Ikeya's study brought lectures of two of my former teachers to mind. A favourite topic of the ethnologist among them was "Why exceptions?", while the then so-called non-western sociologist prompted us to always be alert to 'counterpoints'. However ingenious and plausible, paradigms 'freeze' the object of scrutiny, at the same time that things social are always on the move and never fixed. As a result, the absence of exceptions should evoke our suspicion that something is amiss, or missing at least, at the same time that counterpoints could well be indicators of things to come.

Niels Mulder


As such, the book is an exercise in the history des mentalités that traces the evolution of thought in an ethnically plural urban colonial environment. In doing so, the author convincingly demonstrates that the analysis of the cosmo-political is the arena of participation that women is a formidable crowbar to crack the dominant narrative. As hegemonic national epics, such narratives tend to centre on the historic role of great men while freezing the image of the late colonial period and obscuring its coincident opening to the world. Whereas in such epical accounts women are at best 'represented' as an aftermath – an adventent nod to their unavoidable existence, it is precisely through opening up how they experienced themselves, and how they perceived and shaped the political, cultural, and socioeconomic landscape of colonial Burma that a gendered discourse grounded in real life comes to the fore.

John S. Furnival

Next to the emancipating experience of colonialism, the second dominant theme – that corroborated with the first – is the emergence of a network of Burmese and Burmese- and English-language documents, plus literary and journalistic media, the book examines what it meant to be or to become modern in colonial Burma. The result is enumerated in separate chapters that focus on the educated young woman, the politised woman, the consumerist woman, the wives and mistresses of foreign men, and the self-indulgent and often westernised woman. In doing so, our sight is trained on the elusive breakthroughs in the unsettling of norms and practices, and that contributed to new social formations and asymmetries.

As Susan Blackburn notes, the 1950s saw the birth of socialist feminism under a period of parliamentary democracy. In Pakistan, women lobbyed for legal reform over inheritance rights and the restriction of polygamy. While the 1960s and 1970s are decades most closely associated with the ‘second wave’ of feminism in the West, this was a period in which the Cold War cast its shadow across Asia, with many countries, particularly in Southeast Asia, falling under authoritarian rule. Rocos recognises that these were ‘macho regimes’ by nature, that clamped down on women’s movements across the region. Rarely any dynamic women’s groups appeared in this period, apart from pockets of student activism in the Philippines. The ousting of dictator couples like those of Asia’s ‘tiger economies’ in the 1980s was a turning point as a growing and newly confident middle-class stimulated the emergence of a vibrant civil society. It was from this period that women’s groups in Asia came into their own and began conversing with each other within and across national borders over a wide range of issues.

Women’s movements in Asia have shared many of the same struggles over the past hundred years, and the ability of Asian women to connect with each other across borders has often stemmed from these shared historical experiences. Overall, the book provides a rich collection of dense, critical histories detailing the emergence of women’s movements in Asian countries and the particular challenges women activists have had to face. It is essential reading for anyone interested in gender issues in Asia and the Pacific.

The road

In Refiguring Women the focus is on such cultural brokers, on women who aspired to be abreast of the times and to participate in wider processes. Be that as it may, it is regrettable that we are left in the dark as to the quantum of such participation. However often we run into the phrase ‘women students, journalists, intellectuals, lawmakers, nurses and teachers’, their numbers are nowhere accounted for, even as there must be records on school and university enrollments, and professional careers. So, whereas we run up against the very impressive numbers, the statements remain unqualified while their working projects the idea of a powerful trend that only in the Conclusion is qualified as confined to the colonial capital Rangoon.

Apart from the lectures of my teachers, the composition of the book brought another admonishment to mind. It was the editorial advice with which I was sent home to rework my first academic monograph: ‘Mister Mulder, there are four paragraphs to the page’. When I protested about this straightjacket, they pointed out that I should use a much broader canvas. In the present work, two crowded paragraphs are a rule, even as these occasionally go on for more than the length of a full page. This makes for tiresome reading. The very exhaustive, often circular and repetitious arguments in those sections are burdensome, too, and retain the character of the dissertation the birth of a new voice. The surname lacks about the elusive genre of Burmese words that are supposed to have settled unambiguously in the reader’s mind once introduced, but that are out of place if the test is to be of interest – it is claimed – and accessible to students involved in Southeast Asian, cultural, colonial, and postcolonial studies, plus the broad subject of women and gender. Whereas a genre that has been delineated with crystal clarity in the Introduction certainly deserves this extensive audience, said obstacles should have been edited out.

Niels Mulder has retired to the southern slope of the mystically potent Mt. Banahaw, Philippines, where he stays in touch through <niels_mulder201935@yahoo.com.ph>.

Twice hidden, twice forgotten