

precision than it possibly should and some parts as a result require attentive reading. So, for example, *Chincheo* becomes the Fujianese city of Zhangzhou, but as Borschberg explains in the glossary the reference could be to Quanzhou, the Amoy (Xiamen) coast or bay, Fujian more generally, or one of the rivers emptying into the bay. To his credit, Borschberg is well aware of this problem and offers an editorial note (pp. 129–31) to explain his choices. To supplement all of this, Borschberg also includes a huge number of illustrations (71 in total), some of which are in colour and many of which are maps or city views from the archives such as The Hague, Leiden or the Royal Library in Brussels that have not been published before.

In terms of textual analysis, Borschberg approaches his subject with a light hand. There is a sense in the documents that we are looking through the eyes of a soldier — one who sees skin color as an indication of both skill in modern warfare and in willingness to labour, one who watches with despair as his men are often constantly drunk on *arak*, and one who offers the occasional ‘manly battle-speech’ (p. 143) to shore up such subjectivities. The brutal practices of city sieges known from war in Europe are brought to bear on Malacca, where the aged, women, children and slaves are dying in large numbers due to starvation, disease and bombardment along with those doing the fighting. The contempt for territorial acquisition and the importance of ports is everywhere in evidence, and the King of Johor tells Matlieff that the land around Malacca is useless to him as he already ‘had 20 times more land than he could fill with subjects’ (p. 156). Likewise particular forms of looting by Malay forces — burning down houses to retrieve nails because of iron shortages and the taking of slaves as war booty — the enduring importance of various kinds of oared galleys in an era of supposed galleon warfare, as well as the consistent need to find sources of food through overseas trade of rice and sago give a sense of the unique historical economies of the region. All in all, this is an exciting new set of translations, which will provide a valuable reference for historians of both Southeast Asian and world history for years to come.

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Sarong kebaya: Peranakan fashion in an interconnected world, 1500–1950

By PETER LEE

Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum, 2014. Pp. 352. Maps, Plates, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

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The subject of ‘oriental textiles’ or textiles of the ‘oriental trade’ have been discussed from the perspective of trade impetus and consumption originating from, or at least stimulated by, the European maritime trade (e.g. Carl Crossman, *The decorative arts of the China trade: Paintings, furnishings and exotic curiosities*, Antique Collectors Club, 1991; Anna Jackson and Amin Jaffer, *Encounters: The meeting of Asia and Europe, 1500–1800*, London: V&A, 2004; Rosemary Crill, *Chintz: Indian*

textiles for the West; London: V&A, 2008.) Understandably so, as these publications account for the formation of collections from such sources of provenance, which find themselves in major institutional collections in Europe and America. Taking as their basis trade accounts and records, these works provide an overview of trade and consumption patterns that are often detached from local interactions. Several recent publications have sought to enrich the accounts of foreign interaction in Southeast Asia with an eye to the ground, by providing first-hand accounts of Europeans with experience of interaction with local inhabitants (e.g. Peter Borschberg, *The memoirs and memorials of Jacques de Coutre: Security, trade and society in 16th- and 17th-century Southeast Asia* [2013]; *Journal, memorials and letters of Cornelis Matelieff de Jonge: Security, diplomacy and commerce in 17th-century Southeast Asia* [2015]; both NUS Press); and through archaeological findings (John Miksic, *Singapore and the Silk Road of the East: 1300–1800*, NUS Press, 2013).

Sarong kebaya: Peranakan fashion and its international sources joins these recent publications in providing an account of dress, textiles and jewellery found and collected in the Malay–Indonesian archipelago, and how local culture interacted with the international trade and sojourners that turned up on these shores. The publication gives attention to the ‘cotton route’, which Peter Lee notes is often obscured by the larger category of the maritime ‘silk route’ — the trade in luxuries and exotica that included porcelain, lacquer and ivory. This extensively researched catalogue was written to accompany the eponymous exhibition held by the Peranakan Museum, Singapore, from April 2011 to April 2012.

Running through the different chapters and discussions is the constant act of referencing the different cultural influences that impact on the evolution of local culture, tangible or otherwise. Woven into the discussions of trends and consumption is a rich description of society and the tensions between colonials, locals and mestizos (chap. 2), the slaves and the free (chap. 3), from which derives the politics of dress. Lush and detailed descriptions give an account of the driving forces behind fashion: class, wealth, ethnicity and gender. Notably, the role of women (whether female Eurasian and European batik retailers (p. 206); or Peranakan girls and women described in chap. 3 and after) is emphasised, and they are presented as active participants in determining fashion trends and influencing the evolution of the style of the *kebaya* and accompanying accessories (chaps. 6 and 7). The strategic use of materials that are considered ‘ephemera’ — prints and drawings — removes the ephemeral mysticism of the past and allows history to become documentary and visually present.

The author details and presents the history of the *kebaya* from extensive research on primary source documents. The opening chapter contains an excellent discussion of nomenclature (from linguistic origins and etymology) of the types of dress found in Malaya, from which the Peranakan *kebaya* derived its name. In the descriptions of the textiles and trade in Indian cloth in the second chapter, the very rich and diverse strands of the cultural origins of the *sarong kebaya* are traced. The depth of scholarship is also seen in the substantial appendices, which add layers that build up the contexts presented in the chapters. Notably, the selected inventories from Malacca, Batavia and Singapore (appendix 1), are important data, probably of gentlemen’s/-private trade on major merchant journeys, which provide for an extrapolation of

the volumes of textiles traded. There are citations not only of textual and visual materials, but also of archaeological ones (e.g., chap. 2, n. 29).

The author notes that ‘the costume history of Southeast Asia is still a largely uncharted terrain’ (p. 29), and one of the objectives of the publication is to reevaluate ‘fashion as a Eurocentric phenomenon’ (p. 31), where non-Western textiles are classified as ‘ethnographic’ or ‘ethnic’. Despite providing an account to equalise the status of Asian textiles, power dynamics cannot be avoided in discussing fashion. To Lee’s credit he acknowledges the problems in putting together this significant resource: ‘One theme often encountered in writing on the Peranakans is the notion of its *exceptionalism* — its unique hybridity [emphasis added] ... but ‘cultural assimilation is raised only by one author, Siti Salwa Abu, and solely in the context of Peranakan dress in Malacca’ (ibid.). The problem is indeed a delicate one: despite the clear acknowledgement of the multiple cultural elements that make up Peranakan dress: does the eventual labelling of the collection here as ‘Peranakan’ and the focus on Peranakan consumption and use of Southeast Asian dress and fashion commit an ‘appropriation’ which the author sought to avoid? The historic photographs employed here to illustrate the context of use of Peranakan dress also proves to be a double-edged sword: they suggest the dichotomy between those who had the means to document their consumption and to be identified and named, and those who are hidden, or become passive documentary subjects because they do not possess the same means to control their image.

It is easy for a book on cultural heritage to fall into nostalgia, but *Sarong kebaya* does not face this problem. It is difficult to think of another publication that treats Southeast Asian dress history and cultural heritage — and that, in the context of Peranakan culture — with the same rigour and breadth. In his acknowledgements, Lee quotes Steve Jobs: ‘You can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards.’ Having connected the dots, this publication has collected substantial amounts of material that will expedite further discussions and research on Southeast Asian textile and fashion history.

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Impact of China’s rise on the Mekong region

By YOS SANTASOMBAT

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This volume’s eight chapters by experts on the Mekong River offer comprehensive, unbiased, and meticulous analyses of the sociopolitical, cultural and ecological issues surrounding China’s growing interest and influence in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS). The book focuses on the challenges for the GMS countries in coping with a rising and ambitious China, with a view to managing a complex,