

# SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

<http://englishkyoto-seas.org/>

## <Book Review>

Robert Taylor

Jayde Lin Roberts. *Mapping Chinese Rangoon: Place and Nation among the Sino-Burmese*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2016, xvii+200pp.

*Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, December 2017, pp. 537-539.

**How to Cite:** Taylor, Robert. Review of *Mapping Chinese Rangoon: Place and Nation among the Sino-Burmese* by Jayde Lin Roberts. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, December 2017, pp. 537-539.

## Link to this book review:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2017/12/vol-6-no-3-book-reviews-robert-taylor/>

## View the table of contents for this issue:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2017/12/vol-6-no-3-of-southeast-asian-studies/>

**Subscriptions:** <http://englishkyoto-seas.org/mailling-list/>

## For permissions, please send an e-mail to:

english-editorial@cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp



Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

*Mapping Chinese Rangoon: Place and Nation among the Sino-Burmese*

JAYDE LIN ROBERTS

Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2016, xvii+200pp.

Chinese immigration into Myanmar from Yunnan existed before the colonization of Myanmar in the eighteenth century. However, the trickle of Chinese traders from southern China via Malaya and Singapore grew in number after the British takeover. Thus, there developed in Yangon—or Rangoon, the former Romanization—a small but economically and politically significant Chinatown in the western reaches of the new city the British built on the site of a small Burmese fishing village. Prior to then, Yangon, meaning “end of strife,” contained its own China wharf at the foot of the main road up to the fabled Shwe Dagon Pagoda. The author of *Mapping Chinese Rangoon*, Dr. Jayde Lin Roberts, who describes herself as an “interdisciplinary scholar of the built environment,” provides a contemporary impression of how descendants of those immigrants have coped in what was to their ancestors a new home but one by now in which they are an integral, if sometimes distinctive, part.

As with many younger scholars these days, the author of *Mapping Chinese Rangoon* tends to lean in the direction of the autobiographical. Similarly, she takes a dim view of efforts by governments to manage their affairs in an orderly and rational fashion, seeing these as “strong constraints” to be “maneuvered around.” For example, she sees the grid layout of downtown Yangon, the western part of which is Chinatown, as an effort to control the population rather than an effort to raise capital for the city’s hygienic development and a failed attempt to construct a self-cleaning drainage system based on the tides of the Yangon River. Similarly, she tends to accept uncritically commonly heard criticisms of more recent Myanmar governments, such as the accusation that a singular Myanmar national identity is promoted even though in public cultural performances and the country’s citizenship legislation, the multiethnic nature of the indigenous Myanmar society is celebrated and made real. Nor does she note the irony that it was an army-owned television station that the Chinese community chose to publicize its New Year celebrations.

Roberts rightly draws attention to the internal divisions within Yangon’s Chinatown, the northern part being largely Cantonese and the southern Hokkien, each with its respective temples, clan houses, and associations. The book gives rather more attention to the Hokkien community than to the Cantonese, and the author makes little reference to the Yunnanese Chinese population that has entered Myanmar over many years and is centered on Mandalay and other northern cities. Unlike Dr. Li Yi in her *Chinese in Colonial Burma: A Migrant Community in a Multiethnic State* (2017) and *Yunnanese Chinese in Myanmar: Past and Present* (2015), *Mapping Chinese Rangoon* emphasizes what divides the different Chinese linguistic communities rather than noting the logic of the state in censuses and forms, commerce and trade, and popular stereotypes that ignore the different origins of people who identify themselves as Chinese in the country.

Missing from *Mapping Chinese Rangoon* is any serious discussion of the political role of the Chinese community in the country's politics. Given that many of them were long-term residents in what was the nation's capital until 2006, with strong interests in Chinese as well as Burmese politics, and key roles in business, this oversight is a serious weakness in the author's account. Roberts, for example, states that certain claims are unsubstantiated, such as that it was a member of the Myanmar Chinese community that assisted Thakin Aung San on his journey to Amoy to seek support in 1940 from the Chinese Communist Party or that a Chinese society provided financial support for the anti-Japanese resistance in 1944. A little research on her part would have easily verified the claims. Many anti-Japanese and pro-Communist Chinese saw themselves as both Chinese patriots and Myanmar nationalists and acted accordingly, while others had no compunction in financially supporting Myanmar politicians into positions where favors could be reciprocated.

Also missing from *Mapping Chinese Rangoon* is a complete account of the economic role of the Chinese community. While perhaps the author is correct in her claim that the majority of Chinese in the capital were primarily traders, often serving as middlemen between Indian and British suppliers and the ubiquitous Chinese shopkeepers found in every village and town in the Ayeyarwady Delta, some attention might have been given to the many Chinese who worked as dock laborers or carpenters; or, at the other end of the social scale, the extremely wealthy Chinese who were once stalwarts of the Oriental Club and the Turf Club and mixed and mingled both before and after independence with the upper reaches of Yangon's multiracial high society. While the author does mention Chin Tsong Palace and its prominent and extremely wealthy builder, Lim Chin Tsong, several times, the irony that it became under General Ne Win's military government the Myanmar minister of culture's office passes her by.

Other voids in the volume would seem apparent. There is no discussion of the presence or absence of the Chinese community in crime despite the long-term stereotyping of Rangoon's Chinatown as being a center of vice, including opium dens and illegal gambling parlors and drinking venues. Nor is there any account of the importance that Chinese restaurants had—and continue to have—on the city's eating habits. Before 1988, if you wanted to eat out in the evening in the city, almost the only restaurants available were Chinese; there, black marketers would gather with bottles of brandy and whiskey to while away the evening. Some of these restaurants, several miles from Chinatown—demonstrating that the Chinese community was not as geographically concentrated as *Mapping Chinese Rangoon* implies—are now gone, but their memories live on. Others persist, such as the famous Fushan Si, which was renovated while Roberts was conducting her research.

*Mapping Chinese Rangoon* is rich in ethnographic vignettes, and that is one of its strengths. However, the research is far from exhaustive; and much of what is important to understanding the place of Chinese and of Chinese descendants now intermarried with Burmese and others in the

polyglot city of Yangon is missing from the book. It has its virtues, however, as it is nicely illustrated from the author's collection of personal photographs. Her description of the multiethnic nature of contemporary dragon dance competitions during Chinese New Year is fascinating. While the author rightly draws attention to the travails faced by Chinese in Yangon as descendants of the greater China in a country inherently suspicious of China, it is obvious from her account that actually life for many, if not most, of Yangon's Chinese and Chinese-descended residents has its moments of joy and contentment, perhaps more than she recognizes. The volume is an introduction, almost a guide, to parts of the life of Chinese in Yangon in the very recent past, but we await a more detailed and analytical definitive statement.

Robert Taylor

*ISEAS—Yusof Ishak Institute*

## References

- Li Yi. 2017. *Chinese in Colonial Burma: A Migrant Community in a Multiethnic State*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- . 2015. *Yunnanese Chinese in Myanmar: Past and Present*. Trends in Southeast Asia, No. 12. Singapore: ISEAS.

## *Feeding Manila in Peace and War, 1850–1945*

DANIEL F. DOEPPERS

Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016, xvii+443pp.

How does one feed a primary colonial city in a span of a century, given its complex social, political, ecological, demographic, and cultural dimensions? Daniel F. Doeppers's most recent book, *Feeding Manila in Peace and War, 1850–1945*, is able to successfully weave a narrative to the multilayered history of provisioning the colonial city of Manila. The book covers a century of the urban history of Manila as the city experienced a series of colonial transitions between its three major colonizers. It discusses the urban experience of Manila during periods of peace, revolutionary war, anticolonial resistance, epidemic and epizootic outbreaks, and demographic change.

Doeppers divides the history of provisioning Manila through the complex web of trade and social networks related to the subject matter. The first part deals with rice as a major staple in the diet of the majority of inhabitants in the city. The second deals with the many different forms of *ulam* (viands) that are usually eaten with rice. The third part deals with the conditions related to water and other drinks, as well as the introduction of different food and drink "novelty" items. Lastly, the book discusses the disruption of the established provisioning system that occurred