

would pave the way for the Japanese to move on to Bandoeng and bring the campaign for the Netherlands East Indies to a conclusion.

There is little doubt that Boer's study is a product of prodigious research. Some readers in fact will find the information he has unearthed overwhelming. Others will argue that the book would have benefited from further discussion of the military operations on the eastern side of Java. Other subjects that deserve greater scrutiny include the performance of the American air units. Finally, the book's index could do with a listing of events, military units, nationalities, and places rather than merely the names of personalities. It must be said that these suggestions and complaints do little to detract from the quality of the work. *The loss of Java* as it stands will be welcomed by scholars as a significant contribution to the study of the Second World War in Asia.

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Myanmar

A history of Myanmar since ancient times: Traditions and transformations

By MICHAEL AUNG-THWIN and MATRII AUNG-THWIN

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For over thirty years, Michael Aung-Thwin has been informing and challenging students of Myanmar with original and often provocative publications on the country's history, culture and politics. More recently, Matrii Aung-Thwin has written a searching reappraisal of the so-called Saya San rebellion in the 1930s. Both family members have now collaborated on a comprehensive history of Myanmar that traces the country's development over more than two millennia. As Ian Brown states on the dust cover, it is 'a strongly argued book with a clearly stated perspective ... a stimulating, often pugnacious reading of the history of Myanmar'. It is also a significant and timely contribution to Southeast Asian historiography.

The authors' approach is explained in a prologue and introduction. The main text opens with a description of the 'material (physical) and human environment', which is seen to constitute 'invariable and persistent foundations for the study of Myanmar' (p. 29). The remainder of the book is organised essentially along chronological lines. Chapter two is a masterly survey of Myanmar's prehistory from around 40,000 years ago to 500 BC. Next follows a chapter on 'the urban age', which is described as the country's 'formative period'. This reviewer lacks the expertise to comment on the arguments made in the latter two chapters but they clearly reflect an exhaustive examination of available sources and an original approach to an often neglected subject.

Chapter four describes the 'classical' period, and revisits several themes pursued by Michael Aung-Thwin in past writings about the nature of Myanmar society during the Pagan era. Chapter five is an account of the origins and development of, and the

relationship between, Upper and Lower Myanmar. Again, the book rehearses arguments made in earlier works by Michael Aung-Thwin, relating in particular to the vexed question of the 'Mon paradigm'. The next two chapters describe Myanmar's second 'unification', its expansion during the sixteenth century and the country's later political and economic development. The authors argue that Myanmar's history is defined less by momentous events than by recurring political, cultural and religious patterns, such as the dominance of the central dry zone.

Chapters eight to ten deal with the Konbaung dynasty, Britain's three-stage conquest of Myanmar, and the Second World War. These periods are covered well and offer a range of insights, again based on extensive research and a healthy scepticism toward the received wisdom. For example, the authors reject the 'reification of ethnicity' by foreign historians, who are accused of giving undue weight to racial factors in their construction of Myanmar's past. The colonial period is characterised as 'order without meaning', while the period 1942–62 is described as 'disorder with meaning' (p. 33). In these terms, the period after Ne Win's military coup, viewed by the authors as the beginnings of Myanmar's real independence, represents 'order with meaning'.

Chapter eleven argues that the coup maintained the integrity of the union and restored law and order to 'an anarchic and fissiparous civilian society' (p. 34). Chapter twelve expands this thesis, describing Myanmar under a socialist government and, since 1988, two military councils. Some of the points made in this chapter are compelling, and help provide a lively alternative explanation for developments since the 1988 uprising. That said, the official version of events could have been treated more critically and greater weight given to other possible explanations. For example, given the way they were conducted, it is difficult to accept that the 2010 elections reflected widespread support for '*incumbency* and *continuity* rather than *inexperience* and *unpredictability*' (p. 280). The claim that '*preserving* rather than *changing* the status quo must have been important' was demolished by the National League for Democracy's landslide win in the April 2012 by-elections.

The book persuasively argues that the complexities of modern Myanmar politics have been grossly over-simplified. The news media, activist groups and even the 'international community' have tended to view the country in crude binary terms, as a struggle between good and evil, in which moral and partisan political considerations have been given greater weight than objective, empirical analysis. The authors believe that the past two decades are better described as 'a struggle between effective and ineffective rule, order and disorder, elites and other elites — in short a contest between the forces of strength and the forces of weakness' (p. 35). Not for the first time, they argue that, throughout the country's history, anarchy has been feared more than tyranny by the Myanmar people, whose greatest concern, including in the years since 1988, has always been social order (p. 258).

While easy to read, this is a complex book that seeks to convey numerous messages. It aims to examine the entirety of Myanmar's history, not just the more popular colonial and postcolonial periods. An effort has also been made to look at the country from the perspective of all Myanmar people, in part by giving emphasis to primary, rather than secondary, sources. Ethnic minority issues are covered only to the extent that they impinge on major historical trends. There is an obvious determination not

to be unduly influenced by the standard interpretations of Myanmar history, which are often seen as flawed, and to seek fresh, original perspectives — albeit including some already aired by the authors. Above all, the Aung-Thwins have made an effort to explode what they consider to be the myths about Myanmar created over the years by academics, politicians, activists and others.

In principle, these goals are to be applauded. Myanmar studies needs scholars who, in a genuine spirit of enquiry and on the basis of rigorous scholarship, are prepared to question conventional views and offer new explanations for historical and other phenomena. Perhaps more than other Southeast Asian countries, Myanmar has suffered from myths, misconceptions and misunderstandings. There have also been problems caused by the uncritical acceptance of accounts coloured by political agendas, personal prejudices, cultural biases and other such influences. However, as a number of eminent scholars have remarked with regard to some of Michael Aung-Thwin's earlier works, there is a danger that such a revisionist approach is taken too far.

This has been cogently argued, for example, with regard to the Mon paradigm, introduced by Michael Aung-Thwin in 2005. There may be some evidence to support the claim that Mon culture in ancient Myanmar has been over-emphasised by modern scholars, but another school has argued strongly that Aung-Thwin has been selective in his choice of sources, and taken his argument beyond what even they can justify. His 1998 monograph on the historiography of early Myanmar, which has clearly informed parts of the work under review, was equally controversial, being described by one reviewer as 'at times outrageous'. Similarly, the analysis in the current joint work at times exceeds the available evidence and strays into what one reviewer of the elder Aung-Thwin's 1985 history of Pagan called 'unsubstantiated speculation' and 'overstatement'.

With regard to the modern period, the authors express strong views. There is nothing wrong with this, but some statements on recent political developments lack context and balance, raising in turn questions of evidence and objectivity. For example, to write that the opposition parties whipped democracy 'like a dead horse' during the 1990 elections, while the military regime focused on important national issues (p. 280), risks replacing one distorted account with another. Similarly, a reader does not have to disagree with the authors' claims that the Myanmar people lack a sophisticated understanding of democracy, or that the predominantly rural population may interpret events differently from more worldly urban activists, to question the rather abrupt dismissal of democracy as 'a foreign ideology', by implication alien to Myanmar culture (p. 281).

One aspect of the book that will inevitably attract comment is its treatment of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi. An objective and scholarly analysis of her character, political thinking and national role is overdue. To date, there has been a marked reluctance to criticise her or her policies, although this seems to be changing as she grapples with the challenges of being an elected politician rather than a political icon. The Aung-Thwins are justified in applying to Aung San Suu Kyi the same criteria that are routinely used to assess the performance of other public figures, in Myanmar and elsewhere, but they are bound to touch a nerve by describing her as a 'hard liner', 'inexperienced, stubborn, steadfastly uncompromising, idealistic and

playing a ‘zero-sum game’ in a field where most of the cards ... were held by the other side’ (p. 265).

This book is a bold and thought-provoking work that should be read by all serious students of Myanmar. It offers a major reinterpretation of Myanmar history, in part by relating broad historical trends to more recent developments. The fact that it takes controversial positions on many subjects, and will likely prompt strong responses from both scholars and activists, is something to be welcomed. A robust debate on both historical and contemporary issues is healthy and — provided it is conducted in a civilised manner — constructive. Besides, a re-examination of habitual ways of thinking about Myanmar can never be a waste of effort, particularly if, as the authors clearly hope, it is conducted with an open mind.

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Religion–state encounters in Hindu domains: From the Straits Settlements to Singapore

By VINEETA SINHA

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Through an analysis of the experience of Hindus in Singapore from the period of the Straits Settlements to the present, this ambitious and well-researched book’s pronounced objective is to ‘articulate the actual points of engagement between institutions of religion and the state’ as well as ‘identify the various processes, mechanisms and strategies through which relations across these spheres are sustained’.

Dealing with such a large swathe of history spanning approximately two centuries is never an easy task. In order to achieve this dual objective, the leitmotif employed by Vineeta Sinha to sustain the book’s narrative arc is the belief that in both colonial and postcolonial contexts, the interaction between Hindus and the prevailing statist bureaucracy of specific periods created a milieu where some aspects of religiosity were enabled while others were inhibited. Beginning with a helpful chapter offering background to the creation of the Straits Settlements, moving to the establishment in 1905 of the Mohammedan and Hindu Endowments Ordinance to the creation of the Hindu Endowment Board in independent Singapore, Sinha arrives at the conclusion that religious actors in Singapore are able to often successfully negotiate and navigate the occasionally stifling bureaucratic frameworks put in place to manage them.

Sinha’s project is commendable for several reasons. First, her project goes some way in filling the underexplored relationship between Hindus and governance in