Sarah Tiffin

Southeast Asia in Ruins. Art and Empire in the Early 19th Century. Singapore: NUS, Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 2016, xiii+302 pp. ISBN 9789971698492. Price: SGD 46.00 (hardback).

2016 was the 200th anniversary of the British returning Java to the Dutch after the Napoleonic Wars. It also saw the first major scholarly publications on early nineteenth century British colonialism in Southeast Asia since the 1990s: Farish Noors' *The Discursive Construction of Southeast Asia in 19th-Century Colonial-Capitalist Discourse*, Gareth Knapman's *Race and British Colonialism in Southeast Asia*, and the subject of this review, Sarah Tiffin's lavishly presented *Southeast Asia in Ruins*.

Tiffin's excellent book explores the responses of British colonial officials towards the Hindu and Buddhist *candi* (or temple) they encountered in Java during the period of 1811–1815. This period of British occupation of Java coincided with the final years of the long Enlightenment. In Tiffin's version, the writing and artistic observations of British colonial occupiers in Java is comparable to the outputs of eighteenth and nineteenth century British travelers from Italy and Greece. Colonial writing is therefore comparable to the 'Grand Tour'. The departing point for Tiffin's intellectual engagement with this colonial writing on Southeast Asian *candi* is the 'decline and fall' preoccupation of late Enlightenment British thought.

Tiffin's work demonstrates the close relationship between artistic depictions of Southeast Asia and the colonial ideology of occupation. In her analysis, the imagery of ruins is not an ideologically neutral motif. Instead, the depicting of ruins in the landscape is intrinsically connected to the colonial project. The British government's decision to hand Java back to the Dutch after the Napoleonic Wars was opposed by many of the senior colonial officials who had served in Java, with Thomas Stamford Raffles and John Crawfurd being the leading literary advocates for retaining Java for the British.

These colonial officials responded by writing large tomes, with lavish illustrations, urging the British government to reconsider their decision. These officials argued that Java and Southeast Asia were dynamic economic and political environments, and were assets that should not be relinquished to the Dutch. As a form of pressure, to create a change in policy—Raffles, Crawfurd, and the officials failed in their quest. Their failure was partly due to each of the writer arguing for different policy outcomes, whilst also belonging to very different political factions inside the East India company and the Broader British polity. There was no uniform British view of Java—and unfortunately, the implication of these divisions is not addressed by Tiffin's work.

In the accounts of Java published after 1815, we see an apparent contradiction between the message of dynamic social change present in the books—urging further colonial action—and the imagery of ruins and degradation. These contradictions are not limited to post 1815 depictions in the Java books, but were in fact common across the colonial literary space. It was the starting point for Edward Said's landmark work *Orientalism* (1978), in which Said argued that European depictions of Asian and Middle Eastern decay and barbarism was part of a discourse that legitimized European power over colonized peoples. Tiffin follows Said's approach by continually looking for the 'British view' of ruins and how these ruins played a central part in British conceptions of decline in Java and across Southeast Asia.

The continual focus on the 'British view', rather than the British views, is the limitation of Tiffin's groundbreaking study. Tiffin's chapters explore general themes, wherein she looks for uniformity in British thinking to create a summary of the 'British view'. The problem with synthesizing these various works into a single British view is that we miss the differences within British views—differences that were substantial and often contradicted the idea that there is a general Orientalist 'British view'. These British views are also extremely easy to misinterpret and quote out of context. John Crawfurd's style of writing is full of juicy quotes, suggestive of an arrogant imperialist, but if you take his broader message, the arrogant quotes are often not representative of his overall perspective. In that sense, experts in the field have often misinterpreted Crawfurd.

One example of this is worth exploring at length to illustrate. Here, Tiffin quotes from the opinion of John Crawfurd regarding the temples of Prambanan to conclude that 'he was not overly impressed by the remains, however, and on the whole his opinion was damning'. To support this conclusion she quotes Crawfurd at length.

There is neither grandeur nor sublimity in the temples of Prambanan. The want of pillars conveys a disagreeable impression of heaviness and inelegance; the buildings are themselves too small, the entrances are mean, and the interior conveys more of the gloom of a vault or prison, than of the awe which ought to attach to a place of worship. For the place they are in, they are indeed wonderful structures, but one must be a Hindu to view them with anything like enthusiasm.

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At first glance, this would suggest a Eurocentric arrogance at play in Crawfurd's attitudes. However, a wider reading of Crawfurd's work (in which he

advocated for universal suffrage in 1820, for all people living in British Asian colonies), also demonstrates that he believed that local culture shaped communities more than colonizing ideas or colonizing peoples—an idea that he developed initially in his 1820 *History of the Indian Archipelago*, but continued to refine throughout his life and his later writings for the *Ethnological Society of London*. In the above passage quoted by Tiffin, Crawfurd was rejecting eighteenth century ideas of a universal appreciation, in favor of a detailed contextual appreciation of the ruins by the intended audience of the temple. The key phrase was Crawfurd's conclusion 'one must be a Hindu to view them with anything like enthusiasm'.

In the original source, Crawfurd's paper *The Ruins of Prambanan in Java* (1820) he wrote

'there is nothing here upon a great scale, nothing but what seems within the reach of the most obvious mechanical contrivance [...] What we are chiefly struck with is the minute laboriousness of the execution. Its success is also calculated to excite our admiration'.

CRAWFURD 1820, 357

Crawfurd's argument was that achieving 'grandeur nor sublimity' was not the aim of the builders of Prambanan, but rather the builders chose to focus on the fine details of the sculptures, which Crawfurd notes 'are executed with considerable skill, [with] the artist often succeeding in conveying to the figures even a proportion of ease and grace'. Crawfurd 1820, (358). This focus of detail over grandeur he readily admits, he does not understand from a European perspective which emphasizes grandeur in religious buildings, and therefore Crawfurd's conclusion is that 'one must be a Hindu' to understand why the builders made that decision.

His observations are not a statement of arrogance, but an affirmation that buildings have a specific audience who would read the building through a unique cultural lens. Crawfurd's opinion, therefore, was antithetical to the Orientalist view of colonial thought. Crawfurd was rejecting the Eurocentric idea that there was a universal lens of artistic appreciation to view a building through, and instead he was promoting that buildings only have meaning to the culture that created them, and, therefore, to understand the buildings you need to understand the context and cultural ideas behind the creation of those buildings. Such nuances in argument can easily be misread and misinterpreted by scholars of British Colonialism in Southeast Asia and Tiffin's *Southeast Asia in Ruins* is no exception.

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