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Chie Ikeya. *InterAsian Intimacies across Race, Religion, and Colonialism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2024.

Reviewed by Fujimura Hitomi*

With her latest book, Chie Ikeya—a leading scholar of the histories of women in Burma/Myanmar—invites readers to explore in-between imperial ideas and the lived realities of women. Focusing on intermarriage and religious conversion from the nineteenth century to the Japanese occupation, *InterAsian Intimacies across Race, Religion, and Colonialism* offers a new framework to reconsider how we understand the historical complexity of people’s belonging and its definitions within the matrix of imperialism and nationalism.

The book’s distinctive cornerstone is Ikeya’s “inter-Asian” family history, with rich oral narratives and memories collected from family conversations. Combining this with investigations of different sources—from colonial legal documents to Burmese local periodicals and retrospective memories of Japanese soldiers—the author demonstrates the significance of family history as a new repository of oft-ignored historical experiences.

While “inter-Asian intimacies”—the pivotal analytical lens in this book—concerns transregional connections (p. 5), its significance lies beyond spatial connectivity in Asia. The author stresses that this focus enables the recentering of women who seldom appear as historical brokers of contact and change. The author also claims that gender, intimacy, and colonial studies have been saturated with relationships and intercourse between traveling men—both European and Asian—and Indigenous women. In such studies, intercourse with European men is depicted as favorable, while intimacy among Asians carries connotations of inferiority and subjugation. *InterAsian Intimacies* seeks to defy such imbalanced understandings. Stories of Auntie Rosie (the foster mother of the author’s mother), Helen May (Auntie Rosie’s mother), and Ma Galay (Auntie Rosie’s grandmother) reveal the traversing of their lives through different lineages, languages, and religions.

Starting with the life paths of Ma Galay and her husband, U Choe, Chapter 1 explains that racial and religious intermingling was common in precolonial Burma. Critically reconsidering

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contemporary English documents, the author traces residual references to “foreign” individuals and merchant communities at that time. The existence of mixed-race women who were descended from or married to Pathi and Zerbardi (descendants of Indian-origin Muslims and Burmese) merchants—like Ma Galay and Didi—suggests that females’ capital accumulation and active involvement in trade contributed to socioeconomic shifts in nineteenth-century Burma.

Chapter 2 aims to show the initial discord between the colonial interpretation of indigeneous laws and people’s actual lives. Various testimonies in colonial lawsuit documents not only illuminate women’s autonomy in choosing their religious practices after marriage but also showcase that women were at the margins, facing rejection from spousal relatives and other matrimonial penalties. Colonial authorities inadvertently attributed the ubiquitousness of cross-community intermingling to the “traditional” religious tolerance of Buddhist law (Dammathat). Though Buddhist law did not prohibit mixed marriage, the author emphasizes that the characterization of it as “tolerance to plurality” was a colonial distorted interpretation (p. 57).

Chapter 3 captures the shift in colonial attitude toward problematizing cross-community marriage. The imperial presumption that locals’ racial identity corresponded with religious affiliation led to categorizations of Burmese as Buddhists and Indians as Hindu or Muslim. Close analysis of the racial categories used in censuses exhibits how the hyphenated “categories of mixed races” eventually vanished while simplified racial categories remained (p. 69). Colonial fantasy was stipulated also in personal law, which ruled that matters of succession, inheritance, and marriage should be resolved with reference to the party’s religion. While this scheme localized Buddhism and foreignized Islam, people like Zerbardi women who desired the application of Burmese Buddhist law to their succession were deprived of their legal rights. Memories of the daughters of Ahmed and Helen—an Indian-descent Muslim man and a Karen Christian woman—about eating halal food at home and their school life at a mission boarding school highlight the gaps between the colonial jurisdictional idea and the lived cross-religious reality.

Chapter 4 discloses women’s contestations and practical use of the colonial legal system through the investigation of legal documents. Various lawsuits show that women in intermarriages faced new difficulties in claiming their rights to inheritance, while some women, such as Ma Pu—who claimed that she never converted to Islam and rejected her husband’s legal action against her infidelity—saw new possibilities in the judicial system for making their own claims even though overall colonial legality was in favor of husbands. Contrary to the British legal idealization of Burmese women’s autonomy, liberty, and benevolent respect for the tradition of Burmese Buddhist Dammathat, the colonial framework often alienated women’s inheritance and marital rights.

The sway toward Burmese nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s continued to problematize intermarriage, targeting women marrying foreigners or *amyogyā* (literally meaning “other

kind”) as the root cause of an *amyo*’s (kind’s) degeneration. Chapter 5 elucidates how Burmese Buddhist exceptionalism, the xenophobic ideology that the Burmese Buddhist *amyo* was an exceptional “kind” responsible for the preservation and regeneration of pure heritage, was at work in legislative debates. It was not only male nationalist politicians but also women’s organizations and female elites that condemned intermarried women. The author’s analysis that females’ alignment with Burmese Buddhist exceptionalism was part of a difficult balancing act is noteworthy. Female politicians’ active support of male nationalists allowed the former to negotiate for women’s rights for suffrage and political inclusion, at the expense of people whose life was incompatible with “pure Burmese.”

Chapter 6 compares the gender discourse in the local vernacular media with the real-life experiences of women, particularly those in intermarriage. Based on document analysis and oral interviews, the author discusses how these in-between people held their tongues, with their stories being overlooked as inconvenient and undesirable facts within the Burmese Buddhist exceptionalism paradigm. Describing how Auntie Rosie’s husband, Uncle Mohan—who attended Rangoon University in the 1930s and lived through the age of xenophobic antagonism—unmentioned the public hatred and fear he must have experienced, the author offers an intricate reinterpretation of his untoldness. She claims it is overly naïve to believe that people speak openly about their sufferings. Instead, historians should pay more careful attention to people’s choice to remain silent, as this might demonstrate their desire to not be seen as victims.

Citing the oral memory of Auntie Rosie, who recalled that *Japan khit* (the Burmese term for the Japanese era)—another imperial occupation era—was the best time of her life, Chapter 7 shows a contrast between conventional discourses about women’s experience and their memories during wartime. Women’s relationships with the Japanese army were never the same as their male counterparts’ “strategic and righteous” acts of collaboration (p. 160). The author observes that women have been depicted in the literature as either submissive victims of the occupier’s violence or helpmates of the Japanese army. Drawing from memories of Japanese soldiers and Burmese girls at Japanese language schools (*Nihongo Gakko*), Ikeya highlights their friendly interactions and positive memories to offer an alternative picture of wartime intimacies.

Chapter 8 continues investigating the implications of intimate relationships between Burmese women and Japanese soldiers. In between the Japanese idealization of the pan-Asian family and Burmese Buddhist exceptionalism, women of Burma—though the author is unclear about whom she refers to as the “women of Burma”—formed spontaneous relationships with Japanese: some of them married and had children with Japanese soldiers, while others found jobs as interpreters, assistant teachers, and stenographers. According to Ikeya’s analysis, the women’s cooperation was necessitated by financial need and their own families’ survival. Such collaborative acts might have functioned to fight off Japanese suspicion against the women for

being Anglo descendants. Although easily overlooked in the ethnonationalist narrative, everyday forms of intimacy during the war exhibited a new form of negotiating for power.

InterAsian Intimacies is the first work to thoroughly engage with the history of intimacy in Myanmar studies, proving that attention to intimacy can provide a unique narrative about the colonial past. Numerous case studies in the book capture unchronicled women's pluralistic experiences and illuminate how women were objectified by and exposed to different political ideologies. This point is, unfortunately, also highly relevant in contemporary Myanmar. The author's critique on Euro-American-based discussions of colonial intercourse, which often disregard intimate interactions among Asians, is remarkable, as it reminds us of the significant link between the book's argument and the growing attention being paid to inter-Asian history.

"Intimacy" is a broad term as it includes marriage, love, sexual intercourse, family, kinship, sisterhood/brotherhood, and other social relations involving mutual intimate attachments. With a large part of the book's interrogation revolving around the modern legal idea of family and kinship in order to explore people's lives outside of it, other local forms of kinship do not garner full attention. An important aspect of kinship in Burma, as in Southeast Asia in general, is dyadic rather than lineage kinship. Takahashi Akio—a Myanmar village economy specialist who has engaged in field-based research for over three decades—labels human relations in Myanmar villages as such. As much as filial and familial ties, the "logic of frequent meetings" is pivotal in fostering closeness and intimacy. Introducing the Burmese phrase *yat-swe yat-myo* (relatives of place), Takahashi (2021, 221–222) argues that the "logic of relations" underlies the local form of family and kinship. Drawing from his discussion, dyadic interpersonal relations are crucial to intimate relationships among Burmese, in which non-relatives can be included.

Rich stories from *InterAsian Intimacies* prove this point. The author's mother was welcomed as an adopted daughter by Auntie Rosie and Uncle Mohan, who were acquainted with her deceased mother. Cooks, nannies, and even Catholic nuns were indispensable to the household and family of Helen and Ahmad—New Burmans, as they were locally called (pp. 77–79). These phenomena seemingly accord with Takahashi's discussions about the local idea of *yat-swe yat-myo*. Further analysis on this point would strengthen the book's call to question modern conventions by paying more attention to intimacies.

The documentation also seems to need more careful examination. The fond memories of former Japanese soldiers need to be critically analyzed. Additional inquiry into Japanese-based postcolonial discussions may have been beneficial, as such discussions argue that former soldiers' positive narratives of warm, friendly interactions with local girls are a result of their mental coping with deadly, traumatic wartime experiences. Critical analysis of colonial legal documents has become a new standard to unveil the realities identified by colonial authorities as undesirable or problematic. However, they are ultimately stories within the colonial framework. Though the author admits the limitations of relying on colonial documents that reveal

primarily the experiences of elite individuals who could access the colonial legal system, the political nature of these narratives, which are part of the imperial discourse, should not be negated.

The author's solution to overcome such shortcomings is to blend her research with her own family history, which successfully defies colonial and national paradigms. However, given the book's distinctive characteristic of auto-ethnography, this approach could leave some readers anxious and adrift. Some may wonder whether exploring untold female histories is possible only if one is fortunate enough to have familial ties or happen to know someone with firsthand experience. Long-term fieldwork might solve this problem. But if we are to take the author's self-reflecting critique about more careful attention to people's intentional silence seriously, how much are historians entitled to explore their memories to discover unknown pasts? Another possible solution could be a creative cross-examination of documents in different contexts—colonial, religious, and commercial, to name a few—in multiple languages. I am curious as to what the author would suggest.

The above critique does not deny the excellence of this important work; rather, it raises further questions based on the book's thought-provoking discussion. Anyone interested in colonial history or Myanmar women's/gender studies should learn from the author's continuous effort to find new, creative ways to explore historical sources and diversify historical narratives.

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