

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,

interwoven relationship in a healthier and more predictable manner for the sake of regional peace and development. However, China's regional megaprojects increasingly reveal striking differences between the GMS's grassroots and civil society and an enthusiastic ASEAN elite (pp. 2–3).

The book argues that the post-Cold War problems between China and the GMS have primarily been related to China's perceptions, approach and strategic goals and objectives with regards to the region. To name a few contentious areas, the territorialisation by Chinese enterprises via so-called 'land grabs' or land concessions to create different types of zoning or 'spaces of exception', the growing influence of new state-supported Chinese immigrants (*xin yi ming*), and China's sense of a 'civilising mission' (upholding ancient Chinese values as visionary alternatives to those of the West) have demonstrated Beijing's regional strategy. The case studies from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam in this book testify to China's failure in conducting a harmonious and fruitful relationship with its GMS neighbours.

It is worth noting that territorial disputes, historical mistrust and ideological/political constraints were largely dismissed by regional elites in the mid-2000s, in the wake of Beijing's 'charm offensive' in Asia and optimism about an economic take-off. Beijing's handling of its new challenges have ironically resulted in a more troubled relationship, marked by memories of hostile past interactions as well as ongoing coercion and discontent. Inconsistencies between words and deeds as well as the unpredictability of China's pursuit of its self-proclaimed 'good neighbourliness policy' with the smaller states in the Mekong region and the rest of Southeast Asia have undoubtedly caused further confusion and complexity for regional stability. In other words, China's strategic credibility, long-term vision, and strategic trust have been called into question.

The contributions of this book aside, several points and arguments need to be appropriately addressed to grasp a better understanding of the far-reaching implications of China's rise in the Mekong region.

First, while historical distrust, suspicion and a Cold War mentality did not loom large over China–GMS countries in the early 1990s, such problems were not 'dead and gone', Yos Santasombat points out (p. 18), given the lingering legacies and simmering tensions in the region. There has been a revived mistrust of China's strategic ambitions and its re-ascendancy to great power status in the contemporary era, which serve as a reminder of the concept of *Tianxia* ('All under Heaven') — the ancient vision of an hierarchical world order and tributary system.

Second, China's soft power projection, including its norms and values, has increasingly become less appealing to its Mekong neighbours. China's ties with regional countries have basically been driven by its material power, either for economic benefit or as a form of coercion rather idealism. In Laos, the local backlash to Chinese investors' civilising model in the Golden Triangle SEZ, which aimed to replace the rural Lao way of life with a 'civilised' and good lifestyle, is a case in point, revealing the risks of future conflicts and crises in recipient countries (pp. 13–14). China's preoccupation with its own interests, and its half-hearted commitment to bilateral and regional investment projects, only serve as a stumbling block instead of the stepping stone that Beijing desperately seeks.

Third, the GMS countries should adopt constructive and innovative approaches in strengthening their respective power vis-à-vis China, avoiding an over-reliance on its economic wealth and political power. The so-called free-ride on the 'Chinese economic express' (p. 47) will not work for the GMS countries if they are not ready for internal restructuring, transformation and integration, as empirically evidenced in the case of Vietnam with regard to China's capital inflows in dealing with poverty reduction and rising unemployment (pp. 75–6). The impacts of economic flows from China on Vietnam's development are quite limited, especially in light of heightened tensions over the former's assertiveness in disputed seas and possible tit-for-tat scenarios.

This book presents timely and important research on China and the mainland Southeast Asian countries as they advance to a new stage of a deepening strategic partnership, offering insightful perspectives of scholars from different countries and disciplines in Asia.

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Empires and encounters 1350–1750

Edited by WOLFGANG REINHARD

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Pp. 1152. Maps, Plates, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

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This formidable volume is the third in the six-volume series *A history of the world*, edited by Akira Iriye and Jürgen Osterhammel. The format is as refreshing as the interpretations, for such an ambitious project. Rather than encyclopedic broad but light coverage, the editors commissioned a team of authors to produce substantial interpretive essays, each tasked to 'explore developments and trends within a global historical framework'. This presents as an effort to combine the strengths of regional and chronological depth with a coherent global canvas for reinterpretation of contacts, connections, movements, encounters, and trajectories. This volume presents five such essays, divided by regions defined by geography, culture, politics, economy and society. The overarching thesis of the volume is that during this era, loosely defined at both ends, the world 'reached a tipping point of global connectedness'. This thesis is developed by examining empire-building, and interactions of multiple types, in Continental Eurasia, the Ottoman Empire and the Islamic World, South Asia and the Indian Ocean, Europe and the Atlantic World, and Southeast Asia and Oceania.

There is obvious value to students of Southeast Asian history in engaging an ambitious reinterpretation of global history that takes pains to embed the region within a wider spatial and thematic study, but does so by treating it as a distinct sub-story in its own right. Part Four in this volume, it is the only co-authored section, presented by Reinhardt Wendt and Jürgen G. Nagel. That allowed the authors to combine an analysis of the region we customarily see as Southeast Asia with one of