

but argues '[t]he overall conclusion is that normalcy is remarkably stable' (p. 256). Current friction in the South China Sea between Vietnam and China will test this proposition.

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Cambodia

Lost goddesses: The denial of female power in Cambodian history

By TRUDY JACOBSEN

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Maps, Illustrations, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

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What a refreshing book! Challenging the 'traditional' portrayal of Cambodian women as inferior, Trudy Jacobsen asks, 'What if the true tradition of Cambodia is not one of male privilege, but dignity, value and agency for women?' (p. xi). All of us who have been interested in the status of women in Southeast Asia have found ourselves caught in an unresolved tension between a contemporary literature on sex workers and a historical literature suggesting that women held high status. Jacobsen resolves this tension by outlining a chronological transformation in the status of women over the course of two millennia. Providing compellingly rich evidence for the high status of women prior to the nineteenth century, she provocatively asks, '[w]ho or what is responsible for the denial of female power in Cambodian history?' (p. 2). Her answer lies in the changes that began during the misogynist rule of King Ang Duong in the mid-nineteenth century.

Jacobsen's book is divided into 12 chapters, each providing a careful exploration of the available evidence for different historical periods. Her remarkable breadth is made possible by her interdisciplinary training in both history and anthropology. Not only is she able to draw upon language training in Sanskrit and Old Khmer, she has extended first-hand experience living in Cambodia first as a teenager during the eventful period of 1988–95 and subsequently while conducting fieldwork after 2001. Driven by a rare intellectual curiosity, Jacobsen draws upon an impressive array of sources, ranging from historical sources – such as stone inscriptions, Chinese dynastic histories, court chronicles, court literature, popular folktales, foreign travel accounts and French colonial records – to anthropological sources based upon participant-observation and interviews.

Although the full measure of the book is in its audacity to consider the *longue durée*, each chapter is engaging in its own right and reveals noticeable shifts. While suggesting that Western scholars have portrayed Cambodian women as powerless because they 'exercise authority outside those areas of concern to Western constructs of power' (p. 6), she nonetheless shows that even within these Western constructs,

Cambodian women held positions of power. Beginning with the period of the third to ninth centuries CE, Jacobsen notes that creation myths portray a woman as the first ruler and that goddesses were represented separately from their male counterparts, often with a martial aspect. She describes the presence of autonomous queens from the sixth century on and, importantly, notes that '[m]atrilocality seems to have been the norm amongst the elite' (p. 33).

Having established a baseline in the first two chapters, she then describes shifts in female status with the rise of Brahmanism and the emergence of the *apsara* female divinity during the Angkorian period from the ninth to fifteenth centuries. The 'middle' period up to the sack of Phnom Penh by the Thai in 1772 saw the rise of Theravada Buddhism. But in both periods Jacobsen provides evidence that women continued to be influential.

Jacobsen traces the decline in the status of women to the mid-nineteenth century, in part as an ironic consequence of the reign of Queen Ang Mei who took the throne in 1835 with Vietnamese support. The queen's links with the Vietnamese facilitated the ability of her successor, King Ang Duong, to identify 'female political power with national humiliation' (p. 115). Having grown up in the Bangkok court, Jacobsen suggests that Ang Duong 'inculcated elite Cambodian society with models of correct behaviour that reflected the conservatism of the Thai court' (p. 121). However, Jacobsen suggests that these changes in the court had little impact on everyday village life. Far more wide-ranging were the changes that resulted from French colonial rule.

In subsequent chapters, Jacobsen pursues the declining status of women over the course of the twentieth century. She explores shifts occurring during the 1950s and 1960s when '[c]ontrol over female sexuality increased as more families sought to elevate themselves socially' (p. 188); during the 1975–78 period of the Khmer Rouge when romantic love was tantamount to treason; during the 1978–89 period of Vietnamese involvement when a shortage of women contributed to a resurgence of polygamy; during the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) period of the early 1990s which saw a dramatic rise in the number of sex workers and foreign men; and today with the return of many Cambodian exiles whose nostalgia for the past takes its gender model from the conservative court codes of conduct rather than from everyday egalitarian practices. Nonetheless, Jacobsen also notes how women have continued to play important roles ranging from political mediators to spirit mediums with supernatural powers. Thus she concludes, 'The powerlessness and subservience taken to be 'traditional' for Cambodian women is based upon a false premise' (p. 285).

This book is a major breakthrough in studies of the position of women not just in Cambodia, but also in Southeast Asia more broadly. Well researched, well argued, well written and clearly organised, Jacobsen's book reveals the rich treasures possible from a feminist reading of traditional historical sources. I am looking forward to the debates this book is sure to provoke.

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