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Asia. Asian port cities, 1600–1800: Local and foreign cultural interactions. Edited by Haneda Masashi.
Singapore: NUS Press and Kyoto: Kyoto University Press, 2009. Pp. xvii, 233. About 100 illustrations, some in colour.

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Book Reviews

Asia

Asian port cities, 1600–1800: Local and foreign cultural interactions

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This collection contains 10 articles based on two different conferences, and a long methodological introduction by the editor, which outlines the intellectual framework of the book: A ‘new model of world history’ is needed — a model that should overcome the enduring dichotomy between ‘European’ and ‘non-European’; a model with a distinct maritime dimension. That, in turn, links to the general idea of maritime Asia, or rather, to what is labelled ‘Asian maritime worlds’ — a vaguely defined space with the sea treated as a stratum that ‘connects two or more regions, joining rather than dividing them’. In studying this vast entity, there is no need to ‘assume a closed geographical sphere’, nor should one juxtapose maritime Asia to the Mediterranean case, because that would imply yet another unwanted dichotomy. Put differently, the editor seeks to establish ‘a framework for productive scientific discussion’, which should also permit various comparative (and other?) approaches. Analysing port cities, he believes, one way contributes to our understanding of Asia’s ‘maritime worlds’.

Whether such a loose arrangement – like a matrix without visible parameters – is really apt to push open (seemingly) closed doors, can be doubted. Apparently, the editor himself had difficulties with this ‘model’. Feeling compelled to identify common denominators for the case studies collected in his book, he tries to circumvent the problem by stressing two points: all papers relate to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; furthermore, they focus on port cities that were characterised by the presence of at least one major European company (such as the VOC, EIC etc). Clearly, the last observation raises questions, because it reminds one of the old Euro-Asian dichotomy which the editor seeks to overcome. Although a detailed list of items to compare is provided in the last part of the introduction, the studies that follow, are, for the most part, confined to the investigation of *one* single port or geographical entity — without offering systematic comparisons between different settings. This problem is typical for maritime conference volumes: they address all kinds of commercial and cultural links, across the sea, or from coast to coast. By contrast, direct comparisons between two or more distinct sites are, almost as a rule, less frequent.

Despite these methodological problems, most contributions to *Asian port cities*, taken as individual pieces, make for good reading. The first chapter, by the editor, deals with ‘interpreters’ and children of mixed parentage in Nagasaki, Guangzhou and Bandar Abbas. This is a truly comparative study. There were different attitudes towards translators and children of Euro-Asian (and Sino-Japanese) descent in

China, Japan and elsewhere, which explains variations in social status, political considerations and so forth. Matsui Yoko looks at the legal position of foreigners in Nagasaki. Once again, the issue of children is taken up, along with other points, for example, the deportation of these children and the expulsion of their mothers, various rules governing the relations between foreign men and local women, the treatment of non-Japanese criminals, and the concept of households. While Japan was rather tense and often hostile towards foreigners, the situation in Guangzhou appears to have been somewhat more relaxed. This is discussed by Liu Yong, who describes the commercial environment in that port, its trade institutions and the channels of internal communication, not only between the Chinese side and its European trading partners (especially the Dutch), but also between the Europeans themselves. One important dimension that might require additional investigation in that context concerns the ethnic background of the Chinese merchants. Many entrepreneurs hailed from Fujian, and one wonders how they were regarded by the urban population in Guangzhou. Furthermore, what can one say about Manju–Chinese relations inside this city? Perceiving the ‘Qing camp’ as a multi-layered stratum, and not as one big block, could be of some help in getting around the Euro-Asian dichotomy problem, which the editor has been lamenting about.

The beautifully illustrated articles by Ito Shiori and Liu Zhaohui are concerned with material culture: the first summarises Chinese and European influences on Japanese paintings (motifs, linear perspective, shade/light etc), the second looks at the production of ceramics in Jingdezhen. These wares were imitated in Japan. Later, Japanese export ceramics became a partial substitute for Chinese wares. In a final stage, both Japanese and Chinese products competed on a number of markets.

In terms of geographical arrangement, this book moves from East to West. Therefore, the next chapter, by Leonard Blussé, describes the case of old Batavia. Blussé’s contribution is a general survey somewhat reminiscent of the author’s earlier writings. Bhawan Ruangsilp presents the role of the Dutch in Ayutthaya, outlining their ‘settlement’, social status, relations to the local elite, and various issues pertaining to the question of jurisdiction (legal plurality). Søren Mentz investigates the role of the British in Madras, who kept social interaction with the Indians at an absolute minimum, in marked contrast to the open-minded and very liberal Portuguese. It was only at a later stage that this attitude began to change, gradually, and certainly due to the need to acquire Indian partners against the French. This takes us to the next port, Pondicherry: Philippe Haudrière summarises the complex relations between Governor Dupleix and the Hindu courtier Ranga Pillai. The last chapter, by Nagashima Hiromu, moves on to Surat. It describes the European quarters of that city, especially their physical shape, certain architectural features, and the urban setting generally speaking (illustrated by coloured maps).

Asian port cities is an interesting collection, finely edited, clearly structured, easy to digest. But, as was said, the Euro-Asian dichotomy problem remains, and indeed, certain sections of this book read like glosses on the VOC. This being so, a kind of ‘uniform’ typology might have been adopted in most cases. For, as stated on p. 145, there were fortified (Dutch/European) bases, small forts with control over some hinterland, and unfortified trading posts (other categories could prove even

more apt...). Perhaps, classifications of this kind would have been helpful for the analysis. Finally, we do need many more explicit comparisons. There would be various starting points for such investigations — be those the role of interpreters (as addressed in some chapters), social gatherings, ethnic relations, local customs, medical and sanitary conditions, to mention just a few possibilities. And one should not only comment on the bright sides of daily life, but also on the darker aspects (as was partly done in the present volume). Various coastal sites were considered unhealthy, late eighteenth-century Batavia was marked by the ‘stench of [its] stagnant canals’ (p. 124), and in Surat, the English were accustomed to ‘pissing rudely and doing other filthiness against the walls, much to the dislike of the mahometans...’ (quotation from T. Roe, p. 221). Writing about cultural interactions in the ‘Asian maritime worlds’ is a wonderful exercise; however, within a new ‘model’ of maritime ‘world history’ the challenging task of ‘de-romanticising’ certain aspects of the past, will still require careful thinking.

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Vietnam

The spy who loved us: The Vietnam War and Pham Xuan An's dangerous game

By THOMAS A. BASS

New York: Public Affairs Press, 2009. Pp. xviii, 296, Maps, Illustrations, Notes, Index.

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In the fall of 1957 a young Vietnamese named Pham Xuan An entered Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa, California, to study journalism. He soon became a successful and popular student at the small institution, editor of the college newspaper, frequently invited to parties and student outings, and a keen observer of all aspects of American life and customs. He served an internship at the *Sacramento Bee* and met California Governor Pat Brown. In an era when Americans were coming to believe that cross-cultural relationships and people-to-people informal diplomacy might prove to be important assets in waging the Cold War, the story of An, returning to his native country with a new personal understanding of, and admiration for, American democracy, freedom and opportunity, appeared to be a clear-cut example of the success of such down to earth personal relationships (see Christina Klein, *Cold War orientalism: Asia in the middlebrow imagination, 1945–61* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003)).

Those beliefs appeared to be borne out by An's subsequent career. Soon after returning to Vietnam he was hired by Reuters and subsequently worked for *The New York Herald* and for *Time* where he became a full-time correspondent in 1964. By the late 1960s he was widely known as ‘the dean of Vietnamese journalists’ in the words of Robert Shaplen of the *New Yorker*. Among his close friends, colleagues