

Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia in ruins: Art and empire in the early 19th century

By SARAH TIFFIN

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This book contributes to the broader scholarship on British imperialism in Southeast Asia, specifically focusing on Stamford Raffles' relationship to Java, and the ways in which his desire to maintain a British presence on the island was envisioned through carefully cultivated illustrations of architectural ruins in his 1817 publication, *The history of Java*. Javanese *candi* (temples) and monuments served as literal and metaphorical figures of ruin, intended to convey to a wide readership their status as remnants of a great civilisation and as historical portents of decline in need of a firm and restoring British presence. Tiffin's book demonstrates an impressive breadth and depth of research, finely combed to provide a detailed account of attitudes, discourses, visual productions, and both popular and governmental reception of *The history of Java* as instrument of Raffles' campaigns.

While anchored in British studies, particularly in its emphasis on visual tastes and cultural discourses in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Britain, Tiffin is nonetheless careful to situate localised perceptions of the ruins as they converged and diverged from those of Raffles and other British administrators. She thus illuminates the ruins as a meeting-point between cross-cultural aesthetics and historical appreciation, or what Stanley J. O'Connor described as 'a congruence of obsessions across a wide cultural gulf' ('Art critics, connoisseurs, and collectors in the Southeast Asian rain forest: A study in cross-cultural art theory', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 14, 2 [1983]: 402).

In the first chapter, 'Raffles' *History of Java*, its precursors and its peers', Tiffin introduces Raffles' reign during the British interregnum in Java (1811–16) and maps the processes through which Javanese ruins were drawn by amateurs and then reproduced as aquatint prints by professional artists back in Britain. These were reworked to adhere to the pictorial grammar through which Hindu monuments from India or even Islamic models from the Middle East had been illustrated, supporting assumptions that earlier Indian colonisation had been the creative force behind Javanese temples and monuments. Departing to a degree from scholarship on Southeast Asia that had rendered it within Orientalist lenses of exoticism and the fantastical, Raffles' publication marked a shift toward broader interpretations of history, supported by diaristic as well as observational and empirical accounts.

The second chapter, 'The *candi* of Java and the picturesque ideal', locates the Javanese ruin within formations of British taste in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, tailored to educated classes cultivated in the 'pleasure of ruins' and the requisite understanding of the picturesque and the sublime. For this audience, the ruins were deemed to hold historical truths, surpassing the historical value of local texts (e.g. *kakawin*) considered inferior by British scholar-administrators. British artists

accordingly edited the images to emphasise dramatic ambiances and human isolation, depicting the ruins as untouched by native intervention and improvement. The third and fourth chapters, 'The barometer of civilisation' and 'The nature of decline', subsequently position Javanese ruins within teleological notions of style and progress, as developed through continental art historical formations, often with disparaging comparison to the classical traditions of India, Greece, and Rome, with theories of decline attributed to local indifference resulting from both Buddhist and Islamic religious attitudes. The fifth chapter, 'The politics of decline', aligns these politico-aesthetic discourses with those of politico-anthropological critique, framing the ruins as allegories for what British commentators deemed to be endemic state corruption. Here Tiffin again notes the function of the *candi* at the intersection of opposing perspectives of statecraft: their local value in making merit and reinforcing the exemplary centre of the *negara* (Clifford Geertz's concept of the theatre-state), and for the British, their ubiquity as symptoms of 'oriental despotism'. In their view, the decline of Javanese architectural heritage paralleled failed systems of governance, which needed guided transformation into a modern commercial state founded on free trade. The sixth chapter, 'Dissipating the gloom of ignorance' reiterates the role Raffles played in driving an ultimately unsuccessful campaign to establish a more permanent British presence in Java, despite using *The history of Java* to support a critical view of Dutch rule and the enlightened and humane nature of Raffles' own policies of governance. In reality, such a portrait ran counter to the authoritarian mode of rule that Raffles had advocated. Tiffin concludes the book by restating *The history of Java's* identity as both an ode and a propaganda piece. Its illustrations betray the exoticist fascination and colonial nostalgia found in visual productions throughout the region, but as Tiffin persuasively describes throughout the book, they are simultaneously illustrations of individually motivated aspirations, tinged with promise and regret, on the part of Raffles.

This volume adds a much-needed dimension to studies of colonialism and visual culture in Southeast Asia and the pivotal role of monuments and ruins in promoting the imperial project. Tiffin includes some comparative material from Burma to support her discussion of British policy-making, but such analyses could even be extended to French colonialism in Indochina, given the formidable weight of Angkorean architecture and sculpture in campaigns targeted to garner support from the metropole. While the Javanese examples did not attain the same scale of representation for British audiences, such discussions would locate the particularities of Raffles' endeavours within a broader regional picture in which the imaginary of the ruin anchored imperial rhetoric. As mentioned earlier, rich glimpses of cross-cultural appreciation of the ruins are elucidated throughout the book, and this discussion may have benefitted from a separate chapter. Nonetheless, this is an impressively researched and acutely detailed contribution to interdisciplinary fields of study, and it enriches our understanding of the nuanced differences in such visual regimes across comparative colonial contexts.

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