

Taylor M. Easum, *Chiang Mai between Empire and Modern Thailand: A City in the Colonial Margins*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023. 288pp. 14 illustrations, 1 table. €124.00 hbk; open access ebk. doi:10.5117/9789463726467. doi:10.1017/S0963926824000257

This rich study of the spatial dynamics of Chiang Mai by Taylor M. Easum has two notable features that set it apart from much of the current literature. The first is its plea for redirecting the historiographical gaze ‘away from the metropolis and toward the great urban middle’ (pp. 12–13). Easum’s argument here is well-made: urban history, certainly in its colonial or ‘global’ variants, has indeed often suffered from a perhaps understandable but nevertheless excessive obsession with the colonial capitals that have become today’s ‘global cities’ – this reviewer’s work not excepted. Yet while the likes of Bangkok or Singapore have indeed played major roles in the history of empires, much can also be gleaned about the workings of imperialism from the trajectories of smaller cities like Chiang Mai, as Easum convincingly shows.

The second notable point is the book’s long timeframe, stretching from the city’s founding in the late thirteenth century all the way to the twenty-first. This is a welcome contribution to a field that has often focused on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century moments of urban reform and their attendant notions of urban modernity. To be clear, this work also deals with that familiar subject matter, especially in its latter chapters, but that discussion is grounded in a deeper understanding of the historical arc of specifically Southeast Asian ideas of urbanity and spatiality. This allows Easum to avoid the pitfall of characterizing cities as simplistically foreign or Western impositions in colonial Asia, focusing instead on how different actors at different times held differing visions of Chiang Mai, and how those visions clashed within the space of the city.

The long arc of the argument does, however, cause some problems. Chapter 1, in particular, feels a little overcrowded with events and individuals, perhaps trying to do too much – nearly a thousand years of urban history in this part of Southeast Asia – in too little space. Moreover, the chronicles and inscriptions discussed here provide fascinating source material but could have done with more critical reflection on their limits, as they differ significantly from the official archives and Western accounts used elsewhere in the book. These minor issues are compounded by occasional repetition and cut-up sentences in the prose, which could have done with some more careful copy-editing; also, in a couple of places, important concepts are discussed in advance of their proper explanation later in the text. None of this makes the text anything like unreadable, just harder work than is strictly necessary.

Chapter 2 brings the reader to the modern age, recounting the restoration of Chiang Mai in the late eighteenth century after a period of upheaval. This period of repopulation also had a significant effect on the city’s demographics, although the largely elite-level analysis of the book has relatively little to say about the ‘everyday’ urbanities of these various communities. Rightly careful not to sever the city analytically from its surrounding landscape, in Chapter 3 Easum charts Chiang Mai’s rise to regional prominence through the expansion of teak logging into the city’s hinterland, which connected the previously overlooked regional centre with global economic flows and increased its importance for the Siamese state.

The spatial analysis that forms the primary throughline of the book finds its clearest expression in the final two chapters, dealing with changes in the cityscape around the turn of the twentieth century. The analysis is built around the concept of

sacred space or ‘sacro-spatial authority’ (p. 203), though the theorizing of these concepts remains rather thin. Chapter 4, perhaps the strongest of the book, shows how the traditional focal point of the old walled town was contested by the arrival of both British imperial interests and Thai modernizers, which created an alternative centre of gravity around an administrative/commercial cluster by the river Ping outside the walls. Chapter 5 shows how local grassroots leaders like the monk Khruba Siwichai sought to revitalize sacred spaces as a challenge to this new order, often in uneasy alignment with broader state modernization goals. The space of the city, then, served as a canvas for a variety of visions, each seeking to harness constructed notions of tradition and modernity, local and global, for their own ends.

Appearing in the Amsterdam University Press series ‘Asian Cities’, the primary intended audience of the book is scholars of Asian history, as is evident from the lack of broader context and from the amount of Thai terminology used. Yet this should not discourage a wider readership, as there is much of interest here for scholars working on other regions. The discussion of Buddhist sacred space and its relation to political authority, in particular, readily invites comparative perspectives from Christian or Islamic societies around the world. It is to be hoped that someone picks up on those threads, as another step towards a more genuinely global urban history.

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Jo Guldi, *The Long Land War: The Global Struggle for Occupancy Rights*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021. Appendix. Timeline. xxii + 577pp. £30.00 hbk. \$40.00 hbk.

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In light of our existential environmental crisis, Jo Guldi in *The Long Land War* evokes a precedent for global action – ‘a global government of land’ that prevailed during the middle of the twentieth century. Guldi rebuts scepticism about the metropole’s interventions in rural economies and argues that the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) offered a third way through the Cold War, promoting land redistribution to overturn the legacies of colonialism and foster stable democracies. Underlying these policies was a ‘parade for empire’s end’ – a global movement for occupancy rights that united urbanites in the United States and England with farmers in India and Peru. Guldi concludes that the FAO failed to make the world ‘legible’ but that we can learn from its mistakes.

Guldi’s story begins with the Irish Land War, which prompted reforms that successfully established tenant rights. The conflict was seen as a model for how a colonized nation could amend the imbalances of wealth and power that imperialist land grabs had created. When the FAO was formed in 1943, most social scientists looked to New Deal land reforms or rent strikes in Ireland and India as evidence of a universal movement that would inevitably guarantee access to land. Guldi devotes the first part of the book to showing that, while Westerners had their own histories that fed into this perceived connection between small proprietorship and democracy, intellectuals throughout the world contributed to it. She highlights, for example, the impact of Samar Ranjan Sen, who demonstrated that expensive infrastructure