
[Book Review]
Intruder to the Patriarchal Alliance

Sinae HYUN

Reviewed Book

Inter-Asian Intimacies Across Race, Religion, and Colonialism.

By Chie Ikeya. Cornell University Press, 2024. 282 pages. ISBN
9781501777165

Sinae HYUN is a Research Professor at the Institute for East Asian Studies at So-gang University. E-mail: siena714@gmail.com

Cherished by the author's firsthand experience and family history, *Inter-Asian Intimacies across Race, Religion, and Colonialism* excavates the stories of women in Burma who intermarried and converted. They were regarded as an "infidel and traitor" (p. 3), and thus were marginalized by the "patriarchal alliance" (p. 96) between the British imperialists and the Burmese nationalists from the colonial to the postcolonial period. Supplied with various sources from legal documents to oral histories, Chie Ikeya elaborates how the British colonizers tried to make their colonial subjects in Burma legible through conflating race and religion (Chapters 1-4); how the anticolonial nationalists in Burma strove to create an untainted body of a Burmese nation-state through othering and incrimination (Chapters 5-6); and how the orientalist have reduced the Japanese imperialists to uncivilized and insignificant by treating them peculiar (Chapters 7-8). What binds these colonizers, nationalists, and orientalist is their unrelenting "alienation" of the Burmese women who chose intermarriage and conversion, essentially making them unworthy subjects of the nation-state.

Among those who committed alienation of Burmese women, Burmese anticolonial nationalists who were the "most vociferous critics of intermarriage and conversion... self-identified as buddha batha bama amyō," that is, "the Burmese Buddhist kind" (pp. 6-7, 5) can be considered as the main protagonist. The author terms the logic of these critics for reducing the role of Burmese women who intermarried as "Burmese Buddhist exceptionalism" (p. 6). The book argues that the alienation of the intermarried and converted Burmese women was not only the agenda of the colonizer but also of the colonized subjects in Burma. Their fears and suspicions of the Other (amyō gya) and the descendants of the intermarried families like "zerbadi (Burmese Muslim or Indo-Burmese Muslim)" and "kabya (mixed)" did not stop at improvising and theorizing the Burmese Buddhist exceptionalism. It actually culminated in the violence, representatively the "anti-Indian riots" of 1938. In the process, the inter-Asian marriage and conversion have become the subject of antagonism, further justifying the alienation of the Burmese women in the colonial and national histories.

In order to grasp how the British colonizers, Burmese anticolonial nationalists, and orientalist alienated Burmese women not only from the colonial administration but also from the national history of today's Myanmar, a brief sketch of its historical background may be useful. In a nutshell, it took about sixty years for the British to conquer the entirety of Burman territory. Britain obtained control over Lower Burma after the two Anglo-Burmese wars in 1824–1826 and 1852–1853, respectively. The third Anglo-Burmese war allowed Britain to annex Upper Burma in 1885. Until its separation from India in 1937, Burma was a 'province' of India, and thus was governed by both British and Indian laws and policies.

Anticolonial movements arose against both Britain and India from the late nineteenth century, first by traditional ruling elites calling for the restoration of Burmese dynastic rule and expanded to cultural nationalist movements led by the modern elites who had received Western education and training. In 1930, Dobama Asiayone (We Burmese Association), led by students in Yangon University who called themselves "thakin (masters)," emerged, while the millenarian movement called Saya San Rebellion swept the rural countryside until 1932. Some of those thakins, including the most famous Burmese nationalists, Aung San, collaborated with the Japanese imperialists in the early 1940s with the promise of full independence of Burma from the British colonial rule. They formed the Burmese Independence Army in 1941 with the help of the Japanese military, but upon realizing that Japan was no different from other imperialists, the Burmese nationalists formed the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League in 1944. Aung San, before being assassinated in July 1947, negotiated with the British for a peaceful transfer of sovereignty, and in January 1948, U Nu declared the independence of Burma. The time that this book mainly deals with ranges from the nineteenth century before the full annexation of Burma into British-governing India to the Pacific War that housed nearly three hundred thousand Japanese soldiers on Burmese soil, far exceeding the sixty thousand Europeans who stayed in Burma between 1872–1941 (p. 2).

The book consists of a total of eight chapters in addition to an introduction and an epilogue. The first two chapters set the stage by examining how the migration before and during the European colonization in Southeast Asia created the conditions for intermarriage and conversion in Burma. What should be noted here is that the “young, laboring men from China and India” in the nineteenth century “had no intention of settling in their destinations, unlike their predecessors” (p. 38). In other words, intermarriage was more of a choice and a decision made by the migrants and their local spouses based on their intimacy and necessity. The book argues that British colonizers’ fascination with the Burmese openness to intermarriage stems from their limited knowledge as well as their intended prejudice against Asian people, not the actual reality. Chapter Two pays attention to how the British colonizers utilized the “Burmese Buddhist customary law” based on their interpretation to identify their colonial subjects (p. 53), which is essential to understanding the patriarchal alliance between the British imperialists and the Burmese anticolonial nationalists and the latter’s adherence to Burmese Buddhist exceptionalism for the alienation of Burmese women who chose intermarriage.

After setting the stage for the creation of “colonial alibi” in the first two chapters, Chapters Three and Four dive into how the British colonizers schematized their colonial subjects in Burma. Chapter Three investigates the ways the British tried to categorize the population through conflation of race and religion and reduction of complex realities to create a legible identity of their colonial subjects. Mapping religion onto race, or vice versa, enabled the British colonial administration to distinguish “immigration versus indigenous populations” (pp. 66, 64). In addition, it allowed the colonial judiciary to utilize “personal laws” which apply to a certain class or group of people, based on their religion, faith, and culture. Buddhist law was applied only to the members of the Buddhist community and precluded Buddhists from the application of Muslim law. In this way, “religion, race, and origin status” became “co-constitutive” (p. 64). The presumption that the Burmese are originally Buddhist made Christian Burmese or Muslim Burmese to seem “anomalous and questionable” (p. 66). As this overly simplified process of matching race and

religion did not reflect the complex racial, ethnic, social, and religious realities of Burma, where Indians, Persians, Chinese, and other foreign people had moved and settled for centuries, it could effectively marginalize unwanted groups within the colonial subjects.

In particular, as elaborated in Chapter Four, Burmese women who intermarried with foreign immigrants and converted to Islam or Christianity did not find their place in the colonial administrative system, thereby becoming an easy target of discrimination and incrimination. Assuming that the Burmese women who intermarried abandoned their right to be a Buddhist Burmese, their indigenous rights of property and personhood were forfeited. In this way, the patriarchal alliance between British imperialists and their colonial subjects “created a legal enclosure that systematically alienated the Burmese women” (p. 98).

Using Burmese Buddhist exceptionalism, anticolonial nationalists also alienated the Burmese women who chose intermarriage and conversion. The author, therefore, argues “the colonial alibi turned into an anti-colonial alibi” (p. 103). Chapters Five and Six examine how the colonial and anticolonial alibi developed and were applied. Chapter Five explains the process of constructing Burmese Buddhist exceptionalism with increasing concerns over the ‘extinction’ of the Burmese Buddhist kind that was supported by allegedly modern, scientific eugenics. The addressed concern justified the sacralization of Burmese Buddhist women from the early twentieth century. Eulogization of Burmese women that “had benefitted from the unparalleled liberty and equality made possible by the operation of Burmese Buddhist law” (p. 119), simultaneously raised awareness and fear against any external factors that could ruin the Burmese women’s opportunity for being autonomous and free under the protection of Burmese Buddhist law. As demonstrated in the subtitle, “Boycott Foreign Husbands!” (p. 107), the anticolonial nationalists shared a xenophobic panic to protect the Burmese women, effectively regulating the latter’s bodies and identities.

Chapter Six interrogates the ways in which aversion and consequent alienation of the Indians by the British and Burmese intensified, conducive to the separation of Burma from India in 1937 and the racial

violence in 1938. Again, the most unfortunate yet unwritten victims of this were the Burmese women who married the Indians and their descendants. Their choice of intermarriage was often accused of marriage opportunism. The intention of the Burmese women for choosing foreign, that is, non-Burmese origin, and non-Buddhist, was disparaged and blamed for their ignorance, greed, or the foreign men's lack of "right intentions" (p. 129). Intermarriage was said to pollute the national spirits and bodies, and ultimately, led to the extinction of "buddha batha bama amyō." Regardless of the political and ideological discrepancies, both the conservative and socialist nationalist leaders resonated that the sinful women needed to be saved by the Burmese nation, led by enlightened Burmese men. In this context, the Buddhist Women's Special Marriage and Succession Act passed in 1939 mandated that the Burmese Buddhist law apply to all questions relating to marriage, divorce, succession, inheritance, and the ownership of property of a woman in Burma "who professes the Buddhist faith" (p. 136).

Chapters Seven and Eight focus on the Japanese occupation period and the relationship between the Burmese and Japanese, how both remember each other, and how their relationship is viewed by outsiders, especially by Western scholars and/or orientalist. The author's main argument in Chapter Seven focuses on the "gendered narrative of 'patriotic collaboration'" (p. 162), in which "women appear only as victims of Japanese aggression whose violation transforms Burmese men into heroes and patriots" (p. 159). Above-mentioned thakins like Aung San and U Nu at first collaborated with the Japanese imperial army, but realizing Japan would not be able to bring them full independence from Britain, they soon turned against the Japanese imperialists. While their initial collaboration with Japan was praised as "strategic, righteous, and necessary for Burma's national liberation" (p. 160), Burmese women's collaboration with the Japanese was neither acknowledged nor spoken of, other than being derogated as "japan gadaw (the Japanese's mistress) who followed in the footsteps of the kala gadaw [an Indian's mistress]" (p. 159).

In this context, the main task of Chapter Eight seems to restore not only the Burmese women's place in the national and colonial histories

but also *inter-Asian intimacies* that had been constantly defied and silenced even before British colonization. Building upon a critical analysis of the Japanese imperialists' paternalistic assimilation disguised under the slogan of "Asia for Asians," the author walks a tightrope between differentiating and familiarizing the Japanese empire from Western empires. While the alienation of the Burmese women who intermarried and converted by the British colonizers and the Burmese anticolonial nationalists continued from the British colonial to the Japanese occupation period, the Japanese colonizers, unlike in the conventional histories, seem to be more inclined to cultivate intimate relationships with the Burmese women. Since most narratives and impressions of the author's family towards the Japanese occupation period and people appear positive in Chapters Seven and Eight, the author's argument that Japanese idealization of the Asian family "challenged the prewar political discourse of Burmese Buddhist exceptionalism and its attendant disavowal of *inter-Asian intimacies*" (p. 181) unwittingly incur the perplexity towards benign treatment of Japanese imperialism.

From the Western or orientalist views, the Japanese empire might have been seen or made to be incomparable and idiosyncratic, as the author inferred. From the perspective of Northeast Asians who experienced Japanese colonial rule for a longer period and under different circumstances, the alienation of Burmese women by British colonialists and Burmese anticolonial nationalists, rather than by Japanese colonialists, may be more resonant with their experience. The Japanese occupation and rule over Southeast Asian territories were substantially shorter than the several decades-long colonial rule by non-Asian empires over the same territories. Therefore, it must have been almost impossible for the Japanese to derail the Western colonizers and anticolonial nationalists' alienation of women who chose intermarriage and conversion. On the other hand, the Japanese colonial rule in Korea and Taiwan left different footprints. Put simply, the *inter-Asian intimacies* and violences these women experienced can be compared to those of Burmese women, but they are not to be conflated. In this sense, a further investigation on the Japanese colonial laws and norms on defining and regulating the Bur-

mese women who chose intermarriage and conversion is desired.

Overall, the author's challenge vis-a-vis the "Eurocentric paradigm of incomparability" (p. 191) and anomaly of Japanese imperialism through unearthing "intimacies and interwoven histories of colonization across chronologies and territories" (p. 191) deserves attention and appreciation. Not only does the *Inter-Asian Intimacies* give life to a silenced history of the Burmese women who intermarried and converted, but it also exhorts a critical and not racially biased survey on the nature of Japanese imperialism in Southeast Asia during the Pacific War.

It is ironic that Japanese advancement and intrusion into Southeast Asia, where multiple western colonial powers had competed for their share, dramatically increased global attention to the region and Japan yet studies of Japanese imperialism in Southeast Asia have been dichotomized and, somewhat consequently, marginalized. Very likely due to the overwhelming influence of the Cold War in the region, as well as the far shorter time of its presence, the Japanese occupation and wartime period in Southeast Asia have not received sufficient attention from historians and area specialists. In this regard, the book is a timely reminder for historians of Southeast Asia of their homework.