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ABSTRACTS (selected)

In alphabetical order, by last name

“Malacañang: A Symbolic and Spectacular Museological Space”

Pearlie Rose Baluyut

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If print-capitalism in the form of novels and newspapers, according to Benedict Anderson, provided the means for representing the imagined community, Donald Preziosi theorizes that museums made legible the modern nation-state. This paper investigates Malacañang located in Manila, Philippines, as a symbolic and spectacular space of nationalism. Since its establishment in the late 18th century, Malacañang signified its foreign and local residents’ colonial ideology, national history, and cultural heritage. During the Marcos (1965-1986), Aquino (1986-1992), and Ramos years (1992-1998), in particular, Malacañang metamorphosed from an executive headquarters and president’s official residence into a fortified palace that showcased indigenous mythologies and personal aesthetic tastes; later, it was converted into a public museum that commodified political critique and celebrated the country’s centennial. Through its extensive and radical architectural renovations, expanding and/or collapsing collection of local and foreign objects, and technologies of exhibition and display, Malacañang made legible the nation *and* legitimized state power to its own citizens and the world. Malacañang’s narration of the vicissitudes of the modern nation was spatial, but also discursive *and* performative, articulating competing political agendas and personae: the conjugal dictatorship of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, the People Power revolution of Corazon Aquino, and the profitable democracy of Fidel Ramos. Staged as an official monument of personal and historical memorabilia from the thousand pair of shoes to the presidential portraits, Malacañang became a calculated extension of politics and exhibition of the selves as well. Indeed, no other museum symbolized and spectacularized discrepant nationalisms, power struggles, and high and low culture from 1965 to 1998 than Malacañang, a dynamic agent and landscape in the ideological narration and representation of the Philippines as a modern nation-state.

Imperial Borders, Refugee Diasporas, and the Division of the Patani-Kelantan Cultural Sphere

Francis R. Bradley

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Siam’s brutal conquering of the Patani Sultanate in the period 1785-1838 created a refugee diaspora that stretched from the northern Malay states to Mecca. With their political unity broken, key intellectuals of the Patani diaspora embraced textualized, reformist Islam on an unprecedented level that they transmitted from Mecca to Southeast Asia via a sophisticated network of scholars, students, and schools. Throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century the Patani diaspora not only transformed itself into a religious community with a distinct, if contested cultural unity, they also spread *pondok* (Islamic schools) in the neighboring Malay states that served as vibrant centers of cultural production. The Patani scholars were most successful back in Patani as well as in Kelantan, where many of them settled throughout the period. By the time of the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909 that separated Patani from Kelantan (and Siam from British Malaya), nearly a hundred schools existed throughout the Patani-Kelantan region. These schools were tied intimately together as an autonomous cultural sphere, drew heavily upon successive waves of Islamic thought emanating out from Mecca, Cairo, and other Islamic centers, and continued to defy imperial aims at pacifying the periphery long after the creation of the border.

ABSTRACTS (selected)

“Market trans(form)ation: Placemaking Practices of Female Migrant Vendors in Ho Chi Minh City”

Erin Collins
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This paper traces the daily and seasonal geographies of female migrants working within an informal market area of Ho Chi Minh City to explore the reconfiguration of the relationship between rural and urban space within contemporary, Southern Vietnam. As the embodied lifeline between rural dependents and the urban hub of economic growth, female migrants facilitate the spatial dispersion of rural goods, urban wages and seasonally fluctuating labor reserves. At the scale of the state, 'the female migrant' is key terrain on which many inconsonant social and economic claims of the *đổi mới* era are being worked out, or not. Through the continuance of the system of household registration, access to health care and education remain rooted to one's rural birthplace, whereas labor opportunities are overwhelmingly to be found in the urban informal economy. The divergence between spaces of productive and reproductive labor creates the conditions under which the vendors, garbage pickers, and lottery ticket sellers centered in this paper are ensnared in motion--able to support and nurture dependents only through their bodily absence. As long term urban residents, these women build lasting networks and village enclaves within and across the city. Based on in-depth interviews, participant observation, and trips accompanying migrants to their rural homes, this paper suggests that attention to migrant practices troubles the dualisms of rural/urban and in/formal. In so doing this paper also suggests that the female migrant experience, built in and through exchange, networks and mobility, is a key site of the production of emergent, deeply entangled, rural-urban Vietnam.

“Reading Place and Space in Sumatran History”

Jane Drakard
Monash University

The proposed paper will challenge studies which generalize about the insignificance of “territory” in Malay history and culture by undertaking a close reading of local statements about place and space from two different parts of Sumatra. Royal letters from Aceh and Minangkabau between the 17th and 19th centuries provide an opportunity for considering how local perceptions of space intersect with statements about political power. In each case the local sources examined here reveal a more pressing concern with place than is often suggested in earlier European accounts or in modern scholarship. A close analysis of these materials discloses two contrasting concepts of governance and contributes to our understanding of the central role of spatial relationships in pre-modern Sumatran political culture. This local language of space will also be situated in terms of a wider theoretical literature about space and place.

“A Thorn in Bangkok's Side: Khruba Sriwichai and the Sacred Space of the Chiang Mai State”

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Before the integration of Chiang Mai into the Siamese state during the late 19th and early 20th century, royal authority in this inland city-state was based on a concept of legitimacy that tied the ruling elites to complex and overlapping networks of sacred spaces. This relationship between sacred spaces and their royal patrons began to erode as economic transformations removed much of the material base of elite power, and as Siam accelerated its ‘forward movement’ in the Lao states in the late 19th century, at times even pursuing policies that directly undercut the religious and sacro-spatial foundations of royal authority in Chiang Mai. As a result of these broad changes and specific policies, many of the sacred spaces

ABSTRACTS (selected)

formerly associated with the Chiang Mai state were incorporated, albeit imperfectly, into the Siamese state. The loss of royal patronage for many temples and the subsequent decline of the old system of sacro-spatial legitimacy produced a surplus of abandoned temple land, which in turn helped to shape the spatial arrangement of Siamese administration in the city. Meanwhile, the newly centralized ecclesiastical administration began integrating temples into its hierarchy shortly after the Royal Sangha Act of 1902.

Although Siam had effectively integrated much of the north by the turn of the century, the sacred spaces once crucial to royal legitimacy later emerged as a potent alternative to Bangkok's dominance. Though most works on the integration of Siam's northern periphery cite a handful of violent and short-lived rebellions (such as the Phya Phap rebellion of 1889 and the 'Shan Revolt' of 1902) as evidence of discontent with Siamese policies in the north, the strongest challenge to Siamese control after this initial wave of reactionary revolt came to be articulated in and through sacred space. Khruba Sriwichai, a charismatic monk from a remote, hilly district at the margins of Siamese power, led a popular movement that challenged the central state's control of sacred spaces and practices in the north, in large part by restoring and maintaining various temples and monuments throughout the region. In this essay I argue that his movement, and the threat it posed not only to the Siamese ecclesiastical hierarchy, but to the stability of Siam's northern periphery as a whole, can only be understood within the context of the desacralized and incompletely integrated spaces of the formerly autonomous city-states of the north. Thus, Khruba Sriwichai's story shows how sacred space, once divorced from its political role within the pre-modern Chiang Mai state, became a key point of articulation and contestation between diverse local populations, northern elites, and the Siamese state.

“Walking, Planning and the Production of Pedestrian Urban Space in Jakarta”

Ria Hutabarat Lo
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Despite its legacy throughout history, pedestrian transportation planning remains immature and underfunded in Jakarta and many other cities throughout Southeast Asia. This paper examines the interactions and disconnects between planning, discourse and pedestrian activity in Jakarta, with a view to better understanding themes that underpin the production of urban space in Southeast Asia.

Contemporary urban space is produced by planning, which is, in turn, the product of discourse. According to Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, one of the primary discursive forms shaping contemporary urban space is that of nationhood. This is nowhere more evident than in post-colonial states such as Indonesia, where the concept of nationhood is, arguably, more the product of anti-colonial discourse than of shared community, identity, traditions or history. At the urban scale, the idea of post-colonial nationhood has become a powerful tool for legitimizing structural dynamics behind urban primacy and uneven investment in public spaces such as pedestrian spaces. In Jakarta, public pedestrian spaces are frequently represented by planning personnel and official discourse as monumental spaces that symbolize nationhood and Development (or *Pembangunan*). Grand pedestrian spaces for sightseeing, strolling and shopping have endured as the focus of the city's pedestrian planning efforts while there is a dire neglect of functional pedestrian spaces that serve the needs of ordinary people in the city's planning process. This disconnect between planned pedestrian spaces as a symbols of nationhood, and neglected functional spaces of everyday pedestrian activity is even reflected in lay discourse of people about their daily lives. In some cases, the idea of representational pedestrian spaces promoted by the nation building project trumps people's own actual experience when it comes to how they view walking and pedestrian spaces – thus demonstrating the power of language and discourse when it comes to perceptions and planning for urban pedestrian space in Indonesia.

ABSTRACTS (selected)

Planning for pedestrian space cannot be divorced from the language, since it is language that conveys discourse and either deliberately or unknowingly shapes planning parameters such as that of streets, public spaces and even the ‘design pedestrian’ herself. In order to understand pedestrian planning within Jakarta, it is therefore important to consider what walking and pedestrians signify within the relevant language and discourse. Drawing upon pedestrian interviews, the paper examines how planning discourse is complicated by the multi-disciplinary nature of walking and linguistic ambiguity surrounding the notion of *jalan*. The creolized nature of planning discourse in Jakarta further complicates pedestrian policy by adding English and Dutch assumptions to already ambiguous concepts. Without a clear and consistent understanding of what constitutes a pedestrian or good pedestrian planning, it is impossible to design spaces that effectively address the needs of this key participant in the urban environment, and the design of pedestrian spaces is left to other, more dominant goals such as vehicular movement and revenue generation.

This paper draws upon qualitative interviews with pedestrians and key policy makers to consider how pedestrian movement is understood and accommodated within Jakarta, and how planning reflects wider themes surrounding spatial relations in Southeast Asian studies.

“Spatial pasts challenging present management: The Citanduy watershed on Java between colonial forestry and recent interventions”

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The Citanduy watershed in south Java together with its estuary, the unique Segara Anakan Lagoon, is a prime example illustrating the combined landscape shaping effects of natural processes, historical socio-political dynamics, and shifting management approaches, all of which are highly interdependent. The interplay of geological processes and events, colonial and post-colonial forest management, land use dynamics and phases of peasant upheaval and spatially shifting development interventions has created spatial realities, which pose particular challenges for contemporary environmental management.

Recent research and interventions have focused on conserving the Segara Anakan Lagoon, an ecologically highly valuable lagoon, which is threatened by sedimentation. Although it has often been claimed to be the result of ‘unsustainable farming practices’ in the uplands, lagoon sedimentation is in fact a natural process that has considerably been accelerated by a diverse set of drivers, including increased volcanic activity, agricultural reclamation of the lower river basin and land use dynamics in the uplands. Agricultural reclamation projects not only affected the ontological moment of sedimentation, but subsequently induced a profound shift in the interpretation of its outcome. Sedimentation began to be seen as ‘disruptive’, which in line with global environmental discourses, led to a spatial shift of political attention and intervention to the lagoon and into the uplands. Since then research has largely been confined to the lagoon, while interventions in the uplands have been based on simplified and rather inappropriate narratives.

The first findings of my analysis in land use change and its drivers show that the present spatial pattern of critical, erosion-prone land is largely a result of historically grounded conflicts over forest resources. They are concentrated along the boundary between state forest and community or private land, a boundary demarcated by the colonial forest administration and later modified in the wake of conflicts between forest administration and villagers and between state and communist and Islamic movements. After years of repressive forest management, a powerful counter-movement of villagers spearheaded by

ABSTRACTS (selected)

influential individuals, partly including representatives of the forest administration itself, used the opportunity of social tumult during the political transition after 1998 to plunder the state forests, leaving critical, erosion-prone land, which contributes to lagoon sedimentation. These spatial patterns of land use and conflict and the related division of institutional responsibilities pose a major challenge for watershed and upland management. As regards the lagoon, the fact that sediment delivery from the watershed is impossible to be reduced to levels seen prior to agricultural lowland reclamation, except by technical means, interpreting change as ‘transformation’ rather than ‘disruption’ might prove the best foundation for adaptation.

“Siam and Malaya’s Shifting Frontier: Terengganu as a Haven for Rebels and Refugees”

Amrita Malhi

The Australian National University

Throughout the 1785-1919 period, the multiple shifts in the frontier between Siam and British Malaya created ample opportunities for rebellion and shelter. Terengganu, never firmly controlled by Siam and not formally colonised by Britain until 1919, served as a haven for those fleeing Siamese and British authorities on either side of it. Waves of refugees fleeing multiple defeated anti-Siamese uprisings in Patani headed south, to use Terengganu as a base. From the other direction, rebels fleeing a defeated anti-British uprising in Pahang in 1895 fled north, also seeking protection and support in Terengganu.

Terengganu society was profoundly radicalised by these migrations. Refugees from Patani were often Islamic scholars of high standing, who boosted the Terengganu network of small Islamic schools (*pondok*). They joined Terengganu’s mobile preachers to integrate the Terengganu River valley into webs of scholarship and pilgrimage which connected Terengganu and Mecca. Rebels from Pahang, in turn, received political, material and spiritual support from a Terengganu scholar of Hahdrami Arab extraction, who had risen to chief Islamic adviser in the royal court. With his encouragement, the Pahang rebellion became a Holy War against Britain.

In their own ways, migrations from both directions contributed to politicising, and Islamising, Terengganu society. After 1919, with royal prestige shattered in Terengganu, religious scholars sought new sources of authority, some accepting cooption by the colonial Islamic bureaucracy, and others turning to rebellion against colonial encroachment in their heartland of support along the Terengganu River valley.

This paper is an exploration of how newly-bordered homelands were experienced, and how this experience interacted politically with rebels’ and scholars’ connections to the Middle East, and their ideas of a global Islamic community.

“Talat Sao and the Process of an Urban *Undefinition* of Lao Modernity”

Jose Rafael Martinez

Ohio University

This paper problematizes the modernization plan of the Lao government from the perspective of an urban space in Vientiane: Talat Sao or Morning Market. The paper seeks to respond to what extent modernity has obliterated traditional conceptions associated with urban space in Vientiane, Lao PDR’s capital city. It is suggested that the spectrum of modernity is a process that reflects a continued superficiality in the discursive aesthetics of the modern architecture in Vientiane. In order to demonstrate this, the paper analyzes the interior of the recently modernized Talat Sao. Here, the customary uses of the space for trade

ABSTRACTS (selected)

are evident in the intimacy of the building, in which a “traditionalized” version of modernity has been adopted to suit the preferences of the patrons. Perceived for centuries as an empty space, Talat Sao illustrates the modernization efforts undertaken by different Vientiane governments. In 2007, a few months after being chosen as host for the 2009 Southeast Asian Games, the city government sponsored the most recent remodeling of Talat Sao. In spite of its renewed image and attractive elements of modernity that have transformed its previous appearance, Talat Sao keeps certain spatial practices related to traditional commerce. Based on these findings, the paper proposes to observe modernity in Laos as a subject of the influence of tradition and not vice versa. The paper concludes with a call for further exploring the *traditionalization* of modernity in other fields of the integrated policy of modernization undertaken by the current Lao state.

“From governance landscapes to landscape governance: Analyzing spaces of public sector interventions in rural areas of Lao PDR”

Peter Messerli

Centre for Development and Environment, University of Bern

Rural areas of the Lao PDR are currently undergoing rapid transformations related to global change and globalization. A key characteristic of this process is that decisions on land management are not restricted to local actors anymore but are increasingly embedded in a multi-level setting, where regional, national and even global actors are more and more important. Correspondingly, land systems and more specifically human-environmental interactions can not be adequately understood without knowing their linkages to decisions and policies made elsewhere. Conversely, the differential influence of such spheres of decision-making reshapes and fragment Lao landscapes in terms of problems and opportunities for future development. Research is needed to understand the configuration of such multi-level decision-making, and how its spatial variation forms so-called governance landscapes.

This paper presents results of a research project conducted between 2006 and 2010 in Lao PDR. Based on a relational concept of space, development interventions by public sector actors such as governmental agencies, multi- and bi-lateral development partners, and NGOs were systematically studied. The analytical categories of actors and development interventions were first analyzed in terms of their interactions paying special attention to a spatially explicit representation using Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Second, in-depth analysis was carried out to better understand the types of activities, actors’ values and perception, as well as the role of knowledge in decision-making.

The analysis of 327 development interventions targeting poverty and/or natural resource management and 340 related actors shows a rapidly expanding sphere of public governance where decision-makers are increasingly connected and interdependent. Governmental agencies depend on bilateral actors for implementing policies, which in turn adapt their agendas to multi-lateral donors and implementing NGOs. In spatial terms about 60% of Lao villages are influenced by external decision-makers out of which some are confronted with more than 50 development actors from all levels claiming stakes on their future development.

The description of these distinct governance landscapes allow to reflect on new center-periphery gradients in rural areas of Lao PDR. Whereas some localities confronted with multiple agendas of global development dynamics become globalised places, others remain in the vacuum of public influence. Such areas are often exposed to private sector investors and market dynamics and are hence exposed to unregulated capitalistic transformations leading to poverty and natural resource degradation. Furthermore,

ABSTRACTS (selected)

this analysis allows for reflection on currently applied concepts of scale as the ‘global’ and ‘local’ levels intermingle.

“Transnational Real Estate: the Balikbayan Economy and the Transformation of Metro Manila”

Eric J. Pido
UC Berkeley

The following paper extends recent academic analysis on ongoing policies aimed at Balikbayan and OFW migration flows and remittances into the realm of property development in Metro Manila. I argue that these various policies act together as a regime of governmentality tying together the urban planning of Manila, its over 10 million formal and informal residents, with State and local actors. Together, these actors perform in paradoxical unison to transform the economic and physical landscape of Metro Manila. I will first discuss the historical urban development of Metro Manila through the embedded conflicts between various State interests, local actors, and the struggle over land ownership rights. These intersecting and often times conflicting regimes have created the context for urban transformation in Metro Manila. Furthermore, I argue that these transformations are being produced by three coinciding processes: 1) political stability; 2) the exportation of service labor, specifically IT assistance in the form of call centers; and of course; 3) remittance flows created by long-term expatriates and OFWs. These three processes have together become the most important factors enabling the changing economic and cultural landscape of the Metro Manila. While these transformations further enable more and more Filipinos to return to the Philippines, the various investments continually made by balikbayans are paradoxically perpetuating the very inequities that forced them to leave in the first place.

“The Resurgence of Land Reform Policy in Indonesia”

Noer Fauzi Rachman
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Land reform has returned to Indonesian agrarian politics after a forty-year hiatus fraught with violence and tragedy, a return that resonates with global resurgences of land reform and rural social movements. For more than three decades after smashing a nascent land reform agenda in 1965/1966, Indonesia’s second president, Suharto, used the “New Order” bureaucracy, police, and military to control the rural masses through various mechanisms of coercion and consent. Meanwhile, his regime constructed the apparatus for centralizing management and reaping profits from the nation’s rich resources.

The extent of the change that has taken place since Suharto’s fall in 1998 was made visible on January 31, 2007, when President Susilo Bambang Yodoyono launched a new land reform policy in conjunction with an accelerated land registration program as a part of the government strategy to eradicate poverty. The head of the National Land Agency (NLA) was the author of this policy. The policy declared that 8.15 million hectares of state forest lands under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Forestry (MoF) would be provided to the land reform program, in addition to 1.1 million hectares from other state lands under NLA authority. The NLA also identified 7.3 million hectares of other “idle lands” under their jurisdiction to be redistributed, including state lands that had been unused, misused, or used by private companies in ways contrary to government regulations.

Researching the ways new land reform policy are produced enables me to critique a linear model of policy process which assumes that policy makers act rationally and carefully consider all relevant information as they go through each stage of the following linear processes: understanding the policy issue or problem (agenda setting), exploring possible options for resolving the problem, weighing the cost

ABSTRACTS (selected)

and benefits of each option, making a rational choice about the best option (decision making), implementing the policy, and evaluating the policy. My paper will show that land reform policy processes are not straightforward, but rather are sites of power struggle, contestation, and negotiation. In order to uncover processes by which the land reform policy is conceived, contested, negotiated, expressed, what is included and excluded, brought into law and regulation, and the procedures of implementation and practice, I will critically and ethnographically demonstrate how the exercise of power on the grounds by multiple actors at different levels, including the discourse underlying practice of policy framing. In doing so, in this paper I will focus on changing opportunities, moments, and channels where government officials, legislatures, rural movement leaders, NGO activists, and critical scholars interact in various ways in shaping the new land reform policy.

“Economic Duality: Riverine-Inland Economic Spheres of Patani in the 19th & 20th Centuries”

Mala Rajo Sathian
University of Malaya

This paper presents the case of a coastal state on the Thai-Malay Isthmian region where the economy, in the 19th/20th centuries, was understood simply between a coastal (*hilir*) and inland (*darat*) contrast. While most writings on South and Southeast Asia focusing on dualisms and the wider connotations or divides i.e. urban-rural, inner city (capital)-frontier territory, court (elitist)-mass (rural), core-periphery, developed-undeveloped [Geertz on Java; Andaya on Jambi, Subramanian on south India; Moore M.P on Sri Lanka] tend to demonstrate the economic relations between coast and inland as either complementary or riddled with tensions, the scenario in Patani was markedly different. The *hilir-darat* economy of Patani did not exhibit tensions or competition vis-a-vis the control of resources, rather the two categories of geo-economic space referred to distinct economic livelihoods and the interactions or connections between the two were facilitated by the presence of other (non-indigenous) groups, namely Chinese, Chulia Indian and Pathan traders who moved between the coast and inland areas facilitating trade and exchange.

Additionally, these non-indigenous groups contributed to the exploitation of commodity-network based economies. It demonstrated for instance a divide between – two or three main commodities (tin, salt versus cattle), two main groups of traders (Malay elites/Chinese versus Chulia /Pathan/Malays and two trading networks (coastal/seaborne (via boats and ships) versus overland (via portage routes and caravans)). This paper attempts to capture these divisions and explicate first, the geo-economic importance of such divisions and second, the potential socio-cultural implications of such a divide in terms of cultural-religious belief (liberal or otherwise). Lastly, the implications of the economic dualism were not only historical but also relevant in explaining some of the socio-cultural dynamics in present day Patani (i.e. southern Thailand) society facing the challenge of heightened political and religious radicalism.

“The Use of World Heritage Sites in Southeast Asian Dance Reconstruction: The Re-Creation of 'Classical' Movement and the Use of Ancient Space”

Celia Tuchman-Rosta
UC Riverside

The connection between dance performance in Southeast Asia and archaeological sites such as Prambanan in Indonesia and the Angkor complex in Cambodia today is undeniable. HRH Buppha Devi of Cambodia has said that in Cambodia the classical dance form is considered by its practitioners to be intrinsically related to the physical structure of Angkor with its depictions of heavenly dancers and the story of the Ramayana. But there is disagreement about the use of archaeology in the reconstruction and presentation of dance among scholars, performers, and the general public. There are two main issues: the

ABSTRACTS (selected)

use of archaeological data and interpretation by both archaeologists and dancers to recreate movement and the use or reproduction of an archaeological site itself as a performance space. Dance can be found in the archeological record via writings and iconography, paintings, structures used for dance performances, and rituals. This data set allows for a multitude of statements from pure description of artifacts to the meaning of movement, spatial patterns, and gender roles. The variety of interpretations includes mimicking bas-reliefs in ancient temples in Java and Cambodia to create traditional dances and using a series of carved positions to inspire new choreographies. Often, sensational interpretations of dance, or interpretations with very little archaeological foundation, are the ones that grab the imagination of the general public while archaeologists are trying to understand meaning and purpose. Another point of contention involves the widespread use of heritage sites as performances spaces throughout Southeast Asia. The use of these spaces for performances is sometimes welcomed because it creates a historical continuity for the involved communities. Many performers and observers think the use of an ancient or “sacred” space makes the dance more authentic and spiritual. Others, however, consider the use of archaeological sites for performance to be a desecration of a sacred ancestral space, or worry that overuse will damage these irreplaceable places. The reproduction of these sites for use as stage sets is also commonplace and attracts similar criticism. Although controversial, the use of archaeological traces of dances have played an important role in inspiring concert dances, and recreating, reinventing, and authenticating movement practices.

“Whence the Siamese ‘Harem’”? Space, Status and Invisibility in the History of Siam’s Grand Palace, Bangkok”

Leslie Ann Woodhouse,
Independent Scholar

The Siamese “harem” of the nineteenth century was made famous in the writings of Anna Leonowens, author of “The English Governess at the Siamese Court” (1870). In this text, Leonowens represented the women’s space of the Inner Palace as a site of repression and violence, where women existed only for the sexual whims of the monarch himself. The portrayal of the Siamese Inner Palace as a “harem” appealed to the same hunger for exotic images that made bestsellers of many nineteenth-century European women’s travel writings on the Middle East. Leonowens described the double-walled women’s quarters of the Royal Palace, called the “Inner Palace,” as a virtual prison from which women – whether of high or low social status – had little hope of escape. But how accurate was this portrayal? Was the environment of the Inner Palace as oppressive and violent as Leonowens’ texts would have us believe?

In contrast to Leonowens’ characterization of the space of the Inner Palace as a virtual prison for women, I argue that the restriction of women’s movement was socially coded, and not necessarily a form of violence in itself. In this paper, I unpack the social and political functions of the space of the royal Siamese Inner Palace, and the significance of women’s physical circulations into and out of palace spaces. Created after the destruction of the prior Siamese capital at Ayutthaya, the women’s quarters of Bangkok’s Inner Palace represent an effort to protect royal women’s bodies. From the latter part of the eighteenth century until the first decade of the twentieth century, the women of the Inner Palace acted simultaneously as diplomats and hostages, cementing the political bonds between Siam’s center and peripheries. As social and cultural elites, Siam’s palace women also functioned as educators and trendsetters, the spaces of their households acting as a cultural crucibles in which Siamese elite culture was reproduced and ultimately disseminated to the outside world.

Though the spaces of the Siamese “Middle” and “Outer” palaces are open to tourists to the Grand Palace in Bangkok today, the area of the Inner Palace remains closed to visitors. In conclusion I speculate as to

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ABSTRACTS (selected)

why the space of the Inner Palace remains invisible to contemporary visitors to Bangkok. Though thousands visit the site of the Grand Palace every year, few even know of the existence of the Inner Palace. I suggest that this invisibility is due to the lingering discomfort of the Thai state with the (non-modern) polygynous aspects of Siamese royal history, and suggest that this elision is in effect a form of violence done to historical royal Thai women after the fact.