From the other side of the fence¹ Two new books about Bali

One of the recurrent problems faced by producers of academic knowledge is its institutional separation from not only the people it is about, but from many of the people who would like to read it the most (try getting anything non-sensational published in the mainstream media). A converse problem is the system of institutional gatekeeping that prevents those without proper institutional credentials (implicit as well as explicit) from joining the disciplinary conversation (try getting something into an academic journal without institutional affiliation, let alone proper referencing style). Bali, because it is as popular among uncredited scholars as certified ones, and among popular readers as academic ones, is a fruitful case study for exploring these contradictions.

Graeme MacRae

Reviewed titles:

THE MOST INTERESTING early scholarship on Bali was in fact done by gifted amateurs – expatriate artists (Miguel Covarrubias, Colin McChee, Walter Spies), colonial administrators (e.g., F. A. Liefvink) and eccentric escapees from the stifling normalities of European society (e.g., R. Goris). A few certified academics (Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, Jane Belo) did also produce books but ironicaly almost nobody reads them, then or now. Today there is a constant discourse about the multiple issues that Bali is facing, some (but not all) well-informed and thoughtful. There is also a substantial read- ership of expatriates and thinking tourists hungry for books which translate academic knowledge about Bali into accessible form, but relatively few books really serve this market.

Two recent books speak into this in-between market, but from outside the academic arena. Majapahit Style by Made Wijaya and Pray, Magic, Heal by David Stuart-Fox. Stuart-Fox has credentials as an academic specialist on Bali – author of a PhD thesis and definitive monograph on one of Bali’s major temples Pura Besakih and as highly respected within the academic world as he is of it. He prefers to downplay these credentials and his career has in fact been largely in the ill-defined borders of the academic world – as compiler of the definitive (pre-digital) bibliography of literature on Bali, long-serving (now retired) librarian of the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden and freelance scholar writing since the 1970s on Balinese arts, religion, and culture. Pray, Magic, Heal is written deliberately for a popular audience and its subject is a pop-culture phenomenon but it is based on decades of in-depth research.

The second author, Made Wijaya, died, suddenly, unexpectedly and tragically, between the writing and publication of this review, which now takes on an element of obituary. He was a veteran of the expatriate community in Bali, tropical landscape designer extraordinare, one-man multimedia production machine and much more. His book masquerades as a picture book about ‘style’, and wields its multimedia production machine and much more. His book translates academic knowledge about Bali into accessible form, but relatively few books really serve this market.

The authors train their lens on painted panoramas of the Canton factories, specifically those found on porcelain punchbowls and on two-dimensional surfaces, from small gouache panels to large canvases in oil. Their objective, as referenced in the book’s subtitle, is ‘reading history through images’. The introduction provides a succinct history of the Canton factories, specifically those found on porcelain punchbowls and on two-dimensional surfaces, from small gouache panels to large canvases in oil. Their objective, as referenced in the book’s subtitle, is ‘reading history through images’. The introduction provides a succinct history of the Canton factories, specifically those found on porcelain punchbowls and on two-dimensional surfaces, from small gouache panels to large canvases in oil. Their objective, as referenced in the book’s subtitle, is ‘reading history through images’. The introduction provides a succinct history of the Canton factories, specifically those found on porcelain punchbowls and on two-dimensional surfaces, from small gouache panels to large canvases in oil. Their objective, as referenced in the book’s subtitle, is ‘reading history through images’. The introduction provides a succinct history of the Canton factories, specifically those found on porcelain punchbowls and on two-dimensional surfaces, from small gouache panels to large canvases in oil. Their objective, as referenced in the book’s subtitle, is ‘reading history through images’. The introduction provides a succinct history of the Canton factories, specifically those found on porcelain punchbowls and on two-dimensional surfaces, from small gouache panels to large canvases in oil. Their objective, as referenced in the book’s subtitle, is ‘reading history through images'.

The port city of Canton (now Guangzhou), China, served as a vital hub in the early phase of modern global trade. In the 18th century, numerous European companies set up shop in the designated foreign quarter of factories and warehouses. Like their peers around the world, Chinese artists adapted quickly to the sweeping social, economic, and aesthetic changes wrought by these mercantile aspirations on a world scale. The resulting artworks – often labeled as ‘export art’ – have long been characterized by art historians as inauthentically hybrid, and thus not deserving of scholarly attention. As a broad category, export art encompasses a great diversity of objects made by artists throughout China in a variety of styles and mediums. These include paintings, fans, textiles, decorative and utilitarian ceramics, lacquer ware, and much more.

Hope Marie Childers

Reviewed title:
Paul A. Van Dyke and Maria Kar-wing Mok. 2015. Images of the Canton Factories 1760–1822: Reading History in Art Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press ISBN 9789888208555

THIS OBJECT-ORIENTED VOLUME, co-authored by Paul Van Dyke and Maria Kar-wing Mok, examines representations of Canton via a specific type of Chinese export art, using fresh eyes and new angles. Bookended by an introduction and conclusion, the volume consists of nine chapters: six are chronological surveys, each spanning approximately a decade; the remainder consist of thematic analysis. The introduction provides a succinct history of the founding of Canton’s European merchant district, beginning with the construction of China Street in 1760 (p. xx). The study concludes with the years preceding the Great Fire of 1822, when the entire quarter of factories burned down, thus changing the landscape forever.

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Images of the Canton factories
of Majapahit architecture, expands geographically across the vast region of Majapahit influence and archaeologically across elements and forms. The traditional art historical argument is supported, and indeed most compellingly made, by a primary visual text of photographs, maps and drawings, justifying the categories of forms, elements and local aesthetic traditions, materials, methods, and names.

Embedded in this empirical argument is a methodological one, perhaps more important for academic consider- ation, of the provocative power of comparison of spatial organisation, structural form and even aesthetic style as a means of analysis and even critical transformation. Recognising the evidence of Majapahit culture and interpreting it through the lens of contemporary Balinese architecture and ritual was the starting point of the empirical argument, and the comparative method is what makes this work compelling.

I will not be surprised if historians and architectural scholars find details to disagree with, but do not dispute there is no evidence of them having read, let alone reviewed it. I will leave them to assess the historical veracity of Wijsma’s evidence or its intersections with the established body of Majapahit scholarship, but I think any criticisms in terms of defects of certified academic practice miss the point, both of its vast empirical sweep and its methodological innovation.

Pray, Magic, Heal

This is an unusual book, 45 years in the making and unavoidably entwined with its (infamous) twin fat, Pray, Love, but is not what the title might suggest. Stuart-Fox is in fact an extraordinary and dedicated book scholar who died in Bali in 1970s and 80s, became fluent in local languages and for whom deep research into Balinese culture was his whole life. He knew and wrote about Liyer long before his dubious fame through the Fat. Pray, Love book/film phenomenon.

At this time Liyer was just one of hundreds of balinese [sic] and coutnless in villages across Bali. But he was a good one and also a painter of some repute. Because of this and his proximity to the culturally/spiritually oriented tourist centre of Ubud, he had begun selling his services in the 1960s and in 2002 Elizabeth Gilbert was just another foreign client. But her book changed his life forever, and in 2005 he was the subject of a documentary film and counselling a constant stream of foreigners. He charged for these services, considerably more than for his local clientele, and his family prospered as a result. Opinion is divided as to the genuineness of the advice he provided to foreigners and also as to his motivation in doing this work.

But that is not what the book is about. The first chapter relates some of this story briefly, but the majority of it is based on conversations between Liyer and Stuart-Fox, mainly during the 1970s and 80s, in which Liyer outlines the theory and method of his practice. The result is a very readable account, quite personal in a way, through which we gradually get to know both Liyer the man and the nature of his practices and their wider significance.

This book belongs on the same shelf as the Jero Tapakan films by Linda Connor and Tim Asch, Barbara Lovic’s work on the graphic activities of foreign healers and Charles Geertz’s final books about paintings, temples and artists. We all take the deep into the heart of real grass-roots Balinese spiritual practices, we are wowed behind the spectacular beauty of temple ritual and the increasingly banal and sanitised simplifications of official, universalised ‘Hinduism’. The book is a detailed and potentially dangerous force, embedded in a range of (usually) invisible beings who need to be placated and managed or sometimes fought and defeated by magical tools and techniques at the disposal of a skilled practi- tioner. As Van Dyke and Mok suggest: “the transformation of the landscape” (p. 12). In turn, that shifting interest in doing this work.

What makes this book work, is that Stuart-Fox resists the (understandable) temptation to over-interpret and tell us or to what to think about Liyer – despite forty years’ experience and insight into Balinese culture, he steps back and lets Liyer speak for himself, allowing us to make what we will of the imperfect, incomprehensive and often contradictory narrative, but with- out the magic and the mystery of it. The Liyer we meet in these pages is neither mystic, magico religious nor scholar, let alone celebrity. He is a village craftsman, working with a limited kit of practical tools and a disarming awareness of the limitations of his understanding of the powers behind both sickness and healing. My only disappointment is not learning what he really thought about his later years.

Ways of knowing Bali

Both these books tell us something about Bali: one unpacking a one-man pop-culture phenomenon and informing our (mis) understanding by reflecting it, by way of biography, back into the tradition from which he was plucked by international celebrity culture. In the process, the reader is educated, gradually working off balinese ritual, healing and artistic practice. The other (by a one-man pop-culture phenomenon) works at a different level, addressing one of the biggest themes in Southeast Asian history, but by way of an innovative, largely self-taught and pursued and expressed with an infectious exuberance. Both are well-written and easy to read, but in both cases, much of the work is done by visual means.

It is, I think, no coincidence that both authors are veterans of the expatiate scene of the 1970s, in which some respects more resembled the era of the 1930s, than the present and before Bali was transformed, as one of them put it: “ from a user-friendly magic kingdom into a high-density Paradise theme park” (in the 1990s, and something else again since then). This was an extraordinary period in which a loose community of talented and dedicated foreigners immersed themselves in the local culture. Many of them, like their predecessors in the 1930s, straddled the fence, pro- ducing books (Diana Darwin), photography (Leonard Luars) and (film) Lawrence and one of them (Darwin) has proven classics in contemporary academic understandings of Bali. Some of them moved deeper into local Balinese worlds by way of marriage (e.g. Rosina Ballinger) and engagement with their local community, but others (e.g. with Nicholas Picard) crossed the fence into academia from where they continued to provide some of the most insightful studies of Balinese culture. Since then, fewer of their scholarly engagements with Bali have moved on, the former away from local community and culture into a generic expatiate community that could almost be anywhere in the world; the latter toward more circumscribed and specialised studies based on much shorter (and I fear sometimes shallower) periods of research.

Stuart Fox and Wijsma both had the privilege of living and working in Bali at this time, and since then have had successful careers in other fields. Both have chosen to honour and repay these privileges with books that are simultaneously serious contributions to Bali studies and effective translations of expert knowledge about into accessible form. One for a model for bridging the gap between local community and academic scholarship, the other offering deeply grounded knowledge to the academy for us to engage with. We have something to learn from them both. This book is about how we share our knowledge and understanding.

Graeme MacRae, Massey University.

To borrow from them both – about Bali and about the way we share our knowledge and understanding.

References

1 Fences are a common metaphor in antipodean cultures such as Australia, where both authors and the reviewer originate, but are perhaps less familiar to European readers. They refer to borders and boundaries between places and spaces, in this case the well-guarded ones between academic and popular knowledge. A Balinese cognate would be the pervasive tremlau [tremlow] that mark divisions between domestic and public, sacred and profane places/spaces.


3 Rio Helmi is absent from this list, only because he occupies a special place between the expat and local worlds – another fence.

The shortcomings of the book are minor. A number of passages make for rather dry reading, an unavoidable trade-off for a factually dense and wide-ranging book. It is also under-researched in its later stages, and the credibility of its factual content is undermined – stage in China’s formidable aesthetic legacy.

Hope Marie Chirdler, New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University. (childlers@alfred.edu)
This book does not include addresses, phone numbers, websites or hours of operation, so you would have to use other resources if you need this information. All in all, this is an excellent and informative book that introduces us to new and wonderful sights in Bali and helps make it simple to visit these areas with a solid plan and itinerary. Read more. 16 people found this helpful. G Gabrielle has written a deliciously inviting guide that certainly inspires me to visit the ‘other’ Bali, away from the busy south. Packed with her personal insights, experiences and gorgeous photos this guide is perfect for travelling slowly and embracing this beautiful island. Lots of helpful information on the many amazing sights to visit, a few touristy traps to avoid and stunning places to stay! The Other Side book. Read 1,050 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Clover's mom says it isn't safe to cross the fence that segregate... Â But the two girls strike up a friendship, and get around the grown-ups' rules by sitting on top of the fence together. With the addition of a brand-new author's note, this special edition celebrates the tenth anniversary of this class Clover's mom says it isn't safe to cross the fence that segregates their African-American side of town from the white side where Anna lives. But the two girls strike up a friendship, and get around the grown-ups' rules by sitting on top of the fence together. With the addition of a brand-new author's note, this special edition celebrates the tenth anniversary of this class Clover's mom says it isn't safe to cross the fence that segregates their African-American side of town from the white side where Anna lives. But the two girls strike up a friendship, and get around the grown-ups' rules by sitting on top of the fence together. 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