonisation can draw on Imy's chapters to illuminate themes of race, gender, and power in an accessible yet deeply analytical manner. For undergraduate teaching, excerpts from *Losing Hearts and Minds* – especially sections dealing with personal letters, diaries, and the propaganda images – could effectively illustrate the complexities of wartime collaboration, the interchange of local and global forces, and the emotional toll of colonial warfare on everyday lives. Furthermore, Imy's critical stance toward the notion of «successful» counterinsurgency in Malaya offers a useful foil to more traditional military histories that treat Templer's approach as a polished model for modern warfare.

In *Losing Hearts and Minds*, Kate Imy provides an essential corrective to simplistic treatments of British counterinsurgency and imperial policy in Southeast Asia. By digging into the tangled layers of personal testimony, racialised military recruitment, gendered propaganda, and the harsh realities of internment and forced resettlement, she underscores that colonial power did not so much «win» as it forcibly imposed itself – often at the expense of those whose hearts and minds were supposedly being courted. The book's significance lies in its compelling demonstration that the Malayan Emergency, while invoked in later decades (most notably by American leaders in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan) as a model counterinsurgency, was a project shaped by deeply flawed colonial logics – logics which perpetuated systemic violence and racism under the guise of reform. Imy's insistence that we view the Emergency within a broader arc of twentieth-century conflict in Malaya and Singapore disrupts the myth of an exceptional «success story». Instead, she points to a history replete with ruptures, betrayals, and shifting allegiances, none of which are easily reduced to neat narratives of good governance. From a stylistic standpoint, Imy writes with clarity and engagement. She balances theoretical sophistication with a consistent sense of compassion for those caught up in the imperial machine. The inclusion of extensive personal stories anchors the book in a tangible reality, ensuring it never becomes a purely abstract treatise. Scholars and students will appre-

ciate this balance of rigorous academic detail and attention to the human dimensions of historical processes.

In conclusion, *Losing Hearts and Minds* stands as a major contribution to the study of empire, war, and decolonisation in Southeast Asia. By uncovering the racial, gendered, and emotional scaffolding that underwrote Britain's military ventures in Singapore and Malaya, Imy reorients our understanding of «hearts-and-minds» warfare. Instead of an innovative strategy that minimised force, it was a repackaging of colonial violence, reinforced by paternalistic rhetoric and the illusion of racial brotherhood. Imy's carefully crafted research, broad temporal scope, and vivid narrative arc ensure that her study will become a touchstone for those investigating the entwined histories of race, war, and imperial power in Asia—and, indeed, for anyone interested in the complexities of colonial rule worldwide.

MARITIME CONNECTIONS:
NAVIGATING THROUGH VIETNAMESE HISTORY

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Li Tana, *A Maritime Vietnam. From Earliest Times to the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024, 341 pp. (ISBN 978-1-009-23764-2).

In the early twenty-first century, Vietnam's relationship with the sea is undeniable. On the one hand, the S-shaped country's 3260-kilometre-long coastline welcomes a growing number of national and international tourists, enjoying the modernising seafront on the Pacific Ocean or discovering the beauty of Vietnamese bays from the deck of cruise liners. On the other hand, sea borders fuelled tensions with neighbouring countries, especially People's Republic of China, over the control of the East Sea—also known as the South China Sea—along with its islands and rich fisheries and energy resources.

Recently, scholars have begun to explore Vietnam's maritime history, particularly from the perspective of colonial and post-colonial Indochinese ports.¹ In *A Maritime Vietnam*, historian Li Tana takes a step further by examining the sea connections of eastern Indochina before the nineteenth century. By getting to the roots of Vietnamese history, she aims to partake in its historiographic renewal inasmuch as she goes beyond its traditional frame, based on rural territories as well as on a national and nationalist approach. Currently an Honorary Senior Fellow at the Australian National University's College of Asia and Pacific Studies in Canberra, Li completes and widens her previous works dealing with both the Mekong region and the Tonkin Gulf.² Rather than presenting a history of the East Sea and its Vietnamese coastline, she explores the ways in which maritime dynamics shaped Southeast Asian governance, economies, societies, cultures, and re-

1. See for instance the international conference organised in Đà Nẵng in 2022: "From the Port to the World. A Global History of Indochinese Ports (1858-1956)", University of Sciences and Education – University of Đà Nẵng, 27-29 October 2022: <https://www.gis-reseau-asie.org/evenement/colloque-international-du-port-au-monde-une-histoire-globale-des-ports-indochinois-1858>.

2. *The Nguyen Cochinchina: Southern Vietnam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Ithaca/New York: Cornell University Press/Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1998. Li Tana also edited: with Nola Cook, *Water Frontier: Commerce and the Chinese in the Lower Mekong Region, 1750-1880*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004; with James A. Anderson, *The Tongking Gulf through History*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023.

ligions. She informs us on the genesis of modern Vietnam, shedding light on what Vietnam was *and* is, linking past and present through the lens of a *longue-durée* history.

Li's book is structured around case studies that are skilfully interconnected, offering a broad yet cohesive picture of Vietnam's maritime past. The study unfolds in three main sections. The first three chapters focus on the pre-Dai Viet period, laying the foundations of ancient sea-land connections (Chapter 1). From the beginning, some common features are highlighted, *i.e.*, the effects of geomorphological changes, the development of port cities as well as agricultural activities – especially linked to the cultivation of rice –, and the impact of local and regional migration. During the first millennium AD, two territories played their cards right: China-dominated Jiaozhi (Chapter 2) and Linyi (Chapter 3). The first one appears to be an economic and cultural hub, through the diffusion of aromatics and Buddhism, testifying of Sino-Indian relations. It faced southern competition with Cham's Linyi, also specializing in aromatic plants used in religious cults, and expanding north and south. As early as the eleventh century, Dai Viet did not put an end to regional connections.

The second section of the book examines the rise of Dai Viet and its «Maritime Resurgence» (Chapter 4). From the eleventh century onwards, despite the inland location of the first imperial city, Thanh Long, the Ly dynasty actively engaged with the sea. Forced migration and maritime raids were central to territorial expansion. Salt production, particularly from coastal marshlands, became a key economic activity. Meanwhile, further south, Champa remained a major economic hub benefitting from a Chinese presence and, above all, from its role in Muslim trading networks (Chapter 5). The regional incorporation of Vietnam into Muslim trade networks, including ceramic circulation, persisted until the sixteenth century (Chapter 6). The Vietnamese took the most of the Ming dynasty's ban of foreign trade, filling the gap thanks to the arrival of craftsmen from China.

The third section explores Vietnam's transformation during the Age of Commerce (sixteenth–eighteenth centuries) considering Tongking, in the north of the Indochinese Peninsula, (Chapter 7) and Dang Trong/Cochinchina, in the South (Chapter 8). The northern territory became integrated into the global silk and silver trade, in which Japan was a significant player. These commercial networks transformed the Tongking's society and territory particularly through the multiplication of markets and communal halls (*đình*), which served as trading posts and social spaces. The involvement of women in peddling activities also renegotiated social and sexual relations while maritime wealth strengthened the role of villages as much as that of the administrative elite, with an increasing number of literati replacing the military on the political scene. In Cochinchina, the Nguyễn established a distinct «Maritime Entity» in the seventeenth century. They adopted Malay-style *ghe bầu* ships, developed maritime salvage operations,

and expanded their influence over key ports and entrepôts. Cochinchina, thus became an intermediary between China and Japan, integrating forest products into its commercial networks.

The final chapters examine the decline of Vietnam's «water frontier» through political and economic changes following the Tay Son rebellion which started in the 1770s. By the mid-eighteenth century, a great diversity of products circulated via Vietnamese ports, including rice, tea, tin, pepper, and sugar. Trade reached its peak in the 1760s, driven by triangular exchanges between the Gulf of Siam, Hué and Canton. However, speculation, corruption, and the Tay Son uprising disrupted this network, leading to the mass emigration of Chinese established in the peninsula, a major link in the trade chain, and economic regression. Chapter 9 details this economic regression, while Chapter 10 explores the Nguyễn dynasty failure to ensure economic prosperity. Unlike other Southeast and East Asian states, the Nguyễn struggled to ensure political integration and economic stability. Instead, regionalism prevailed: southern ports remained export-oriented, while the North was subjected to a grain-shipping system, named '*tao van*', in order to feed the Central provinces. After decades of free trade, rice consequently became a highly political commodity.

All in all, this book offers a stimulating study of the history of Vietnam that does not ignore politics and dynasties but links them to economic, social, and cultural phenomena. The book puts the predominance of political facts and actors into perspective, stressing the role and agency of economic actors, including craftsmen, smugglers, and migrants. While questioning land and sea borders, the historian also reveals the shaping and unshaping of territories that took part in the formation of Vietnam and the Vietnamese society to the present day.

Li's approach offers a connected history highlighting the complex entanglement of relations forged on the Indochinese peninsula. While China remains central, Li's book widens the horizon by considering other Asian populations and territories, to include Muslim merchants from the Middle East and the Ottoman Empire, as well as European traders, particularly the Dutch VOC and the British. In doing so, her work not only addresses historians of Vietnam but represents a valuable piece of Southeast Asian global history. Li employs a *connected history methodology* that ignores the borders between history and archaeology, geomorphology, and, to a lower extent, economy, literature and poetry. Archaeological findings are put to the forefront right beside a particularly rich use of the existing Vietnamese, Chinese, English, French and Japanese scholarship. If some of the attached maps, especially in the first chapters, could appear quite blurry to readers freshly diving into the history of Vietnam and Southeast Asia, this is easily counterbalanced by Li's thoughtful and instructive writing style. Furthermore, her use of micro-history along with detailed case studies of human and commodity circulation serve a dual function: it compensates the lack of

historical evidence in order to seize the social dimension of sea-land connections and facilitate the understanding of complex interactions. Through this study, Li Tana's book paves the way for new studies on Vietnam, and Southeast Asia, transcending traditional boundaries.

SEARCHING FOR MIGRANT VOICES IN THE GLOBAL ARCHIVE

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Martin Dusinberre, *Mooring the Global Archive: A Japanese Ship and its Migrant Histories*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023, 304 pp. (ISBN 978-1-009-34651-1). DOI: 10.1017/9781009346535

In his second monograph, Martin Dusinberre presents new research on Japanese labour migration to the Hawai'i and Australia in the late nineteenth century, contextualising it within broader processes of imperialism, settler colonialism, and industrialisation. At the same time, he explores the coal extraction and trade that enabled steamships to move across the Asia-Pacific region. Adopting a global history framework, the book critically engages with established narratives, using empirical findings to address epistemic and methodological issues in a way that challenges established views. As the author states in the Preface [p. xxi], these methodological concerns lie at the heart of his study.

The book contains six chapters, each of which introduces a specific primary source – a painting, a court testimony (as quoted in a newspaper report), a map, a filed statement, or a diary entry – as a gateway into the case study under discussion. These sources frame broader analytical themes while also prompting reflections on historical methodology. Each chapter follows a similar structure: a discussion of the primary source leads to an investigation of a historical problem, followed by a concluding section where the author addresses the methodological implications of his findings. While the chapters can be read independently, their thematic coherence and consistent design contribute to the book's overall unity.

Chapter 1 introduces the *Yamashiro-maru*, a Japanese steamer built in England in 1884, whose two-decade career included early service in the government-sponsored programme for labour migration to the Hawai'i (1885–94). The ship's history serves as a starting point for the discussion of global interactions, but also to spark reflections on historical method. Dusinberre rejects the temptation to build a linear narrative by tracking the lifespan of the *Yamashiro-maru*, out of concern that such a conventional approach might lead him to pursue «a diffusionist view of progress» that would emphasise Japan's effort to catch up with the West [p. 13]. He then signals two other «archival traps» of which he became aware in the course of his investigations. One is reliance on digitised collections that reproduce, or even amplify, the epistemic bias of their physical archives of origin. Through sev-

eral examples across the book, Dusiñberre makes it a point that institutional archives reflect the perspective of those who selected and recorded the information; therefore, they tend to underrepresent the voices of people that were subaltern because of their gender, social class or ethnicity. The other trap lies in the distraction written sources overall provide from other material evidence that can be crucial to filling archival gaps, as well as to understanding the specific context in which the archives were born and grew.

Chapter 2 explores Japanese migration to Hawai'i, focusing on the socio-economic motives, work conditions in the sugarcane fields and contrasting representations of the labourers by various institutional actors and press writers. Besides using sources to deconstruct the migrants' supposedly homogenous identity, Dusiñberre argues that, from the viewpoint of native Hawaiians, the main reason to promote immigration from Japan might have been not to solve a labour shortage problem, but rather to repopulate their islands through marriages with another Pacific nation whom they perceived as relatively close to themselves.

Chapter 3 complements the previous one by extending the inquiry to other sources that shed light on the mentality of migrant workers, their cultural background and the ties they maintained with their hometowns. The analysis centres on a specific case from Western Japan, that is the port town of Murotsu and its inland districts. Dusiñberre concludes that the emigrants' work culture, while familiar with concepts of economic circulation, did not embrace a labour-intensive mode of production; therefore, their attitude does not fit into the theory of an «industrious revolution» sustaining growth in nineteenth century Japan and parts of Europe. The chapter also reconsiders the relationship between Japanese immigrants and native Hawaiians, intervening in the historiographic debate over the former group's possible role as conscious agents of settler colonialism. Dusiñberre remains dubitative about intentionality but points out that successful immigrants in practice built their status upon a system of dispossession of the natives.

Chapter 4 shifts the scene of investigation to Australia's Queensland and its sugar industry in the 1890s. Differently from Hawai'i, Japanese immigration there was not state-sponsored, but organised with the support of private enterprises. Dusiñberre juxtaposes the economic interests that favoured the importation of labour, as well as the development of bilateral trade, with racially charged discourse on the «Japanese threat» to white workers in the Australian press and political circles. Owing to the Anglo-Japanese Treaty of Commerce of 1894, which granted Japanese subjects free entrance into the Dominions, the immigration issue became entangled with the question of Australian autonomy within the British empire.

Chapter 5, while keeping the main scene in Queensland, takes as object of inquiry another kind of labour, that is prostitution resulting from trafficking. Discussion stems from the case of Hashimoto Usa, a young woman who travelled from Nagasaki to Thursday Island in 1897 via Shanghai and

Hong Kong. By dissecting a statement that Hashimoto made under interrogation, Dusinberre widens the scope of his analysis to regional trafficking routes and hubs of prostitution, spanning from Vladivostok to Batavia. He shows how Japanese officials monitored migrant prostitution in Australia as a problem that affected national reputation and could therefore hamper «respectable» migration. From the standpoint of method, the core question this chapter raises is how to read sources beyond the narrative framing that appears in the archive. Hashimoto's case demonstrates that, even in a first-person testimony, the speaker's viewpoint gets blurred under the filter of translation and written recording by other individuals.

In Chapter 6, the author departs from his focus on migrants to explore the logistics of steam navigation. He follows the path of a piece of coal from seam to ship, describing labour in Japanese mines, in the loading ports and aboard steamers. Dusinberre also stresses the strategic importance of Japanese coal for the development of Pacific navigation from about the 1860s. He reconsiders Commodore Matthew Perry's earlier mission to Japan in the light of this geopolitical factor and concludes that securing access to fuel was a main drive of US policy towards that Asian country.



Through its case studies, *Mooring the Global Archive* composes an articulate and nuanced picture of Japanese labour migration within the author's selected time and geographic frame. The book does not touch on the developments of that phenomenon into the early twentieth century. This choice seems consistent with the exclusion of California, South America and other places from the geographic scope of discussion. Notwithstanding these intentional limits, the book captures well the regional dimension of migration and links it firmly to long-term processes of a global scale. The analysis blends meticulous research based on a wide range of primary sources with sophisticated conceptualisation on methodological issues. There are, however, some imbalances in the overall design.

In the first place, there is a gap between some of the author's declared goals and the results he delivers. Although he aims to «contribute to a new literature which argues that Japanese overseas migrants were central to the making of the imperial state», or «Japanese state-building» [pp. 34, xx], the evidence presented does not substantiate this claim. Rather than proving the centrality of migration with respect to either Japan's politics, economy or society, the book deals with peripheral topics and perspectives that usefully integrate research on more pivotal themes in the history of that country.

Secondly, and more strikingly, the author's attempt to question dominant narratives by «positioning the labourers' experiences and imaginations at the heart of [his] story» [p. 34] leads to few departures from sources that express the viewpoint of other actors. If the reader expects to find reference

to diaries, private correspondence, legal testimonies or some material legacy, perhaps provided by the families of the descendants, then this work will disappoint. Aside from Hashimoto's statement, a few individual voices surface in other documents relating to prostitution [pp. 190-91, 212]. Earlier on, in Chapter 2 [p. 92], Dusinberre quotes four passages from cane field songs collected by Franklin Odo (2013). In a logical tour de force, he links the sense of drifting these songs convey to the workers' understanding of the circulation of goods and labour, to introduce his analysis of socio-economic conditions in Murotsu. The lack of first-hand testimonies in the book, however, may be justified by the relatively low literacy among migrants in the period examined (compulsory education was introduced in Japan in 1872), along with the difficulty to access sources outside the official archives.

A further methodological gap, in terms of divergence between aims and results, is the absence of Native Hawaiian and Indigenous Australian perspectives. In Chapter 2, Dusinberre acknowledges the need to overcome the «marginalization of Native Hawaiian voices» and finds a promising resource in «the huge collection of nineteenth-century Hawaiian-language newspapers which have now been digitized». However, he also admits that his «own language deficiencies have precluded [his] taking the lead in conducting such research» [pp. 73-74]. Consequently, his hypothesis of Hawaiian support for Japanese immigration as a means of repopulation rests on a single newspaper article, which he got translated by two assistants [p. 75, note 103]. In Chapter 4, he similarly argues for the need to reframe narratives on Australian history. In this case, his «archival departure point» is a bark painting by a contemporary Yolŋu artist, representing ancestral territory in a unified vision of land and sea. Dusinberre presents this artwork, and its legal implications, as an example of a worldview alternative to the one embedded in a map by a Japanese shipping company, the NYK. However, after remarking in this way the importance of directionality for the unsettling of colonial narratives, he acknowledges not having the skills to interrogate «the Yolŋu country archive» [p. 170]. Overall, Dusinberre's renunciation to explore native sources is emblematic of the difficulty to research global history by relying only on one's own professional skills and cultural background. As he aptly concludes, «herein lies one impetus for collaborative research projects» [p. 170].

Concerning the book structure, it is noteworthy that chapters do not include a paragraph or section devoted to reviewing the literature on major topics in a systematic way. Reference to previous scholarship is abundant but comes interspersed with the presentation of the author's own findings and methodological reflections at the expense of clarity. Some critique to concepts and trends in historiography would have deserved further space in the main body of the text. In the final note to Chapter 6, for instance, Dusinberre mentions that his approach to this part of the book «has encapsulated the so-called volumetric turn in history» [p. 266], then provides reference to

a journal article without further comments. To the non-specialized reader, the lack of literature review sections might make it difficult to appreciate the book's contribution to the study of overseas migration and other topics.

In the seamless flow of narration and analysis that makes up this book, an unusual feature is the high frequency of metahistorical passages on the author's «practical positionality». In response to Marc Bloc's invitation to show the reader «the site of an investigation» [p. xxi], Dusiñberre explains continuously how he conducted research and what he thought in the process. Though functional to addressing the epistemic questions that constitute one of the main concerns of the book, this approach leads at times to the reporting of superfluous details. Professional historians will relate sympathetically to the situations described (as negotiating with one's spouse a detour from holiday in search of sources), but some of this information adds little, if anything, to the reader's understanding of the intellectual process behind research. Furthermore, at certain points the author projects his expectations onto the description of sources. In presenting the NYK map, for instance, he notes that «its emboldened shipping routes seemed wilfully to cut across transpacific tensions over race and migration» [p. 126]. After reading the book, this reviewer was left with the impression that, among the many voices gathered in its chapters, Dusiñberre's was the loudest.

Despite these reservations, *Mooring the Global Archive* is a piece of solid research that deserves attention. Besides contributing to the advance of global history with a wealth of empirical evidence, it tackles methodological issues of wide relevance in an innovative way.

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AN ISLAND IN BETWEEN: HISTORY AND GEOPOLITICS OF TAIWAN

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Stefano Pelaggi, *Lisola sospesa: Taiwan e gli equilibri del mondo*, Rome: LUISS University Press, 2022, 231 pp. (ISBN: 9788861058453)

Stefano Pelaggi's book offers a thorough yet concise geopolitical and historical analysis of Taiwan's position in the contemporary international system, exploring both political and social dimensions. Pelaggi covers a wide historical spectrum, tracing Taiwan's indigenous origins and its socio-political transformations through a few key historical phases: the Japanese Occupation, the return of the Kuomintang, the party's retreat to the island after its defeat in the Chinese Civil War, the White Terror years, and Taiwan's democratization process, which has led it to become one of the most efficient and stable democracies in the world. Beyond this, the author addresses Taiwan's ongoing diplomatic, economic and political challenges. Its clarity and accessibility make the book suitable for a broader audience, extending beyond purely academic circles. Moreover, its interdisciplinary approach, which integrates geopolitical, historical, and political perspectives, provides a rich and multifaceted analysis of Taiwan's evolving role in the world.

The book is divided into fourteen chapters. The author has adopted a chronological and thematic structure that spans from the 16th century to contemporary times in just 230 pages. The narrative begins with Taiwan's early encounters with European colonization (Dutch and Spanish) and concludes with an exploration of the most recent grassroots movements opposing rapprochement with the People's Republic of China, as promoted by the Kuomintang (KMT) leadership in the past decade. Each chapter focuses on a specific phase of Taiwan's history or a critical aspect of its cultural, social, or political environment, offering readers a nuanced understanding of the island's complex evolution. In the introduction and the first chapter, Pelaggi situates Taiwan within the current international system, analysing its geopolitical significance in the Taiwan Strait dispute, and exploring the island's role in US-PRC relations. This section provides a comprehensive background for understanding Taiwan's precarious position in global geopolitics, highlighting its strategic importance in the East Asian region. The second chapter delves into Taiwan's history prior to the Japanese occupation, with a focus on the island's indigenous heritage and its interactions with the early European colonial powers, such as the Portuguese, Dutch, and Spanish. The chapter also explores the influence of the Chinese Qing Dynasty, which shaped Taiwan's early socio-political structures. This discus-

sion is crucial to understanding the heritages of Taiwan's shifting identity, which continues to influence its internal development and its responses to external affairs. The discussion then moves into the third chapter, that analyses the fifty years of Japanese rule (1895-1945), highlighting its transformative impact on Taiwan's infrastructure, economy, and society. This chapter focuses on how this period laid the background for Taiwan's earlier modernization, including developments in agriculture and infrastructures.

The return of the Kuomintang and its retreat to Taiwan following their defeat in the Chinese Civil War are examined across thematic chapters – from the fourth to the ninth – which explore the political and sociological trajectories undertaken by Taiwan's civil society during this transformative period, particularly after the establishment of the martial law. These in-depth thematic analyses are seamlessly integrated into the book's overarching historical narrative, adding interdisciplinary dimensions that deepen the reader's understanding. The political and historical legacy of Chiang Kai-shek is explored through the issue of his monumental political statues, alongside the White Terror era and the tensions between the authoritarian governance and civil society (chapter 4). Additionally, Taiwan's transformation into the industrial and entrepreneurial hub we recognize today is explored through the role of family-led small and medium enterprises in driving the island's growth during that period (chapter 6). Furthermore, the diplomatic role of Song Meiling – Chiang Kai-shek's wife – and the political legacy of his son, Chiang Ching-kuo, in shaping Taiwan's subsequent democratization and reforms are discussed in chapters 5 and 9, respectively, contributing to a more in-depth description.

The subsequent section, covering chapters 10 to 14, addresses the events of the last thirty years, characterized by Taiwan's gradual democratization and its evolving role within the global political landscape. These chapters provide a dual focus. On the one hand, they analyse Lee Teng-hui's presidencies and his pivotal role in steering Taiwan's democratisation process (chapters 9 to 12). On the other, they delve into economic and geopolitical issues, including Taiwan's critical role in the global semiconductor industry (chapter 10) and the dynamics of cross-strait relations following the deaths of Chiang Kai-shek and Chiang Ching-kuo (chapters 12 to 14). As for the economic perspective, the author emphasizes the island's pivotal role in the global technology supply chain, particularly as a critical player in the US-PRC competition over technological dominance. Furthermore, this analysis is framed within a broader discourse on national identity and civil society, approaching them both from an historical and geopolitical perspective. He examines the role of Hakka and Hokkien indigenous minorities in shaping the identity of native Taiwanese people, particularly in the context of the predominance of Han people in public office following the Kuomintang's retreat in 1949. From a political and geopolitical standpoint, Pelaggi explores the contrast between the island's democratic stance

and the authoritarian governance of the Communist party in the mainland. Chapter 14 focuses on the most recent grassroots civil movements, analysing their implications within the context of the Taiwan Strait dispute. These events, such as the 2014 «Sunflower Movement», underscore the growing importance of Taiwan's evolving political and social identity. The author provides a detailed account of the «Sunflower Movement» and its reception by Taiwanese civil society, illustrating how ideological concerns, particularly among younger generations, play a critical role in shaping Taiwan's domestic and international policies. This analysis aims at highlighting how Taiwan's identity and values are increasingly becoming decisive factors in discussions about potential rapprochement between the two sides of the Strait.

Pelaggi's research methodology is synthetic, as his goal seems looking to analyze the major events that have shaped Taiwan's history. His approach integrates geopolitical perspectives with historical accuracy. While relying primarily on existing academic literature rather than archival research, Pelaggi successfully constructs a comprehensive and cohesive narrative. He offers a broad overview of the pivotal phases in Taiwan's history and its evolving role within the contemporary international system – an issue of critical importance in today's international dynamics.

The book stands out for its comprehensive scope and its ability to merge historical, geopolitical and cultural dimension of Taiwan into a single, concise narrative, despite being no longer than 230 pages. Indeed, one of the book's key strengths is its interdisciplinary approach, which enables the author to connect Taiwan's internal developments with its external relations in the context of cross-Strait relations with the People's Republic of China and, more broadly, with the United States and Europe. The book examines the evolution of Taiwan's civil society, offering a multidimensional perspective on the island's journey from the «White Terror» era to democratization. A noteworthy example is the thematic exploration of Taiwan's business sector, which was driven by civil society actors who were excluded from the bureaucracy during Chiang Kai-shek's presidency. Furthermore, the chapter dedicated to Taiwan's semiconductor industry is seamlessly integrated into the historical narrative, emphasizing its vital role in the contemporary economic and political international system. Finally, the thematic chapters that delve into political and cultural elements, such as the monumental political statues of Chiang Kai-shek (chapter 4), the diplomatic of Madame Chiang (chapter 5), and the days of the Yuan occupation during the 2014 Sunflower Movement (chapter 14) – to name just a few – skilfully intertwine historical events with the personal stories of key historical figures.

On the other hand, a few weak points can be detected. Firstly, the historical narrative ends with the Sunflower Movement of 2014 and his consequences both nationally and internationally but does not delve into the developments of Tsai Ing-wen's first and second administrations. The author only mentions about recent events in the introductory chapter, where

he had briefly summarized the island's latest history, focusing primarily on its international relations disregarding its internal dynamics. Secondly, the sources Pelaggi relies on are predominately from Italian and Anglo-American scholars. While these provide a valuable basis, incorporating Chinese-language sources would have significantly enriched the work, offering a more nuanced perspective on Taiwan's history and its complex identity. Finally, the author's informative approach broadens the book's appeal beyond the Italian academic sector, but the absence of original source research represents a missed opportunity. Taiwan's history, its geopolitical significance in the current international system, and the emergence of a new political and social identity – particularly across the younger generation – are critical areas that need deeper investigations. A more detailed exploration of these elements would provide a better understanding of Taiwan's role as a pivotal actor in contemporary global affairs, especially in the context of its complex relationships with key players such as the People's Republic of China, the United States and, by extension, the European Union.

Nevertheless, *Lisola sospesa, Taiwan e gli equilibri del mondo* is an appreciable contribution to the Italian field literature. While it does not rely on original archive research and instead draws on pre-existing works – primarily from Western scholars – the book's structure and the themes it explores make it a valuable starting point for engaging with Taiwan's history. *Lisola sospesa, Taiwan e gli equilibri del mondo* serves as a well-crafted foundation for further developing a debate on Taiwan's history, culture and politics.

