



*Monarchies and Decolonisation in
Asia*

**Robert Aldrich and Cindy McCreery
(eds.)**

Manchester: Manchester University Press,
2020.

Review by: Aidan Jones



Monarchies and Decolonisation in Asia. Edited by Robert Aldrich and Cindy McCreery. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1-5261-4269-6. xiii + 292 pp. £85.



One of the earliest casualties of the Covid pandemic, surprisingly, was a state visit by the Japanese ruling house. In March 2020 a public statement from Buckingham Palace announced that the proposed visit to Britain by the newly crowned Japanese Emperor and Empress, Naruhito and Masako—the first overseas trip by the imperial couple since their enthronement ceremony in October 2019—was to be postponed considering the current circumstances and rescheduled at a later date. The attention that the visit gained in its preparatory stages and by its cancellation, and would have achieved had the trip taken place, demonstrates that, in Japan and her neighbouring counterparts, “Monarchy remains a key component of national life in the Asian countries where it survived through both the powers of the sovereign and royal ‘spectacle’” (8). The fifteen essays in this book, the third volume edited by Robert Aldrich and Cindy McCreery in Manchester University Press’s *Studies in Imperialism* series, explore in detail the oft-neglected issue of the role of indigenous Asian monarchies in the long process of decolonisation. They focus both upon countries which were subject to imperial rule and those, such as Japan and Thailand, which managed to maintain their independence, tracing their constitutional and territorial transformation. And, as the editors point out in their introductory chapter, contributors illustrate the long-lasting legacy of monarchy, both in countries that have retained their ruling house and those where “the mantle of monarchs as military commanders in chief, arbiters of justice, executors of legislation, patrons of the arts” and so on, have been taken on by republican and other leaders (18).

Chapters 2–8 focus on Britain’s former Asian possessions, ranging from India and Burma to Brunei. Priya Naik’s essay, chapter 2, shifts the focus away from the traditional examination of the “men who ruled India” and instead offers a fresh perspective of the ministers, the dewans, who formed the “civil administration of the Indian princely states under ‘indirect’ rule” (23). Naik reveals that while the end of the princely states witnessed Indian princes “sulkily” holidaying in Europe (39), the former “senior administrators and counsellors to the maharajas” (11) grappled with their new post-independence positions and the new rhythm of life which included chasing their unpaid pensions. The next chapter, written by Jim Masselos and keeping the focus on India, adopts a different tack and charts the way in which the Indian princes and others adjusted to the new post-colonial environment. Unlike the former dewans, the rajas and maharajas showed resourcefulness in adapting to the new order by “restoring the palaces and turning them into heritage structures,” ensuring that they “were privileging a past that was gone” (53). Chapter 4, written by one of the editors, Robert Aldrich, focuses on the Himalayan dynasties of Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Tibet, and explains not only Britain’s part in the history of the Himalayan kingdoms, but also the role of an independent India. Susan Conway’s examination of the Shah states of Burma, which forms chapter 5, details how the Shah states fared after the British conquest of Burma in the nineteenth century, with the sons of Shah princes “invited to court ceremonies and introduced to members of the royal family” in Britain. Yet loyalty and purpose to the British did not equate with a post-colonial atmosphere, where the Burmese military, having no use for the Shah dynasties “destroyed the power of the principalities and the traditional relationship that existed between the Shah people and their rulers” (91). The next entry, chapter 6 by Anthony Miller, looks at one of the surviving monarchies—Malaysia’s multi-monarchy. Miller explains how, during the creation of independent Malaya, many sultans

“behaved shrewdly” in negotiating to help “convince the British to leave sovereignty in the rulers’ hands” (108). Chapter 7 by Donna Brunero explores the Malaysian state of Sarawak and the celebrations that marked the Brooke dynasty’s one hundred years of rule in 1941. This is followed by chapter 8 and Naimah Talib’s examination of the sultanate of Brunei, whose ruler, Omar Ali, managed to hold back the demand for the introduction of democratic reforms in the face of British protests and reclaim many powers while entrenching the monarchy in Brunei society.

Christopher Goscha spearheads the move away from the British Empire and towards French Indochina. Goscha’s chapter 9 explores why unlike his Moroccan and Cambodian counterparts, Norodom Sihanouk and Mohammed V, who succeeded in becoming “national icons of their post-colonial states” (152), the last Vietnamese emperor, Bao Dai—buried in a Parisian cemetery—failed to weather the wave of decolonisation and didn’t survive. Chapter 10 by Ryan Wolfson-Ford continues the French theme and investigates how the Lao monarchy “succeeded in remaking itself in the democratic-era of popular sovereignty after the Second World War as a constitutional monarchy” (188). By, for example, establishing cordial relations with the old mother-country. Yet, the Lao kings could not “survive a communist revolution so closely linked to its enemies, China and North Vietnam” (188).

Jean Gelman-Taylor’s chapter, 11, shifts the focus to the colony known as the Netherlands East-Indies, now the Republic of Indonesia, and demonstrates the central role that sultans played in the former Dutch colony. Next, Bayu Dardias Kurniadi’s chapter, 12, looks at the only surviving monarchy in Indonesia during the period 1942-1950, the Yogyakarta Sultanate. Kurniadi explains that while other “sultans and rajas were kidnapped, exiled or murdered, and their palaces looted and burned” (208) the Sultan of Yogyakarta retained his position by showing “he was both a charismatic traditional leader and an efficient administrator” and due to the association of his territory “with the nationalist cause” (222) and independence. Mark Hampton’s chapter focuses on the final thirty years of British rule in Hong Kong, before cession of the colony to China in 1997. Hampton explores, amongst other things, the royal visits of 1975 and 1986 by Queen Elizabeth II, desired by the Hong Kong government as a method of building popular legitimacy. Chapter 14 by Elise Tipton takes the reader back to a surviving monarchy, Japan. Tipton explains how the end of World War Two witnessed a change: the Japanese emperor no longer being viewed as a “manifest deity”, but rather as a “human” (249). To promote this image “the emperor took other opportunities for engagement with ordinary Japanese when volunteers were invited into the palace grounds to help clear out rubble and weeds” (250). Chapter 15 by Irene Stengs, which offers an insight into the Siamese monarchy, brings the volume to a conclusion. She “shows how memories of monarchies part form key components of collective Thai memory today, and how memory and national narrative have been revitalised in monuments, television series and other ways” (13). Perhaps the volume’s most thought-provoking images are those supplied in Steng’s chapter on Thailand’s post-colonial perspective on kingship.

In *Monarchies and Decolonisation in Asia*, the editors have done a sterling job in compiling a stimulating collection of studies that shine a much-needed light on a continent whose history is dominated by imperialism and monarchy, yet monarchy during the end of empire is often neglected in history texts. Supported by a cohesive framework, these various essays, written with

elegance and style by pre-eminent scholars, breathe fresh air into the realm of monarchy in a colonial context, and excitingly invite further research to be conducted.

AIDAN JONES

King's College London