Macassan History and Heritage: Journeys, Encounters and Influences

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Allison’s ethnography of contemporary Japan, framed in terms of instability, poverty, hope, mud and the desire for belonging, is a compelling and timely work. The author’s observations, a bricolage bound with the concept of precarity, enjoin the need to accept uncertainty in a time of flux: ‘Stay with the present, precarious as it is, and face the pain but also the pleasures of working together in the mud’ (205).

Reference

Macassan History and Heritage: Journeys, Encounters and Influences
MARSHALL CLARK & SALLY K. MAY (Eds)
Canberra, ANU E Press, 2013

This volume surveys the history and heritage of the Macassans, a term which has come to mean the mostly Makassarese, Bugis and Bajau seafarers who annually crossed the Arafura Sea to harvest sea cucumbers off the coast of northern Australia. The book consists of twelve essays which, collectively, present an interdisciplinary exploration of their influence on the history of the Kimberly and Arnhem Land. In so doing, it provides an extended challenge to the view that Aboriginal Australia was isolated from the rest of the world until the arrival of Europeans, as well as to certain assumptions surrounding contemporary fishing, such as what constitutes ‘traditional’ technology. It also gives some attention to the influence of the Macassans on the society and economy of Makassar.

The variety of perspectives included in Macassan History and Heritage is exceptional. The historiographical chapter by the ‘doyen of Australian “Macassan” trepang industry research’ (10) Campbell Macknight and the long-term overview by Anthony Reid offer valuable introductions to the subject matter. While their presence is not surprising, some of the details, such as Macknight’s account of his encounter with the Dutch historian Meilink-Roelofsz, are delightful. Yet, it is in the subsequent chapters where the book becomes truly innovative. Maggie Brady’s chapter, ‘Drug Substances Introduced by the Macassans’, explores the use of alcohol, betel nut and tobacco through the lens of the mystery of the tobacco pipe. Paul Thomas’s chapter, ‘Interpreting the Macassans’, offers an unofficial, alternative diplomatic history of Australia. These individual contributions are generally very well researched and cite a wide variety of sources. The inclusion of a sixth-generation descendant of the Malay
interpreter Oodeen provides unexpected context but the perspectives of more Aboriginal elders would have been a valuable addition. Furthermore, in some instances, more analysis or at least speculation as to which of the sources cited is most likely to be accurate would have been welcome.

The variety of illustrations and photographs is similarly impressive. Especially striking in the eyes of this reviewer are the juxtaposing of a photograph and a petroglyph of a Macassan knife in Paul S. C. Taçon and Sally K. May’s chapter ‘Rock Art Evidence for Macassan-Aboriginal Contact in Northwestern Arnhem Land’, the before and after pictures of Unusu Daeng Remba’s house in Makassar in Marshall Clark’s chapter ‘Tangible Heritage of the Macassan-Aboriginal Encounter in Contemporary South Sulawesi’, and Mawulan’s 1947 drawing of goods introduced by the Macassans in Brady’s chapter. The general reader would benefit from a map before the 128th page of a 238-page volume.

While the subject matter is inherently interesting and will fascinate readers with an interest in Australia, Sulawesi or maritime trade, Macassan History and Heritage will also appeal to historiographers. This is because it exemplifies how a topic for which there are comparatively few written sources can be approached from a variety of perspectives. Entire chapters are based upon insights gained from archaeology, ethnic studies, linguistics, art history, law, media studies and anthropology. All of these are presented in laymen’s terms. Some examples, such as the number of articles discussing Macassans in popular geographic magazines in Rebecca Bilous’s chapter “An Arnhem Land Adventure”: Representations of Macassan-Indigenous Australian Connections in Popular Geographical Magazines’ are quantified, but the nitty-gritty archaeological and linguistic data is by and large absent from the book. It is presumably to such detailed, scientific studies that the editor refers when he calls for a more comprehensive project.

Macassan History and Heritage promotes the idea that the Macassan trepang pathway, from its northern limit in China where the sea cucumbers are sold to its southern limit in Arnhem Land, is a worthy contender to become the world’s first UNESCO-listed maritime cultural route. Sandy Blair and Nicholas Hall’s concluding chapter deals explicitly with this proposal and presents a list of criteria with explanations as to how the Macassan trepang pathway fulfils them. In the context of preservation efforts, the editor’s own essay comparing the presentation of maritime heritage in Makassar and Kuala Terengganu has particular social value because it envisions a more prestigious future for the Macassan past. Unfortunately, this comparison comes at the cost of the implication that nothing is lost in the professionalisation concomitant with a ‘static form of cultural expression’ (179) in a state museum, as well as that Terengganu’s maritime culture is not an ‘ongoing cultural process’ (161). Nevertheless, the book clearly achieves its goal of taking a small step in the process of nominating the Macassan trepang pathway to become a UNESCO-listed maritime cultural route.
Anxious Wealth: Money and Morality among China’s New Rich

JOHN OSBURG

Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2013

In Anxious Wealth John Osburg provides important insights into the rise of the new rich in post-Mao China through an ethnographic case study on young and middle-aged, male private entrepreneurs and how they build and sustain elite networks with state enterprise managers, government officials and other entrepreneurs in Chengdu, the capital city of China’s interior Sichuan Province. Osburg rejects the idealised Western concept of a universal ‘middle class’ and paints a multifaceted picture of the new rich as a major beneficiary of market reform, with diverse interests and attitudes. Conceptually, he is primarily concerned with the role of state-business alliances in China’s broader political and economic change.

Stereotypical media depictions have created a public image of China’s new rich as uncouth, uneducated country bumpkins (baofahu). However, there is almost no empirically grounded in-depth study of this emergent socio-economic group—partly because of the lack of research access to many of their business and consumption practices, which take place in legal grey areas. Drawing on three years of fieldwork, this ethnography fills this gap. In an interior city where there is a relatively small foreign population (in comparison with coastal cities), Osburg, a Chinese-speaking American researcher, was often seen by his entrepreneurial elite friends as an asset to project their international reach and influence, thus turning his outsider status to ethnographic advantage.

Osb urg accompanied his entrepreneur informants to teahouses, coffeehouses, restaurants and karaoke clubs (often referred to as KTVs) as they entertained their clients and business associates in the afternoons and evenings. Through this he was able to enter their business and social circles and eventually embed himself within the elite networks that he had come to study. Much of his analysis delves into the nightlife of his informants. When usual practices of gift-giving and banqueting fall short of the goal of creating shared intimacy and durable ties, KTV entertaining (characterised by singing, dancing, drinking and the hiring of hostesses) plays this role. As a site for generating illicit pleasure and cultivating relationships, it has become an urban ritual for Chengdu entrepreneurs to get to know important officials for utilitarian purposes. As Osburg states, ‘KTV nightlife is the central component to entrepreneurial courtship and officialdom in contemporary China’ (56).