

the Chakri dynasty, which has ruled Thailand since 1782, as succumbing to Western “civilised” tastes in the second half of the 19th century.

The text is clearly written and informative, though heavily biased towards historical material, but the highlights of the book are clearly its illustrations by photographer Eddie Siu. These are reproduced excellently with each accompanied by a descriptive paragraph. Evidence for the dating of bencharong wares is scarce and most in the collection are dated as 19th century or by reference to the reigns of particular Thai monarchs.

The book ends rather abruptly with a chronology, a bibliography (in both English and Thai), acknowledgements, a biography of the production team and a rather limited glossary, but no index. Despite this criticism, the book is a major, if not the principal, contributor to this major style of Thai ceramics. The closing sentence to the editorial preface that “this beautiful and interesting book should serve as a welcome addition to the bookshelf” cannot be challenged.

Philip Courtenay

*Siamese Coins: From Funan to the Fifth Reign* by Ronachai Krisadaolarn and Vasilij Mihailovs (Bangkok: River Books, 2012). ISBN 978-974 9863 54 1 (hard)

This is a beautiful, if literally heavy, book. From the superb reproduction gold coin woven into the black cloth cover and the beautiful slip case to the more than two thousand sumptuous colour photographs that enrich the book throughout, it is clear that this has been a labour of love for joint authors Ronachai Krisadaolarn (Ronald Cristal) and Vasilij Mihailovs – both life-time members of the Numismatic Association of Thailand - and brought to fruition by Bangkok-based publisher River Books. Together, they have produced what will surely become the bible for Thai numismatists.

The book covers a lot of ground, outlining how the Thai monetary system developed over two millennia. The authors briefly describe the earliest forms of money found in the first millenium in the general area that now constitutes Thailand - including Funan, the Kra Isthmus, Sri Dvaravati, Haripunjaya, the Maritime Empires and Angkor – and continue through later eras of Siamese history. Coinage and ingots found in the Yonok, Sukhothai, Pattani, Lan Na, Lan Chang and Ayutthaya kingdoms are also quickly assessed before the book really comes into its own tracing in greater depth the history and manufacture of the unique Thai *pot duang* (bullet coins) and flat coinage before and during the Rattanakosin period. The authors rightly make note of the fact that *pot duang* evolved unlike coins used in any other country, and that the level of skill needed to make these coins was such that they could not be recreated today.

Of particular interest, the authors explain how the Siamese monetary system

evolved, and specifically how the baht currency system was introduced, initially comprising the octuple system - based on divisions of eight – in the Ayutthaya and early Rattanakosin eras before the current decimal system of coinage was adopted in 1897. As elsewhere, coins have evolved from being value-based, made predominantly from gold or silver, to being almost worthless, made from copper, bronze, tin and/or cupronickel.

A subsequent chapter focuses on emblems found on Siamese coins with clear illustrations provided of every possible mark, while another chapter provides considerable information on the numerous and varied legends found on Siamese flat coins. The final chapter, which makes up the heart of the book, provides plates and descriptions of all the various coins, ingots and gambling tokens known to have been in circulation (throughout the lengthy period of history under examination).

There are two completely new areas on which the authors have also focused. They have for the first time sponsored an extensive study of the metallic composition of most specimens of coins listed in the book, either through Energy Dispersive X-Ray Fluorescence (ED-XRF) tests at the Department of Chemistry, Faculty of Science, Mahidol University, Thailand, and/or Inductively Coupled Plasma Mass Spectrometry (ICP-MS) tests at the Department of Chemistry, Faculty of Science, University of Cincinnati, USA. The purpose of this costly and time-consuming examination has been to determine the exact chemical composition and weight analysis of each coin. While such research findings may be fascinating for the keen numismatist, the extraordinary wealth of fresh data and the manner in which it is provided is simply mind-boggling for the casual reader.

In contrast, I found the authors' extensive study of contemporary and modern counterfeit coins found in the market today much more interesting. The lengths to which humans have gone, from the earliest times, to produce counterfeit coinage (admittedly of varying quality) are impressive. Photographs distinguishing genuine old coins from contemporary counterfeits, together with clear explanations of what to look for, are provided extensively throughout the book and will doubtless be of great assistance to any collector or scholar.

The authors have included extremely thorough Appendices that provide extensive documentary context and support to the main text and photographs. Through the Appendices, the authors have traced the development of the various forms of currency found in the Sukhothai, Ayutthaya and Rattanakosin eras by providing extensive documents in Thai and English from a broad variety of sources that provide the novice reader, in particular, a quick understanding of some of the more important events in Thai commercial and economic history. Some of these documents, such as those from the Royal Archives, have never previously been published or translated into English. Other interesting documents include proclamations and letters from the reign of King Rama IV relating to the purchase of minting machines and problems with counterfeit coins, as well as a review of the

coinage in circulation in Siam during the reign of King Rama V.

It is perhaps surprising how few books have been published in English about Thai numismatics since Reginald Le May's classic 1932 work, *The Coinage of Siam*. This learned book certainly attempts to make up for that deficiency. It will probably appeal more to diehard numismatists as the writing style is serious and direct, and the weight and depth of information provided is overwhelming to the reader with little prior knowledge of the subject. As if the meticulous photos in the book are insufficient, the authors and publisher have also seen fit to enclose at the back of the book a DVD with more than one thousand high-resolution photographs of coins and other forms of money from the National Museum and private collections.

My main criticism of the book is that it could have used a good final edit, as typos and grammatical errors occur throughout. However, that is a minor quibble given the fine work of scholarship that the authors have produced on this important subject. The astounding wealth of information is sufficient that it is almost impossible to read this book at one attempt. It is certainly a reference book to which the reader can, and will, return repeatedly – whether to find new information on Siamese coins or related historical trivia.

Paul Bromberg

*Modern and Contemporary Southeast Asian Art: An Anthology* edited by Nora A. Taylor and Boreth Ly (Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2012). ISBN 978-0-87727-786-6 (hard) 978-0-87727-756-9 (soft)

Southeast Asian contemporary art still seems to be very much waiting in the wings, largely surpassed by art from China. It is still uncertain whether there is actually an eager audience for this medium. Looking back to the cultural history of the region, Southeast Asian contemporary and modern art practice has rarely been addressed collectively, largely due to the diverse and expansive expressions that have emerged over the past decades as a result of each nation's distinctive political and economic history. The first hand experiences of the essay contributors in this new volume offer intimate views on the complexities that identify their specific areas of expertise.

Though Southeast Asian contemporary art remains an under-explored and fertile field that deals critically with politics, materiality and aesthetics, this book offers different viewpoints of often deeply coded social and cultural messages. Given that the geography of Southeast Asia looms large, the chapters examine contemporary culture through works related to the individual, the community and the environments in which the writers have had their many forms of exchange. Simultaneously, the publication may be regarded as a cornerstone for the various academic and formalist narratives, with specific focus on current art practices of the region.