

Keith Tan, *Mission Pioneers of Malaya: Origins, Architecture and Legacy of Our Pioneering Schools*. Subang Jaya, Malaysia: School of Architecture, Building and Design, Taylor's University, 2015. 192 pp. ISBN 978-967-0173-23-8.

When I was first asked to review this book, I was only given the first part of the title, and was intrigued at the prospect of reading about the history of mission work done in Malaya in the 19th and 20th centuries. So I was a little surprised when I got an email from the author and discovered he was from the School of Architecture at Taylor's University. The mystery was cleared up when I received my copy of the book, and discovered it to be a rather handsomely produced history of the architecture of some of the leading mission schools in Malaya.

This is Keith Tan's second book. His first was *Mission Schools of Malaya: Architecture, Legacy and Conservation of our Landmark Schools*. It is clear that the author is fascinated by the central role played by mission schools in helping to shape this nation, and (given his emphasis on conservation in his first book) the need to remember that contribution at least in part by conserving and remembering the buildings themselves.

If *Mission Pioneers of Malaya* had focused purely on matters architectural, it would have been a dry read. Even though I have some interest in architecture, there is only so much I can take of hipped roofs, barrel-vaulted ceilings, central staircases and the like. However, Tan does not confine himself to just the details of the buildings. Rather, he traces the history of when, why and how these schools were built, and through this examination, provides the reader with some idea of how society and education within Malaya developed as well. As he himself points out in his conclusion, "Built in different materials, using different techniques and manifesting different styles throughout the country, these Institutions tell the story of Malaya in the same way some countries' histories are told through their castles, battlefields and graveyards" (182). But this is a history of education, not of conquest.

Tan begins his exploration with a chapter on "Fortress Malacca," looking at how the Portuguese city was systematically erased by the Dutch; despite this, he says, "the spirit of the pioneering Missions" survived (18) because Lisbon maintained its missionary links within the region through its base of operations in Macau. Schools began to be established within these outposts by the Jesuits, thus forming the nucleus around which later mission schools developed and expanded.

He then moves on to chapters covering "Straits Missions," "La Salle Institutes" and "Infant Jesus Convents." These chapters look not just at the schools within Malaya, but trace the connections between the relevant religious institutions in Europe, and how the schools developed out of charitable

institutions such as orphanages. We also get some information about how these schools were funded, who designed them, how they expanded, and so on. Sadly, these stories also encompass the erasure of some of the schools, with some beautiful and historical buildings falling prey to rapid development. I was interested to read that in 2011 the Johor Bahru Convent was deemed “structurally unsafe” (a possibly unfounded claim which had been used with other convents), but that it was saved by the intervention of the Sultan of Johor. In fact, there has been a long history of connections between the Johor Sultans and the JB Convent, with the Royal household donating land for the building of the school in the 1920s, as well as helping to secure financing. The prime motivation for this aid was to “increase access to girls’ and boys’ English-language education in the state” (162). It is by including these socio-historical details that Tan makes his book more engaging and interesting for the layperson.

As with any book devoted to architecture as a subject, this one is quite lavishly illustrated with old maps, floor plans, site plans, old photographs from the mission archives and new photographs taken by Tan. The old and new photographs offer some interesting glimpses into how the buildings have changed over the years. Sometimes, there is a hint of sadness when the caption of a particular picture notes that the picture was taken “before demolition”; it is tragic that so many of these lovely old buildings have been lost – sometimes because of greed for development, sometimes perhaps because of a lack of sensitivity to their beauty and their cultural and historical significance. This loss is what makes work like this even more important – it archives these fragile buildings in a more permanent form, preserving a part of our educational and cultural heritage that is, in many ways, being marginalised.

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