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<Book Review>

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democratization, its subjection to problematically nationalist, elitist, religious, partisan, conservative, and even right-wing and counterrevolutionary pursuits. Who has the right to say and determine what democracy is and what determines its course? The authenticity expert? The religious cleric? Art curators and critics? Government bureaucrats? Old elites seeping into new politics, displaying their revanchism in the public sphere? Strassler's book is a perceptive study of the visual in a time of neoliberal democracy, and we hold our breath for more of her work.

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Ramayana Theater in Contemporary Southeast Asia

MADOKA FUKUOKA, ed.

Singapore: Jenny Stanford Publishing, 2023.

Ramayana Theater in Contemporary Southeast Asia provides an introduction to Ramayana performances across contemporary Southeast Asia, with chapters on Cambodia (Sam-Ang Sam on a range of Khmer art forms inspired by the *Reamker*), Thailand (Hinata Shinsuke on Khon masked dance and Hiramatsu Hideki on Ramayana-inspired films by Chaiyo Studio), Indonesia (Umeda Hideharu on Wayang puppet theater in Bali and Fukuoka Madoka on Sendratari dance drama in Java), Singapore (Takemura Yoshiaki on dance performance in the Indian diaspora community of Singapore), and Japan (Fukuoka Shota on Ramayana displays at the National Museum of Ethnology in Japan).

Each of the contributors has taken care to make their work accessible to non-specialists, so the book should be of interest not only to Ramayana scholars but also to scholars working in Southeast Asian media studies more generally. While the title refers to Ramayana “theater,” the chapters actually cover a wide range of performance media including dance, song, film, animation, comic books—what the editor calls “dramatic art forms”—along with other visual arts as well as cultural practices such as astrology. For readers unfamiliar with the Indian Ramayana, there is an appendix with a summary of Valmiki's Sanskrit Ramayana, which is an important point of reference for all the performance traditions discussed in the book.

The chapters are written such that they can be read independently. This results in some redundancy, as historical background about the Ramayana is provided repeatedly. However, each time the writers present the specific literary and performance history in a way that is most relevant to their own national context, providing a kind of crash course in the many centuries of Ramayana literature and performances throughout Southeast Asia.

Because the chapters are introductory overviews, they do not engage in detailed critical or

theoretical analysis, although they do provide hints about the approaches that would be most relevant within each context. For example, globalization and cultural heritage preservation are important themes in Sam-Ang Sam's chapter about Khmer arts both in Cambodia and in the Cambodian diaspora. Government cultural policies play a key role in Takemura Yoshiaki's chapter about the Singapore government's involvement in Ramayana preservation efforts and also in Fukuoka Shota's chapter about the evolving presentation of Ramayana-related materials at the National Museum of Ethnology in Japan. Tourism culture and "tourist gaze" is another recurrent theme, as in Umeda Hideharu's discussion of Kecak performances in Bali which date back to the 1930s and Fukuoka Madoka's chapter on Sendratari dance drama in Java.

Each chapter references the political contexts that shaped the meaning of the Ramayana in different places at different times throughout Southeast Asia. In her introduction to the book, Fukuoka Madoka discusses Suharto's support for Ramayana puppet theater performances during the economic crisis in Indonesia in the late 1990s. Hiramatsu Hideki situates Chaiyo Studio's *Hanuman vs. 7 Ultraman* in the context of strained Japanese-Thai relations in the early 1970s, with the Thai hero Hanuman fighting side by side with Ultraman, a Japanese hero, retelling a story from the Thai *Ramakien* in the *tokusatsu* style of Japanese film. Writing about Ramayana theater in Cambodia, Sam-Ang Sam discusses the teaching of traditional arts to the second generation of Khmer-Americans whose parents fled the Khmer Rouge regime. Hinata Shinsuke discusses more recent events, describing tensions between Thailand and Cambodia regarding the origin and ownership of Ramayana performance traditions in light of the 2018 UNESCO decision to include Ramayana art forms from both Thailand and Cambodia on the Intangible Cultural Heritage list.

Several studies in the book demonstrate how media such as film and comic books have popularized elite performance art forms to reach new audiences. New technologies also play a role. For example, Takemura Yoshiaki looks at how Facebook can make performances available to global audiences, as with Singapore's Indian Heritage Center's CultureFest 2020 (Digital Edition)—a "festival focused on the richness of Indian arts, culture, and heritage as seen through the lens of the Ramayana" (p. 125)—which reached well over a million people in Singapore and beyond via Facebook.

The book itself takes advantage of a new technology platform as well: thanks to the power of YouTube, it is possible to enjoy three brand-new Ramayana performances by Indonesian artists that were commissioned as part of this project. These commissioned artworks are accessible at the editor's YouTube channel via QR codes and URLs supplied in the book. The descriptions of these artworks appear in the final part of the book, along with supplementary materials from the artists:

- Didik Nini Thowok, an internationally renowned cross-gender dancer, plays the role of Hanuman's lover, Urang Rayung, in a new performance that he created, inspired by both Indonesian and Cambodian sources.
- Nanang Ananto Wicaksono, a "post-traditional" shadow puppet artist and animator, has created

a new animated film that depicts Rama's despair when he loses Sita despite his victory over Ravana.

- Ken Steven, a choral music composer, uses both song and dance to tell the story of Sita's trial by fire, with a chorus of performers from Voice of Bali (who also have their own YouTube channel).

These three works of art provide a kind of portal through which one can see many of the themes discussed in the chapters come to life in actual performance. For example, consider the theme of gender, which is central to the plot tensions of the Ramayana story. Didik Nini Thowok wears a mask when he dances, with exquisite beauty, as the sea goddess, and then in the book he is seen posing for a photograph after the performance, holding the mask in his hands—what does that juxtaposition tell us about gender as performance? In Nanang Ananto Wicaksono's animated film, the character of Ravana appears in traditional wayang style, but then his heads begin to multiply: one pops up out of his head, and then another, and then the heads start popping out of other parts of his body until one sees the ten heads of Ravana, although depicted emerging from his body in a way that is different from any traditional style of representation. Then those heads separate from Ravana's body and participate independently in the fight with Rama, a visual drama that is possible only through the new medium of animated film. It is a perfect example of the blending of old and new which is a recurrent theme in the chapters of the book. So too with globalization and disparate cultural influences: just listen to the unexpected harmonies of Ken Steven's *Sinta Obong* that are used to depict the traditional drama of Sita's trial by fire (*pati obong*); one can even see how the harmonies are arranged, because Steven's musical score is also included in the book.

In addition to the artworks commissioned for the book, one of the chapters—"Death of Kumbhakarna: Interpretation of the Story by *Dalang* of Balinese *Wayang*"—comes from an ethnomusicologist, Umeda, who is also a Japanese *dalang* puppeteer. Thus, his scholarship is informed by his own experience as a performer of the Kumbhakarna story, based on a script he learned in the 1990s from I Nyoman Sumandi, a puppeteer from Tunjuk, Tabanan in Bali.

Each chapter is accompanied by a detailed bibliography for both primary sources and secondary scholarship. While the focus of the chapters is on performance traditions, there is also much useful information regarding written Ramayana traditions; for example, Hinata's chapter on Khon performance in Thailand includes a detailed account of the *Ramakien* textual tradition, and Fukuoka Shota's chapter on the Ramayana in Japan provides a fascinating version of the Ramayana story from the *Hobutsushu*, a twelfth-century Japanese Buddhist text. The religious diversity of Southeast Asia is another important theme throughout the book, including both the Buddhist elements in various Southeast Asian Ramayana traditions and Islamic elements in Indonesia.

In sum, this volume is a welcome addition to what might be called the "many Ramayanas" genre that began with Paula Richman's edited volume *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (University of California Press, 1991), which included A. K. Ramanujan's

1987 essay “Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation.” Thanks to Fukuoka Madoka and her collaborators, the many Ramayanas of Southeast Asia have now been made more accessible not just to scholars and specialists but also to a general audience of all readers who want to learn more about one of the world’s greatest epic traditions.

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In the Shadow of the Palms: More-Than-Human-Becomings in West Papua

SOPHIE CHAO

Durham: Duke University Press, 2022.

Nausea. Anger. Grief. With these three words, Sophie Chao introduces the reader to the feelings that overwhelm her whenever she drives through the vast, monotonous fields of monocrop oil palm that blanket Marind lands in West Papua. Two years after I first read Chao’s book, I am still viscerally affected by her powerful portrayals of Marind communities and the devastation to which they have been subjected. They make me shudder.

Nausea. Chao’s poetic and poignant style of writing enables the reader to feel revulsion at the destruction of Marind lifeworlds, which comprise human and more-than-human kin, most especially the generous, nurturing sago palm. Marind people are also nauseous: they retch with the fumes of agricultural chemicals and choking smoke from corporate forest clearing. They recoiled when Chao offered to show them drone footage of the surrounding plantations: the sight of tens of thousands of hectares of decimated forest was too distressing. *Anger.* Chao explores the corporate greed and the false promises of development and jobs that government officials roll out to justify the ruin that plantations cause. Marind people are angry, but they must be careful about expressing anger in a context of repression and retribution. *Grief.* Chao clarifies that what has been lost is gone forever. Marind people know there is no way to reconstitute their multispecies lifeworlds or the memories, stories, and dreams that anchored them to particular landscapes and events. They survive, but they are not healthy: shorn of access to sago palms and the plants and animals that sustained them, they eat white rice and instant noodles, if they can afford them. Cassowaries that belong in the forest wander into hamlets confused and lost, unsure where they are supposed to be. Dreams are nightmares that bring no rest. Skin dries up and loses its shine. Rivers cease to flow. Everything is out of kilter.

Together with Pujo Semedi, I have studied West Kalimantan’s oil palm plantation zone and the particular form of domination to which customary communities are subjected when their land is occupied by corporations (Li and Semedi 2021). The violence we witnessed in West Kalimantan