

Eric Tagliacozzo. *Secret Trades, Porous Borders: Smuggling and States Along a Southeast Asian Frontier, 1865-1915*. New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2005. 454 pages.

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Secret Trade, Porous Borders is a panorama of human diversity and motion. In it, the twentieth-century state templates of the Malay Archipelago take shape as a vast area of autonomous and semiautonomous states, and unbounded interior territories are transformed into two large adjoining colonial entities—one British, one Dutch. Peoples of great heterogeneity are embraced within them. Mobilizing a stunning array of archival sources, Tagliacozzo approaches his subject from the perspective of the advancing colonial states as they attempt to transform aspirational borders into real ones. As they do so, they come into conflict with the complex traffic patterns of the archipelago's *longue durée* and find they cannot contain them—hence the “secret trades and porous borders” of the title. Indeed, Tagliacozzo shows how, during a time when global patterns of exchange were quickening alongside colonial expansion, local actors adjusted nimbly to new constraints and new opportunities.

The Dutch were long rooted in Java and, here and there, elsewhere. Britain had been inching into the archipelago since 1786, when the English East India Company occupied Penang. For quite a long time, the ultimately domineering role of Europeans in the island world was not obvious. But, by the time Tagliacozzo picks up the story, the West was clearly tightening its grip and claiming (as Joseph Conrad put it in the opening lines of *The Rescue*) its “inevitable victory.” In his early chapters, Tagliacozzo describes in detail the multifarious push of Holland and Britain into the archipelago between 1865 and 1915. The new matrix grew in fits and starts. Yet, for all its appearance of improvisation, it was, in fact, a coordinated assault on all the unfilled spaces of the Anglo-Dutch imperial map. Dutch colonial armies and marine forces fanned out across the archipelago, moving up its rivers and bending hundreds of small states to European supervision and governance. In their wake came officials, police, and mapmakers—as well as engineers who built jetties and wharves, roads, telegraph lines, and “a necklace of watchtowers...across the frontier” (p. 84). With them came explorers, missionaries, ethnographers, and geologists. Capitalists opened mines and plantations, linking once-off-the-map territories in Sumatra and Borneo to global markets. By 1915, “western telegraphs and steamships crisscrossed the border territories” (p. 123).

In *Secret Trades*, the Anglo-Dutch frontier appears in all its bewildering diversity—from its legions of small sultanates and Chinese mining camps and independent nomads on land and sea to the burgeoning colonial centers in the British Straits Settlements and Dutch Batavia. Into this varied realm the new colonial matrix grew apace, crimping independent actors campaign by campaign, treaty by treaty, contract by contract. But never altogether. Tagliacozzo shows how an in-depth study of smuggling demonstrates the limits of imperial control along the tightening frontier. Indonesian traders and the archipelago's rajahs and sultans—and its ubiquitous Chinese and Arab merchants—were artful dodgers, adept at exploiting the overlapping and conflicting legal jurisdictions of the region's Dutch-affiliated mini-states and the not-always-coordinated policies of the British and Dutch. Despite layer

upon layer of new rules and legislation, and the efforts of a growing cadre of state agents on the ground and seas, Holland and Britain never wholly succeeded in circumscribing piracy, or the traffic in counterfeit money, opium, prostitutes, coolies, and firearms. Although some of these clandestine trades eventually succumbed to British and Dutch discipline by 1915—so that Tagliacozzo says, “most slave trafficking in the classic sense...was becoming obsolete” (p. 242)—others did not. This was spectacularly true of opium and guns. Tagliacozzo shows why this was so and, in doing so, draws a detailed, fact-rich portrait of each of these trades and of the often ineffectual state apparatuses designed to curtail them.

We learn, for example, that in 1900 the Dutch were attempting to patrol a population of 50 million people in Dutch-held or Dutch-affiliated territories with a Dutch-Indies military force of only 22,000 men, most of whom were indigenous themselves; and that Indonesians resisting the Dutch in Aceh, the Batak highlands, Borneo, and Sulawesi did so with German Mauser, British Enfield, Dutch Beaumont, and American Winchester rifles, and that some of these weapons were shipped by Dutch traders themselves (in piano crates from Rotterdam, for example) while others were sold by colonial soldiers directly to their adversaries. And we learn that the collaborations that fostered “secret trades” crossed all ethnic boundaries. The Kim Ban An episode, for example, which Tagliacozzo dissects in detail, involved Indian-Muslim and Anglo-Dutch financiers and ship charterers based in the Straits Settlements, a Chinese sea captain and his Chinese crew, and Acehnese pepper growers.

Tagliacozzo’s text is lush with detail: trade goods such as beeswax, damar, and rhino horn; ships called *Hydrograaf* and *Blue Jacket*, and a German steamer named *Chow Foo*; and hundreds of Chinese, Indian, Dutch, English, Japanese, Malay, and Indonesian names that evoke the multiethnic land- and seascape of the region. The fine detail of Tagliacozzo’s text reflects the impressive range of his research. At one moment, he is calling upon records of the British Admiralty from the public records office in London; at another, upon the Dutch *Tijdschrift voor de Aardrijkskundige Genootschaap*; and at another, the *Penang Guardian and Mercantile Advertiser* newspaper. He uses court cases from the *Indisch Weekblad voor het Recht* and the National University of Singapore law library, Aceh War reports from the Indonesian National Archives, and countless dispatches, letters, and files from the Dutch colonial archives, not to mention thirty-four newspapers.

Few works of Southeast Asian history have been researched so deeply and widely. It is a strength of his work that Tagliacozzo stays close to his sources. But it is also significant that the vast majority of these sources flow from colonial filing cabinets and similar voices of empire. He often reminds us that he is presenting the perceptions of “colonial minds” (p. 130). This may be why, in *Secret Trades*, the indigenous world into which colonial forces are expanding appears as largely unstructured; what we see is a coherent European matrix advancing into a largely incoherent Southeast Asian one. Tagliacozzo does not assay the underlying order of indigenous political life and commerce in the Malay world, however complex and shifting it may have been. Something similar occurs with the Chinese. Tagliacozzo tells us repeatedly that, regarding this or that contraband trade, Chinese were the main players—often Straits-linked Chinese. (Chinese counterfeiting operations, for example, “reached across the

British dominions and deep into the Dutch Indies" [p. 215].) Yet, he does not vigorously explore the possibility that this fact reveals the existence of a region-wide Chinese economy, the broad principles and outlines of which can be discerned—not a China-linked Yellow Peril, as the whites feared, but a competing socioeconomic matrix that flourished within the colonial one but that was also independent of it (and outlived it).

This may be too much to ask in a book that already offers so much. *Secret Trades* opens vast new terrains of the past to scrutiny. With impeccable scholarly authority, it fills a large void in the historiography of modern Indonesia by creating a dazzling portrait of the region in the late stages of colonial state formation. Tagliacozzo does not foreshadow the unanticipated consequences of this achievement, but they are in the reader's mind. The British sphere was fragmented into the Malay States, the Straits Settlements, Brooke-ruled Sarawak, a "protected" sultanate in Brunei, and a company-run territory in North Borneo. Only some parts of this sphere became Malaysia, yet Malaysia could not have been without it. On the Dutch side, despite Aceh's perennial restiveness, all parts of the emergent colonial state (including many not along the Anglo-Dutch frontier) did become Indonesia. Tagliacozzo's book ends as the first wave of local resistance to hegemonic Dutch rule subsides and as a new sort of resistance is beginning. Both Muhammadiyah and Sarekat Islam are already in play by 1915. Tagliacozzo's *Secret Trades* is, thus, both a study of the limits of colonial state power and the porosity of frontiers and, also, for Indonesia, a diagnostic scan of the gestating geobody that only a long decade later will be claimed by Sukarno as "One Country." This book reminds us of the breathtaking speed with which that transformation occurred.