

## Editorial Foreword

This current issue features seven research articles and a generous collection of book reviews. Three of the articles form a thematic cluster that question the way digitisation is changing the role of visual materials in the production of knowledge. The remaining four examine how local–global interactions contributed to the emergence of new notions of womanhood in Thailand; the effects of marketisation upon the home and family in Singapore and rural Vietnam; and the uncovering of circulations of illicit Chinese ‘coolie’ networks linking port cities in mainland China with the Philippines. While each article delves deeply into local contexts, collectively the articles address the role of transregional models, actors, and technologies that contributed to the shaping of these experiences.

Our special thematic ‘cluster’ draws attention to how the digitisation and dissemination of visual materials through alternative platforms is changing the epistemological position of the postcolonial/national archive as an arbitrator of knowledge production. Together, the three articles explore how scholars, curators, artists, and online communities engage with art, colonial-era photography, and other ‘nostalgic’ imagery in different ways through digital technology; changing both the content and manner in which these materials are viewed. The articles provide case studies of how the digitisation of visual content create new historical and interpretative possibilities for the communities who construct new meanings associated with these materials and for those who consume them in settings beyond the archive, museum, or national library. Individually, the articles focus on different interpretive communities, archives, and visual materials over time and epistemological/virtual space. Collectively, they explore the intellectual, methodological, and sociopolitical effects of transforming images to digital form, drawing attention towards new narratives, contexts, and meanings that these images now engender.

Our lead article by Adrian Vickers provides a theoretical framework for thinking about the way visual materials are experienced and presented by Southeast Asian artists, curators and scholars. Drawing attention to anthropology’s engagement with Southeast Asian artists since the 1930s, the article points to ongoing discussions about how studying local modes of feeling and perception reveal broader understandings of the terms and meanings through which the visual is expressed by Southeast Asians. Through his study of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson’s collection of Balinese imagery and the generations of scholars who later examined it, Vickers provides an analysis of the social career of an art collection; recounting how the paintings were photographed, curated, distributed, and eventually reconstituted digitally as part of an interactive visual museum that linked the images to other ‘artists, artworks and locations of production’. By highlighting how digital tools make contextual information about particular artists and their work more accessible to the online viewer,

Vickers demonstrates — via his own experience of creating a virtual platform of Balinese painting — how anthropological principles concerning thought-systems can now better reflect how Southeast Asian art is interpreted, organised and presented.

The second article by Alexander Supartono and Alexandra Moschovi picks up where Vickers left off, shifting attention from scholars and curators to examine how contemporary Southeast Asian artists are utilising digitisation to expand, reframe, and disrupt visual materials within the colonial/postcolonial archive. Where Vickers examines the social life of an art collection, Supartono and Moschovi trace the afterlives of colonial photos through the work of regional artists. They show how, by reconfiguring the content of the photos through digitisation, artists are actively contesting the authority of such images as historical sources and challenging the epistemological position of archives that preserve particular meanings associated with those images. The article highlights the visual interventions deployed by three artists from across the region to demonstrate how digitisation provides a space for Southeast Asians to express in new ways their relationship to their pasts.

The final article in the thematic cluster by Clare Veal explores how the social media platform Facebook provides users in Thailand with a space for the performance of nostalgia (*khwāmkhiththungbān*) through the posting of digitised historical content such as photos, documents, and advertisements. Where the earlier articles by Vickers and Supartono/Moschovi focused on specific scholars and artists, Veal analyses the use of historical imagery by a Thai Facebook group called ‘Siamese Memories’, adjusting our focus from corporeal to virtual actors and their role in the construction of an alternative, digital archive. Veal argues that the posting of historical images reflects a ‘photographic history’ made from below, an alternative construction of the past drawn from the memories, priorities, and experiences of those individuals contributing to the site. As the Facebook platform allows for the reposting of visual content once only found in the National Library, the photos (and the comments they solicit) create ruptures in the narrative structures associated with official versions of Thai history. The use of the Facebook page ‘Siamese Memories’ by individual contributors raises questions about what constitutes an “archive” and “an archival source” in the way these materials are displayed, shared, and curated.

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Our four individual research articles begin with Thosaeng Chaochuti’s analysis of the ‘New Woman’ figure in Thai literature, an archetype borrowed from Henrik Ibsen’s character ‘Nora’ in his internationally renowned play, *A Doll’s House*. Chaochuti’s study explores the adaptation of Ibsen’s ‘New Woman’ figure by three Thai authors and shows how their version of Nora, embodied through ‘Ying Samai Mai’, became part of Thai public discourse in the print media of the time. Chaochuti’s study demonstrates how the New Woman phenomenon connected Thailand to both trans-Asian and global campaigns for better education, occupational opportunities, the end of polygamy and political participation for women. At the same time, Chaochuti demonstrates that the emergence of ‘Ying Samai Mai’ stirred broader debates about gender roles in the family and in society, as discussions concerning duty (*nathi*) and the responsibilities associated with conventional female/male

roles, began to emerge in response to the ‘Thai New Woman’ phenomenon. Through a close reading of Thai-language newspapers, magazines, and literary fiction from the 1920s to 1930s, Chaochuti provides a careful analysis of the storylines created by Thai authors who featured New Woman characters in their work. In doing so, the article suggests that the example of the New Woman character in Thai literature represents another benefit of expanding the intellectual boundaries that currently delineate Thai Studies.

Where Chaochuti’s study shows how authors began to construct notions of womanhood through fiction in the case of Thailand, Ying-kit Chan explores how the figure of the middle-class woman in Singapore was socially constructed through discourses associated with public housing, technology, consumerism, nation building, and the modern home kitchen. Through an intricate study of state documents, newspapers, commercial advertisements, and academic literature, Chan illustrates how the public housing kitchen came to represent the space that epitomised the new middle-class ideal in Singapore. The article examines the socioeconomic transitions of the 1970s to the 1990s through the evolution of ‘the middle class as a cultural ideal’, treating ‘kitchens as a symbol of domestic consumption and industrial capitalism and as imagined spaces operated primarily by women’. Chan examines how the kitchen was socially constructed as part of national policy and how the definition of the modern Singaporean woman was created in dialogue with this home-space. Just as Chaochuti’s article describes how the image of the ‘Thai New Woman’ would evolve through debates about notions about gendered ‘duties’, so too does Chan’s article examine tensions that emerged concerning expectations about women being both homemakers and wage-earners. As with the case of Thailand, Chan’s case study also notes that the notion of the modern woman in Singapore varied across communities and that this image was entangled with ongoing discussions of femininity, masculinity, class, family, citizenship, and nation.

If nation building in Singapore began at home, this view was shared in many respects in Vietnam, especially during the shift to a more market-oriented economy under the Renovation (Đổi Mới) initiative. Lam Minh Chau examines how local households negotiated state-initiated initiatives to develop ‘sideline’ businesses as an application of Đổi Mới ideas at the grassroots level. Directing our gaze to a village located in the Red River Delta, the article explores how rural life experienced the transforming effects of marketisation, a process that Lam suggests brought both widespread immiseration and transformational wealth. Whereas the kitchen served as the focal point for Singapore’s economic modernisation process, this study focuses on how local farmers were encouraged to diversify their modes of livelihood by starting small businesses selling crafts and poultry products. Lam’s analysis shows, however, that while households attempted to embark on some of these ‘sideline’ enterprises, for the most part, household responses to state initiatives to then expand production reflected the idea of ‘*đà gi năng*’, which the author explains is an expression of a family’s social responsibility to ensure and protect its future security. Ultimately, the article argues that an ethnographic understanding of rural transformation in the context of marketisation is needed to show that the villagers’ response to risky state initiatives were as much social as they were economic in nature.

Our final article by Mònica Ginés-Blasi reassesses Sino–Southeast Asian connections in the Philippines through a study of the illegal coolie trade between Chinese ports and Manila, a topic that remains understudied. Challenging the conventional understanding in Philippine Studies that Chinese immigrants were mainly commercial actors, Ginés-Blasi contends that throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, there was an unofficial network of unfree labour travelling into the Philippines via Xiamen, some eventually ending up in Cuba, or departing via Hong Kong. Through an analysis of Spanish and European diplomatic correspondence and other local commercial documentation, the article also shows how Chinese coolies continued to circulate into the Philippines to be deployed for mining and public construction projects, rather than as agricultural labourers, as was the case in Peru and Cuba. The analysis ultimately shows how the influx of Chinese emigrant workers became entangled within a broader anti-Chinese immigration dispute between Spanish authorities who were concerned about the growing influence of Chinese commercial enterprises and those manpower brokers who benefited from the coolie trade.

As mentioned above, the research articles are followed by a healthy selection of book reviews that reflect the time and effort of colleagues from around the world who generously agreed to review the titles featured in this issue. This volume would not have been possible without the unflappable efforts of our editorial team, our graduate-student fellows, and our undergraduate research assistant Ms. Tho Jia Yi. The continued support and commitment from our international network of authors, referees, and reviewers during these unusual times is gratefully appreciated.

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