

Book Reviews

The House of Doors. By Tan Twan Eng. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023. 306pp. ISBN 9781639731930

Tan Twan Eng's latest novel [on The Booker Prize longlist for 2023, as were his first and second novels] opens in the arid Karoo of South Africa, but swiftly switches to tropical Penang before and after the first World War, where he adopts the voice of the main protagonist, Lesley Hamlyn. She is a European born and bred in Penang, married to a well-to-do Englishman 20 years her senior.

When the famous author Somerset Maugham visits Penang in 1921, he stays in the house of Lesley Hamlyn and her husband Robert, a friend of Maugham's from his youth. Maugham initially describes his young hostess as doleful, and suspects she is probably as uninteresting as most of the typical memsahibs. But after some time, as she urges him to tell her about his travels in China, and they discover their common interest in China and in Sun Yat Sen, the ice thaws between them. Lesley unburdens herself. She is the lonely wife of a busy lawyer, and while navigating with ease her adult world of Penang's affluent European population, she has been influenced by her childhood *amah* [nursemaid], who spoke to her in Hokkien and Malay, took her to temples and introduced her to local food. She tells Maugham of meeting Sun Yat Sen when he visited Penang, and how she was drawn to his cause, eventually joining his small band of followers in Penang.

Things get interesting when Lesley narrates her role in a high-profile murder case, the real life murder trial of Ethel Proudlock, which Maugham later fictionalised in his play *The Letter* (1927). This episode is the inspiration for Tan to pull threads together for the weaving of his tale. Parallels emerge, names of the protagonists Robert and Leslie in Maugham's tale coincide with Tan's actors, lawyer Joyce becomes Dr Joyce, and forbidden love affairs come to light that defy race, social class and convention.

A fascinating tale of old Penang, I wonder what Somerset Maugham would make of *The House of Doors* if he were to read it.

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Kedah Tua; Sejarah, Arkeologi & Naratif Baharu; Ancient Kedah; History, Archaeology & New Narratives. By Nasha Rodziadi Khaw, Nazarudin Zainun, Suresh Narayanan. Penang, Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia & Think City, 2024, xxiii, 252 pp. ISBN 978-967-461-929-9

Bujang Valley; Heritage, Archaeology, and National Identity. By Bowen Liao. Petaling Jaya, Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2024. xi, 107 pp. ISBN 978-629-7575-16-2

A century elapsed between the time Colonel James Low (1791–1852), a Scottish army officer of the East India Company based in Penang, first reported finding Hindu and Buddhist relics in the Bujang Valley, and its first systematic archaeological excavation in 1936–37 by H. G. Quaritch Wales (1900–81). Quaritch Wales had established his credentials as an advisor to the Siamese Courts of Kings Rama VI and VII between 1924–28, thereafter writing a book on *Siamese State Ceremonies* (1931) which remains a benchmark reference until today. Quaritch Wales' archaeological investigations of the Bujang Valley followed excavations of coastal sites on the Kra isthmus between 1934 and 1936 in search of archaeological evidence for the major historical issue of his day: explaining the spread of Brahmanic and Buddhist influence in the region which was becoming known as Further or Greater India. How to account for the Vaishnavite art and architecture of Angkor Wat or the Buddhist sculptures on Borobudur? Quaritch Wales and his wife Dorothy spent fourteen months from 1935 to 1937 surveying the Bujang Valley and its three river systems, the Sungai Merbok, the Sungai Muda and the Sungai Bujang. They identified some thirty sites and excavated twenty-three. Quaritch Wales published the report of his 'Archaeological Researches' in Volume 18 of *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* in 1940. The numbering system he used to designate the thirty sites he identified continues to be used today by the Muzium Negara and the Lembah Bujang Archaeological Museum while photocopies of Quaritch Wales's report are still on sale at the reception counter of the Museum, when your reviewer visited it in November 2024.

Quaritch Wales' interpretation of the thirty sites he identified in the Bujang Valley was that they indicated an Indian colonisation of Kedah (and Southeast Asia) in four main waves of Indian cultural expansion corresponding to the peak periods of Indian civilization—the Amaravati (2nd to 3rd centuries CE, and not apparent at Kedah), the Gupta; the Pallava and the Pala. This narrative of Indian colonisation became the dominant narrative of Bujang Valley's history. However, this narrative of an Indian colonisation of the lands east of the Bay of Bengal (akin to the Pilgrim Fathers colonising America) has been challenged and had given way to more nuanced interpretations which ascribes local agency a greater role in bringing these Brahmanic and Buddhist influences into their territories. Quaritch Wales' interpretation of the archaeological remains of the Bujang Valley has also been re-evaluated by succeeding generations of archaeologists. The two books reviewed here trace the course of this re-evaluation of Bujang Valley history and its implications for our understanding of Bujang Valley as part of Malaysia's historical inheritance.

Bujang Valley; Heritage, Archaeology, and National Identity by Bowen Liao, a post graduate student from China at the National University of Singapore's Department of Malay Studies is a pioneering critical heritage study of how Bujang Valley is understood, valued and managed as a historical and cultural asset in Malaysia. Liao examines the politics and policy issues of who is arguing for what reasons why Bujang Valley is of more than academic historical and archaeological interest. It is also an issue about Malaysia's heritage and national identity. *Kedah Tua; Sejarah, Arkeologi & Naratif Baharu* is a bilingual volume by Nasha Rodziadi

and Suresh Narayanan, senior lecturers at the Centre for Global Archaeological Research at the Universiti Sains Malaysia, and Nazarudin Zainun, Professor in the History Department at the School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia. The lead author Nasha Rodziadi Khaw is an archaeologist with a PhD from Peshawar University where he also studied epigraphy and palaeography while Suresh Narayanan works on the ethnoarchaeology of Malaysia and Southeast Asia.

The intent of *Kedah Tua* is clearly indicated in its title: to provide a ‘new narrative’ about Bujang Valley in the context of Kedah history. ‘New narratives’ about Kedah Tua are responses to a narrative of an Indian colonisation of Bujang Valley and represent direct challenges to it by subsequent generations of archaeologists and historians. These include a pioneering generation of Malaysian archaeologist such as Nik Hassan Shuhaimi Nik Abdul Rahman (1944–2024) who developed the insights of Alastair Lamb (1930–2023), the first academic staff of the History Department of the then newly established University of Malaya campus in Kuala Lumpur in 1959. Lamb was a diplomatic historian turned archaeologist who studied the art and architecture of Bujang Valley in the wider context of other port settlements he investigated on the isthmus. Nik Hassan Shuhaimi and his colleagues including Zuliskandar Ramli also saw, as did Lamb, the archaeological remains at Bujang Valley as outcomes of an acculturative process between the local population and Indian traders.

It was, however, the archaeologist Jane S. Allen in 1988 and Michel Jacq Hergoualc’h (1943–2014) who shifted our focus on Bujang Valley to viewing it and other port settlements on the isthmus as (in the title of Hergoualc’h’s large, influential 2002 study) ‘crossroad of the maritime silk road.’ The breakthrough in further archaeological investigations of Bujang Valley however, came with a new archaeological research programme initiated by the Centre for Global Archaeological Research at the Universiti Sains Malaysia in 2008 led by Mokhtar Saidin. His investigations at Sungai Batu revealed evidence of an iron smelting industry, jetty sites and a brick structure identified as SB1B which could not be identified as clearly Buddhist or Brahmanic and possibly dated to 1,800 or 1,900 years old, making it the oldest possible Buddhist or Brahmanic structure in the region. His student, Nasha Rodziadi Khaw is emerging as the leading young archaeologist whose investigations at Bukit Choras has unearthed *in situ* a series of terracotta statues of the Buddha. *Kedah Tua* provides a well-illustrated inventory of the recently recovered archaeological remains at the Bujang Valley and analysis of these new finds.

For Nasha Rodziadi and his co-authors, the Bujang Valley was a strategically located centre of trade and industry at the northern end of the Straits of Melaka where Indian, Arab, Persian and Chinese sailors and traders gathered to trade and wait for the monsoons to change before they could continue their voyages. At Bujang Valley these foreign traders could also engage in trade in valuable forest products and sacred plants collected by the hunter-gatherers inhabiting the upland forests of the Sungai Muda and brought by middlemen down the jungle trails for sale to the foreign traders. The Hindu-Buddhist temples whose foundations we see today were built to serve the Buddhist and Hindu traders.

These 'new narratives' of Bujang Valley as a confederacy of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural entrepôts from the second to the fourteenth century however raises a number of questions about how it changes and shapes our perception of Bujang Valley's significance as part of Malaysia's historical legacy and place in the writing of Malaysian history. These are questions Liao discusses in his book on how Bujang Valley has become part of Malaysia's heritage. The core of Liao's book are in chapters four and five where he documents how discussions of Bujang Valley moved out of the realm of academic archaeology and history into the public domain when Malaysia and its state governments and institutions decided to promote Bujang Valley as part of Malaysia's cultural heritage, raising some interesting issues relating to its national identity and tourism.

Liao systematically tracks plans to develop Bujang Valley into a National Park from the mid to the late twentieth century and then post-2000 to promote Bujang Valley as an ecotourism destination. However, the new archaeological discoveries by Mokhtar Saidin after 2008 led the Malaysian government to propose developing Bujang Valley as its National Historical Heritage and more ambitiously, to eventually get Bujang Valley recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Liao discusses how this commercialisation of Bujang Valley as a tourist destination and subsequent moves to promote Bujang Valley as national heritage promoted one dominant voice about what Bujang Valley is about and marginalises other voices with a stake in the Valley. Among the other voices not heard in this discourse of Bujang Valley as national and international heritage are the local residents themselves whose daily lives are disrupted by the development of Bujang Valley. The other group whose voice has been lost in the development of Bujang Valley, according to Liao, are the local Chinese Buddhist communities who see Bujang Valley as evidence of Buddhism's contribution to Malaysia's cultural heritage. Liao is sadly less optimistic that this Buddhist voice will be heard, as the emerging new narrative is predominantly about Bujang Valley's trading network, not its cultural connections. In the longer cycles of history, Bujang Valley and Melaka were parts of a series of port-settlements along the Malay peninsula side of the Straits of Melaka which included earlier port settlements of Takuapa on the Kra isthmus and Temasek/Singapura at southern terminal of the Straits. Penang and Singapore are arguably, the modern continuation of these ancient port settlements.

These two books provide us complementary perspectives to view Bujang Valley. *Kedah Tua* is about how ongoing archaeological investigations are helping us construct new narratives about Bujang Valley as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural entrepôt. *Bujang Valley, Heritage, Archaeology, and National Identity* is about how Bujang Valley is being constructed as part of Malaysia's evolving discourse on heritage and its national identity. Together the two books provide us new insights in understanding the significance of the Bujang Valley.