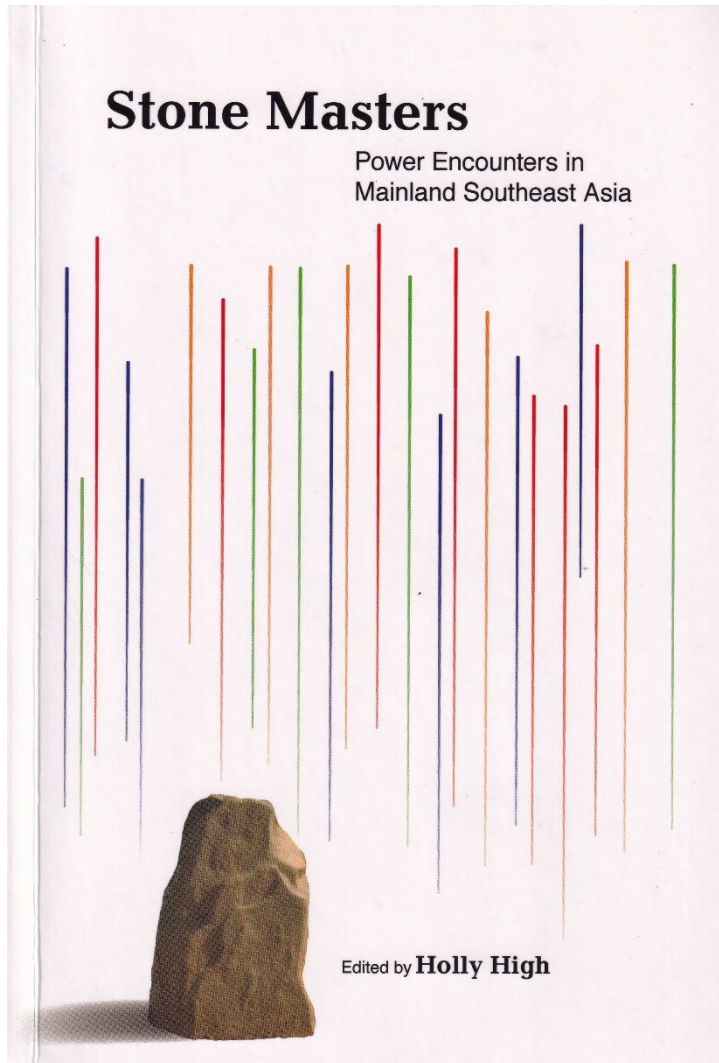


## BOOK REVIEW

---



### **Stone Masters: Power Encounters in Mainland Southeast Asia.**

**Edited by Holly High**, with an introduction by Luiz Costa and afterword from Penny Van Esterik.

NUS Press, Singapore. Year of publication: 2022. Paperback. ISBN: 978-981-325-170-0.

**Reviewed by Lia Genovese**

*Stone Masters* deals with stones, tutelary spirits and power encounters in Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam. The choice of title is a deliberate break with previous tendencies to refer to ‘guardian spirits’ and the “one-sided prior assumption” that these presences are always benevolent, when in fact they are

often “capricious, violent, and dangerous” (p. 13).

The book is inspired by the panel ‘Stone Masters’, from the 22nd Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) conference held at the University of Sydney in July 2018. It is assembled in three sections and includes a Foreword by anthropologist Luiz Costa, who advocates for a reading of the book in its entirety, because, although each essay is self-standing and is crucial to the sum of all contributions, “a reader who does not read the whole book will miss out” (p. xv).

The first section discusses stone theory and comprises an Introduction by Holly High, volume editor, and an essay by John Holt on the indigenous cults in Champa, as

proposed by Paul Mus (1902–1969) in his seminal *India seen from the East* (Mus 2011), a work of reference for several of the essays.<sup>1</sup>

The second section is a series of ethnographic analyses on stone, power encounters and termite mounds, while the final section explores themes of city pillars, territory cults and the interplay between ancestral cults, world religions, statehood and military governments. An Afterword by the cultural anthropologist Penny Van Esterik concludes the volume. The concepts expressed by F.K. Lehman in *Founders' Cults* (2003), namely spirit lords as the original owners of the land and hereditary heirs holding power in perpetuity, are discussed in relation to the “dynamism of territory cults” (p. 15) expressed in the volume.

Other related topics include statues of horses and elephants, megaliths, shrines, tombs and stone tablets, mountains, all with their inherent cults and in communities dwelling in disparate locations from cities to isolated hamlets.

The volume has evolved from contributors' extensive fieldwork in the region, among the ethnic minorities whose traditions they study and document. In addition to mastering national languages like Lao, Thai, Khmer, Burmese or Vietnamese, contributors have often acquired fluency in a local minority language, adding a deeper coverage to their findings. The knowledge acquired in the field, coupled with theoretical principles from social science, imbues their writing with a wealth of details that enriches each topic, including terminology specific to the context.

Stone veneration features prominently, along with other cultural features discussed by Mus, such as soil gods, Indianisation of Southeast Asia and monsoon Asia. For Mus (2011: 28), the worshipped stone is not “the ‘seat’ of the god, but the god himself, consubstantially”, a concept at odds with beliefs elsewhere in Southeast Asia, where stone *hosts* the spirit. Father Léopold Cadière (1869–1955), French missionary and long-term resident of Vietnam, wondered whether the stone cult addresses a spirit independent of the stone or “the stone itself, deemed to possess supernatural powers” (1992: 21).<sup>2</sup>

Anthropological theories underpin most of the essays, frequently interwoven with the work of scholars like Paul Mus, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) and, to a lesser degree, his nephew Marcel Mauss (1872–1950). In this reviewer's opinion, besides Mus' *India seen from the East*, reading Durkheim's *Elements of Religious Life* (1995) is still quite useful, particularly the core themes on animism, guardian spirits, stones and what constitutes a ‘cult’, a term which in *Stone Masters* carries no “pejorative meaning” (p. 8) but designates a set of devotional practices related to a particular figure and/or place.

In Myanmar, the three spheres of heavens, earth and underworld are guarded by different classes of supernatural beings known as *nats*. Here, too, we find the territorial nature of lords of the soil (p. 193), acknowledged by rulers like King Kyawswa (r. ca.

<sup>1</sup> The study by Mus on the relationship between Indian and indigenous religious institutions has inspired generations of students and scholars and was first proposed as a lecture (Mus 1933) in Hanoi at the Louis Finot Museum, present-day Vietnam National Museum of History, with the offprint published separately the following year (Mus 1934).

<sup>2</sup> Cadière arrived in Vietnam in 1892 at the age of 23, as a newly ordained priest, and dedicated his life to the study of the history, linguistics and religions of Vietnam. In 1944, he published the first of three volumes of the country's religious beliefs and practices (*Croyances et pratiques religieuses des vietnamiens*).

1289–1300) who became a *nat* after being dethroned by his son. In its various guises, spirit cult thrives because its potency is recognised and adopted by military governments and state parties, as in recent adoptions by the secular governments in Myanmar and Vietnam. When the Burmese military realised the symbolism of the power of the land in the Tai Loi communities' 24-hour drumming, they took the responsibility of "blessing the drum" (p. 255) to convey their status as the new rulers of Chiang Tung, in Myanmar's Eastern Shan State. This recalls the legitimation of power vested in the revolutionary leader Hồ Chí Minh (1890–1969), who considered himself, and other Vietnamese, as the "descendants" (p. 274) of the Hùng Kings.

Spirit propitiation was also adopted by rulers in Myanmar's ancient kingdom, who paid homage to Buddhist and Brahmanic/Hindu *dewa nats* (superior spirits) residing in the heavens, but also a variety of other *nats* who guarded ancestors, palaces, "villages or features in the landscape" (p. 193). Other Burmese monarchs like Kyanzittha (r. 1084–1112) and Mindon (r. 1853–1878) drew on the power embedded in specific locations "in the form of *nats*, *naga* and pillars cut from auspicious trees" (p. 194) to protect their newly founded palaces and, by extension, their kingdoms.

A contradiction common in these cults concerns the powers they embody, which appear to be both life-giving and potentially life-taking (p. 20). The spirit dispenses protection and benevolent deeds if respected and propitiated, but can be violent, dangerous and vengeful if ignored or disrespected, with punishment meted out when assistance is asked for "but not repaid" (p. 13). However, deference towards spirits does not guarantee automatic protection. A Royal Order issued by the Burmese King Bodawpaya (r. 1782–1819) on 15 July 1817 called on Thakya Min (the *nat* Sakka, protector of Buddhism), to chase away and punish the British, which "appeared like clouds to sun and moon" despite the monarch's "observance of the correct ways and rules of a king" and the presence in his kingdom of "Buddhist relics and establishments" (p. 201), hinting at the contractual nature of the relationship between guardian spirits and humans.

Taboos as a hindrance to the advancement of modernity were also treated as "superstition" (p. 54) in the Kantu ethnic village of Kandon (Old Kandon), in Laos' Sekong province. Restrictions like endogamy were targeted for eradication and pathways were constructed to limit access into the village other than during the annual festival. Other restrictions centred around the *cernaay*, a ring of standing stones encircling a sacred grove, whose cult ended in 1964 when it was destroyed by socialist cadres (p. 54). Kandon villagers were known to worship the *Ahak*, a stone stingray in the pond of a sacred forest (pp. 55–56). In 1996 Old Kandon was abandoned in favour of New Kandon in Central Laos, for better healthcare and economic opportunities. However, improperly conducted rituals in New Kandon offended the *Ahak*, causing an epidemic which came to an end in 2011 after the villagers returned to Old Kandon for time-honoured rituals and propitiation of the *Ahak*.

In northeast Thailand's Buriram province, great spiritual significance attaches to the cult of termite mounds, and their stone-like remnants, as deities of the underworld. Stone has been identified as a derivative of termite mounds, due to the way that some termite species chew and mix earth with saliva and plant fibres, until it reaches a stone-like consistency. Scholars and villagers argue that termites provide nitrogen and rich nutrients, greatly helping with the fertility of fields, particularly in regions with poor soil

conditions (p. 143). Mus did not address termite mounds, which may explain their exclusion from regional studies of chthonic developments and general discussions on territorial cults. The cult of termite mounds in India is known as anthill cult and once occupied a central place in Vedic and Hindu religion, dating back to the first millennium BCE and probably earlier (Irwin 1982).

Stone or termite mounds are said to be annoyed by disturbances from cutting of trees and defilements like the elimination of human waste in their proximity (p. 21). A story is told of a termite mound sprouting on a spot where a wandering Buddhist monk, originally from Surin, in Thailand's northeast, had passed away in the garden of villager Phi Num. Her ritual stimulated the termite mound, which developed at a tremendous rate, seen as the manifestation of the dead monk's mystic potency merging with the soil where he died (p. 151). Phi Num's fortunes and those of her family began to improve but in 2019, her health deteriorated, seemingly due to noise and disturbance from construction work in the vicinity, aggravated by the termite mound's master growing angry by a stranger's intrusion into the neighbourhood.

In stone veneration, women appear as willing participants, instigators or unwitting victims. Gender and pregnancy feature often in this volume (pp. 4, 20, 167, 225, 236), including the popular legend of Wat Sii Mueang, a stone pillar "raised over a pregnant woman" (p. 4) who became the protector of Vientiane and Lady Luck of the City. A version of the myth recounts that a local bride named Sao Si responded to calls of volunteers willing to sacrifice themselves during the creation of Vientiane in 1563. Sao Si, saddened by her husband's infidelity during her pregnancy, travelled to the site and threw herself into the pit dug for the city pillar, which was then covered with a stone on which the pillar was erected, fulfilling her prophecy that she was "predestined to be the tutelary deity of the town" (p. 172).

Gender prohibition centres around Inthakhin, or Indra's Post, in Chiang Mai, Thailand's second largest city. In Thailand, city pillars were erected in the name of the highest political authority and the religious practices connected with its guardian spirit are reminiscent "of attitudes towards a seat of political power" (Terwiel 1978: 159). At Indra's Post, access to the hall is prohibited for women, for fear that they could "damage the transcendental power of the pillar" (p. 224) that holds the Buddha statue. But these restrictions have not always been in place. Europeans' accounts speak of a princess in the Chiang Mai court who was a medium more than a century ago, while female mediums were invoked to locate stolen property or to cure a disease when doctor's skills failed (pp. 225–226).

Several parallel themes are explored in *Stone Masters*, like transformations in the political landscape following the end of hostilities. One such instance connects Kandon, discussed earlier, with the Khmu village of Sanjing (p. 105) in the northern Uplands of Laos, as told by Paul-David Lutz, who lived among the Khmu villagers for a year and details the hamlet's change of fortunes following independence from France in 1953. Sanjing sided with the Pathet Lao, the victorious party in the war against US-backed Royal Lao government forces (p. 113), with Laos becoming a one-party system on 2 December 1975 under president Prince Souphanouvong (1912–1995). In the 1970s, the inhabitants of Sanjing abandoned customary laws, deemed backward and wasteful, but soon reinstated them when crops failed, recalling villagers returning to Old Kandon, after wrongly conducted rituals in New Kandon were blamed for illness and disease.

Mainland Southeast Asia is the scene for all the essays in this edited volume but Island Southeast Asia offers scope for rich parallels, particularly in the areas of stone promoting fertility, as arbiter of good conduct or as castigator for misbehaving humans. The woman who fell seriously ill until it was divined that “she needed to make devotions to Nang Sii Mueang, who wanted her as a devotee” (p. 13), for example, has a counterpart in Sabah’s Kampong Kurai district, where a villager was cured after an offended spirit-stone was pacified with an animal sacrifice.

*Stone Masters* is a scholarly contribution to the field of cultural anthropology in Mainland Southeast Asia, from researchers who have spent years in the field. Their accounts are vivid and richly illustrated by the writers’ own images. The volume corroborates the long-standing notion that ancestral beliefs continue to co-exist with world religions, in a symbiotic relationship where dualism is preferred to outright rejection, in a dynamic interplay of indigenous spirit cult and “imported Brahmanic and Buddhist conceptuality” (p. 34). The anthropological content and frequent application of theoretical principles make this book ideal for informed readers, classroom discussions and field studies. The chapter on the dance of life and death, social relationships and elemental power would have been equally effective if shorter and sharper in focus. Some variations in spelling and a few minor typographical errors in some chapters are likely to be corrected if a second edition is published.

#### REFERENCES

- Cadière, L. 1944. *Croyances et pratiques religieuses des vietnamiens*. First edition. Hanoi: Imprimerie d’Extrême-Orient.
- Cadière, L. 1992. *Croyances et pratiques religieuses des vietnamiens*. Vol. 1. Paris: École Française d’Extrême-Orient.
- Durkheim, É. 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (K.E. Fields tr). New York: The Free Press (first published in 1912 as *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: Le système totémique en Australie*).
- Irwin, J. 1982. The Sacred Anthill and the Cult of the Primordial Mound. *History of Religions* 21/4: 339–360.
- Lehman, F.K. 2003. The relevance of the Founders’ Cult for Understanding the Political Systems of the Peoples of Northern Southeast Asia and its Chinese Borderlands. In *Founders’ Cults in Southeast Asia: Ancestors, Polity, and Identity* (Tannenbaum, N. & C.A. Kammerer eds): 15–39. Yale University Southeast Asian Studies Monograph Series, Vol. 52. Yale University: New Haven, CT.
- Mus, P. 1933. Cultes indiens et indigènes au Champa. *Bulletin de l’École Française d’Extrême-Orient* 33: 367–410. doi: 10.3406/befeo.1933.4628.
- Mus, P. 1934. *L’Inde vue de l’Est: cultes indiens et indigènes au Champa*. Hanoi: Imprimerie d’Extrême-Orient.
- Mus, P. 2011. *India seen from the East* (Mabbett, I.W. tr; Mabbett, I.W & D.P. Chandler eds). Caulfield, Australia: Monash University Press (first published in 1934 as *L’Inde vue de l’Est: cultes indiens et indigènes au Champa*).
- Terwiel, B.J. 1978. The origin and meaning of the Thai city pillar. *Journal of the Siam Society* 66/2: 159–171.