Asia Through a Different Lens

Asia Inside Out Vol.1: Changing Times
Edited by Eric Tagliacozzo, Helen F. Siu & Peter C. Perdue
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015, 432 pages, $35.00 (Hardcover)

Asia Inside Out Vol.2: Connected Places
Edited by Eric Tagliacozzo, Helen F. Siu & Peter C. Perdue
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015, 432 pages, $35.00 (Hardcover)

Asian Encounters: Exploring Connected Histories
Edited by Upinder Singh & Parul Pandya Dhar
New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014, 235 pages, $74 (Hardcover)

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda

IN JANUARY 1650, residents of the flourishing Peruvian silver mining town of Potosí woke up to a gruesome sight. Francisco Gomez de la Rocha, one of the richest silver traders in Peru, was garroted and his body strung up in the central plaza.1 It was meant to serve as an example to the counterfeiters of the Spanish silver dollar, which circulated throughout the world. The Spanish authorities were aiming to warn counterfeiters and secure global customers, especially China. Some 75 percent of the 400 million pesos of silver bound for China by the Spanish during 1565-1820 ended up in China, which was termed the “suction pump.” As the Spanish monarch saw it, the fate of his empire and that of the Ming were tied together. The silver that flowed into China to pay for tea, silk and porcelain enabled the Ming to finance the fortifications of the Great Wall and also underwrote the might of Philip IV’s empire.

The “good times” ended in the 19th century. Silver mines fell and the price of the rising bullion made English traders switch to paying the Chinese in opium. Grown in their Indian colony, it brought misery to Indian farmers and the scourge of mass addiction to China. The Opium Wars that followed shaped Chinese history and their consequences continue to ripple through to this day. There were other instances in which the interconnected world of trade transmitted the impact of a development in one continent to another. The 13th-century Black Death, which came from Central Asia and devastated Europe, reduced the mining of silver and the resultant bullion shortage. As Victor Lieberman writes in Asia Inside Out, “in one region after another, the ensuing ‘bullion famine’ erected new barriers to monetization of the political economy while impeding private investment and trade.”

This is the type of connected history that helps us understand the long-missing broader currents. The traditional study of history has been confined to narrower national borders, as while the actions of communities and populations, monarchs and ministers have been studied, seemingly marginal actors such as traders, pilgrims, refugees and other mobile populations have been largely left out. As one of the editors of Asia Inside Out, Peter C. Perdue, points out, the result has been that historians’ failure to do enough research across disciplinary, regional and national boundaries means that the global public has trouble connecting historical processes with their daily lives.

The volumes on connected histories under review brilliantly fill that gap. They show Asia as a “space of flows” and offers glimpses of early globalization. All the books are the result of conferences held by US and Asian universities bringing together scholars from diverse disciplines and specializations. Their mission, as Eric Tagliacozzo, Helen F. Siu and Peter C. Perdue, the editors of the two-volume series Asia Inside Out, say, is to “examine the historical processes spanning wide geographical areas which shaped the people, places, and institutions that make up the modern Asian world.” Although the editors of the third volume under review, Asian Encounters, have a somewhat limited scope (confined to art and cultural history), editors Upinder Singh and Parul Pandya Dhar hope that the re-engage with the world, Asian Encounters takes readers back two millennia, when Asian polities were taking shape in continuous and deep interactions with each other. Themes that emerge from the 34 chapters in the three books are the critical roles that trade, religion and imperial ambitions have played in connecting geographical sites and shaping many of the common cultures, yet not erasing the very different cultures and societies.

The origin of modern nation states in Asia is rooted in the ambition of chieftains to expand their rule, but also to seek legitimacy in religious teachings. The rise of the Hindu belief system in India, with its notion of a divinely sanctioned ruler, was carried by traders to different parts of Southeast Asia, and encouraged emerging rulers to seek legitimacy through rituals and blessings by Indian priests. Asian Encounters clears misperceptions about both “Indianized” Southeast Asia and the “peaceful” hegemony of imperial China. Historians have long debated whether Indian influence in Southeast Asia was the consequence of conquering armies or came about through peaceful contacts by traders or priests. Hermann Kulke argues that in 5th century societies on both sides of the Bay of Bengal, they were evolving in a similar fashion, with dynastic leaders increasing their dominance over local groups while improving their contact with other cultures. Hindu ideas, icons and artifacts, and the invitation of priests to perform rites, offered legitimacy to the new dynasty. “India’s culture did not reach Southeast Asia through an act of ‘transplantation,’” Kulke writes, “but through a ‘complicated network of relations’ between partners of mutual ‘processes of civilization’ which comprised both sides of the Bay of Bengal.”

If Hindu notions of kingship and statecraft influenced the character of Southeast Asia’s emerging polities, another Indian belief system — Buddhism — provided long-lasting connections for the two volumes of Asia Inside Out cover the past 500 hundred years of Asia’s interactions with the world. Asian Encounters takes readers back two millennia, when Asian polities were taking shape in continuous and deep interactions with each other. Themes that emerge from the 34 chapters in the three books are the critical roles that trade, religion and imperial ambitions have played in connecting geographical sites and shaping many of the common cultures, yet not erasing the very different cultures and societies.

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China in the early 20th century. Anand A. Yang highlights a fascinating account of the Boxer Rebellion (1900) written in Hindi by an Indian soldier, Gadhadar Singh, who took part in the multinational intervention force in Beijing. Despite being part of the British contingent, Singh’s account of China and the Chinese people displayed a surprising awareness of common Asian identity and sympathy for the Chinese against Western imperialism. The account anticipates anti-imperialist pan-Asian sentiment movements in the early 20th century. There are periods in history when military strategy combined with trade and economic considerations promoted connections. Perdue shows how the Portuguese acquisition of a leasehold in Macau in 1557 was linked to the Ming policy toward Mongols on the northwestern frontier and toward the maritime trading confederations called “dwarf pirates” on the southeast coast of China at the same time. The Ming decision to allow migration laid the ground for the rise of powerful trade networks in Southeast Asia.

Together with the Portuguese and Spanish, who inaugurated a global silver economy, the Chinese merchants in Southeast Asia emerged as significant drivers of Asian economies.

The faith of the mobile population — migrants or refugees — also helped create connections and diffuse culture. Charles J. Wheeler, in Volume 1, uses the story of a migrant Zen Buddhist monk in Vietnam in the 17th century and the arrival of Ming refugees from Qing China who settled in Vietnam, to show how they served as a conduit of Chinese culture and syncretic Buddhist religion all the way to Korea and Japan. In his chapter in Vol.2, Wheeler uses the life of sea-based communities in the 19th century consisting of political refugees from Ming China and illegal traders — commonly called pirates — to show another agent of connection transcending borders of political authority. “Pirate” activity in the waters between the Gulf of Tonkin and Gulf of Thailand and their impact inland brought economic, political and cultural transformation, not to a defined geographical space but to “a space of flows.”

Willem Van Schendel, in Vol.2, traces the evolution of Chittagong as another “space of flows” by showing how farmers, traders, immigrants and soldiers from the surrounding region and the colonial administration transformed a fishing village into a major trading hub. Some chapters in Asia Inside Out provide a closer look at trading networks and the transformation of material culture they brought about. Kerry Ward’s analysis in Vol.1 of the diary of a Tamil interpreter working for the French governor in Pondicherry gives us an intimate look at wide-ranging trade networks connecting the Indian Ocean to Southeast Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

Heidi Walcher, also writing in Vol.1, notes how connections with Saffavid Iran turned it into a central hub between Europe and China, promoting cultural exchanges — extensive Iranian imports of Chinese porcelain and widespread use of Persian as a lingua franca of traders. Nancy Um, in the same volume, writes about the impact of coffee grown in Java by the Dutch on Yemen’s global coffee empire, and observes the key role played by Gujarati traders as intermediaries between Yemeni and European traders. Another chapter by Robert Hellyer reveals the important role of international trading on the rise of Miijel industrial power. Initially, the humble tea exported to the US, aided by Chinese technical expertise and European trading networks, was responsible for the increased revenue...

Alan Mikhail in Vol.2 traces the story of a different kind of trade — in live animals. Trade in horses from the Gulf totalling 10,000 a year in the 14th century helped create powerful armies in India and China. Elephants imported from India served to show the European and West Asians the “sovereign’s capacity to stage and harness the wonders of the natural world in controlled spec- tacles like processions or imperial ceremonies.” Asia Inside Out also exemplifies a different way of looking at Asia — not through its traditional contours but as a space of connections helping to shape something unique elsewhere. The story of the language of the Dungans, Sinitic Muslim communities living in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, offers counter examples of the remnants of historical flows. Jing Tsu, in Vol.2, shows how the language of the descendants of Chinese Muslim rebels who fled to Russia via Xinjiang in the 19th century, retains the imprints of that journey, mixing Cyrillic script with Russian, Arabic and Persian words, while being rooted in the oral peasant speech of Shaanxi and Gansu in northwestern China. I wish the editors of all three of these books had written a more theme-based introduction, tying the broad trends together while underlining their significance. Still, a collection of such X-ray images presented in these books allows the readers to see beneath the national narratives. These volumes dramatically reveal the sinews of connections that shaped an Asia without borders.

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