

Book review: Mina Roces: Gender in Southeast Asia

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MINA ROCES, *Gender in Southeast Asia*. (Cambridge Elements: Politics and Society in Southeast Asia). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 75 pages, £15.00. ISBN 978-1-1086-8049-3

In the short volume *Gender in Southeast Asia*, Mina Roces takes on the sizeable task of providing an overview of hegemonic gender constructions, their contestations and their relationship to politics and power in the region between the 1950s and 2020. The book's main theoretical argument is that kinship structures are key to understanding how Southeast Asian politics are gendered. As political power is generally held by kinship alliance groups rather than by individuals, "Western" theoretical models are often inadequate for analysing women's informal ways of exercising political power, for example as daughters or wives. At the same time, Roces's work is a plea for increased gender equality activism and the unpacking of the links between gender and kinship alliance groups.

The introduction surveys existing scholarship and its thematic strands, ranging from activism, the state and religion, to motherhood, alternative sexualities and youth. The second chapter deals with hegemonic gender ideals across the region, which posit men as breadwinners and leaders and women as chaste and dutiful wives and mothers, who are first and foremost identified through their relationships with men. Roces points out that contradictory discourses, such as the admiration of both virility and asceticism in men in Thailand and Cambodia, often exist side by side. Furthermore, activist movements challenge traditional ideas about gender, both through human rights narratives as well as "indigenous brands of feminism" (p. 11).

Through case studies on Thailand, Myanmar and Indonesia, chapter three explores how mainstream religious institutions and ideologies are intertwined with gender ideals. Building on the rich literature on these topics, Roces demonstrates how women have often struggled both to acquire independent spiritual authority and to oppose religious forms of oppression. Such responses include feminist interpretations of religious scriptures and lobbying for the inclusion of women in the top layers of religious hierarchies.

Chapter four focuses on Indonesia and Vietnam, arguing that Southeast Asian authoritarian states have promoted certain "gender ideals in the name of 'modernity' and the 'national' interest" (p. 22). Roces also shows how these official discourses are frequently undermined, citing as examples the feminisation of the workforce as a result of industrialisation in Vietnam and the failure of centralised policing of polygamy practices in Indonesia.

Chapter five examines how hegemonic discourses on sexuality and desire in Southeast Asia result in both the policing of both women's desires and the safeguarding of heterosexual marriage. The chapter includes a discussion of "subordinated sexualities" and the important role of marriage and the state as

tools of their suppression. Roces argues that while LGBT activists have made some gains, they are “hindered by society’s conceptual barriers, where certain issues remain ‘off-limits’” (p. 37). The author concludes that the “most radical” gender and sexual transgressions occur in the context of migration or overseas labour, away from the policing eye of the state.

The final chapter brings together the literature on kinship, power and gender equality in Southeast Asian politics to argue that existing kinship structures overdetermine the way politics are gendered, frequently offering women political agency only through their male relations. The progress of feminist activism, Roces argues, has been hindered by the absence of a “women’s vote” and the lack of gender-sensitive political representatives. Roces advocates for the deconstruction of the aforementioned links between gender and kinship alliance groups while taking care not to remove one of the few avenues to political power presently available to women. Roces ends her work by cautioning against the indiscriminate application of “Western” theories of gender and heteronormativity to the Southeast Asian context.

The book’s short length does not always allow for the exploration of local subtleties, such as tensions among and between different Southeast Asian feminist and activist groups – for example the divergences between secular and Islamic feminists in Indonesia and Malaysia. Given the author’s acknowledgement of the paucity of studies on masculinity in the region, the work focuses mainly on the position of women in society, leading one to wonder whether perhaps it would have been more aptly titled “Gender Equality in Southeast Asia”.

Although Roces does an exceptional job explaining national developments and trends in terms of gender, little attention is paid to (trans)regional dynamics or the role of globalisation beyond a discussion of gender and sexual transgressions made possible by migration. The work might have benefited from a discussion of the literature on globally entangled historical trajectories of gender discourses and practices, including themes such as colonial and post-colonial dynamics, the role of mass media and tourism. Nevertheless, *Gender in Southeast Asia* is an accessible, impressively comprehensive and useful introduction to important themes within the vast field of gender studies in the region. Roces’s observations on gender relations and kinship will surely serve as solid starting points for further research by scholars in the field.

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