

points, as argued by David M. Lampton et. al. in their analysis of China's Pan-Asia Railway project in Southeast Asia, are also adopted by Southeast Asian countries to maximize their interests in dealing with China.⁴

Much of the discussion is convincing and stimulating, yet as most case studies concentrate on policy-making and the implementation of infrastructure projects, critical readers may wonder how history and culture are involved in the process, though this point has been occasionally touched upon in Conrad John Masabo's chapter on Tanzania in China's MSRI. As Tim Winter recently points out, China is actively adopting the past as a mechanism of heritage policy and artfully uses history and heritage to exercise its geocultural advantage.⁵ Because the MSRI and its broader version, the BRI, are firmly based upon the history of the ancient Silk Road, the importance of the historical and cultural aspects shall not be overlooked.

Clearly structured and fluently written, this volume stands as a pioneering work on China's MSRI in Africa and MENA. The contributors acknowledge the promises and benefits of the MSRI for African and MENA countries, yet they also keenly remind us that the MSRI is under pressure and new actions need to be taken. The detailed examinations of MSRI projects are well-suited for introductory overview while they also include direct policy implications that will certainly inspire observers and decision-makers.

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Pious Peripheries: Runaway Women in Post-Taliban Afghanistan. By Sonia Ahsan-Tirmizi. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021. 239 pp. (ISBN: 9781503614710). doi: 10.22679/avs.2022.7.1.014

Pious Peripheries examines the dialectic of construction, resistance, and lived experience among marginalized Afghan women. Ahsan-Tirmizi draws on rich ethnographic research to study the marginalization of women and the evolution of gender politics since the last Taliban regime (1996–2001). Her insider status and linguistic ability enable her to collect many first-hand accounts, often told in the words of runaway women, of the disciplining of their everyday life in abusive relationships. The timing of this publication is significant as the world is pondering the future of women's rights after the fall of Kabul to Taliban forces in August 2021.

In eight concise and highly readable chapters, Ahsan-Tirmizi contextualizes the struggles of runaway women within the fields of feminism, gender studies, and politics of

⁴ David M. Lampton, Selina Ho, and Cheng-Chwee Kuik, *Rivers of Iron: Railroads and Chinese Power in Southeast Asia* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020).

⁵ Tim Winter, *Geocultural Power: China's Quest to Revive the Silk Roads for the Twenty-First Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

resistance. The introductory chapter problematizes the conventional binary framings of women's identity that have obscured our understanding of the complicated relationship between Islam and women's empowerment. These binaries often divide women into the opposing categories: "Muslim/traditional/submissive" and "secular/modern/subversive." Such constructs emerged in specific junctures of Afghan society and are shaped by the larger shifts in domestic and global politics.

Chapter one looks at the paradoxical role of shelter (*khana-ti aman*) for runaway women. Proclaiming to offer refuge, the shelter often places vulnerable women "at the mercy of the state without family safeguards" and exposes them to "rape and other violence at the hands of the officials in charge of protecting them" (24). The shelter only permits "transitory bonds to form between marginalized runaway women" (37), even though its "emancipatory potential" is "deeply implicated within the disciplinary mechanisms" of a patriarchal state.

The next chapter revisits many draconian measures that the Taliban implemented to regulate women's public behaviors. Despite the US overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, many of the women's shelters still internalize the disciplinary values and norms against female bodies. One notorious practice is the enforcement of virginity tests that "distinguish chaste bodies from promiscuous ones" (67), but the categorization of virgins and non-virgins among shelter residents led to more harassments and abuses by local gangs and police officers.

Chapter 3 analyzes the transmission of submissive ideology in many Persian and Pashtun poems and songs that are popular among shelter women. These verses of love and honor serve as a double-edged sword. While glorifying the image of virtuous womanhood, the verses inspire some women to "navigate their worlds in far more complex ways than singing their suffering or killing themselves" (79). The poetic mode of expression is a dialogical and reflective process that helps women "to risk openly expressing a sexually promiscuous self" (77). The heart of the matter is the resolve to embrace "the risk of being different" against the external moral code (77). Evidently, the Pashtun women subalterns are not passive recipients of a theocratic, patriarchal order that the Taliban imposed on them. They are capable of utilizing poems to seek intimacy and protection through "anonymous and collective narration" and to reflect on "the hardship inherent in conforming to honor ideals" (98).

Chapter 4 reveals that the Taliban was not the first state to make piety mandatory in Afghanistan but its governance structure has politicized the scope of private and public piety on an unprecedented scale. Consequently, Afghan women have to appeal to Islam to circumvent the "old-fashioned, totalitarian public shaped by the Taliban" and to assert their limited agency in a hostile environment. Along the same reasoning, chapter 5 looks at a variety of pedagogical materials on Islamic womanhood. The Taliban movement was a reaction to the perceived "fear of Westernization" through "the threat of Soviet secularism" in the decade-long war against the Soviet Union (1979–1989) (143). The Islamization of homeland and family has given rise to a pan-Islamic imagination of female chastity and honor as essential pillars of modern Afghanistan.

Chapter 6 evaluates the impacts of wars. Decades of violent conflicts have destroyed social

trust, but the longstanding values of hospitality, refuge, and generosity that define Pashtun culture still hold the society together and prevent it from falling apart. The shelter women delve into these traditional norms to construct a humane vision of Islam against the Taliban discourse of pious and obedient womanhood. Thus, the politics of gender engagement span a wide spectrum, ranging from extremely conflictual to relatively cooperative, and the picture that arises is one of such variations that it is hard to generalize.

The conclusion pulls all the conceptual and empirical issues together and discusses the official failure to safeguard women's rights in the post-Taliban state. Nonetheless, all is not lost for the women because "the process that makes difference visible" in the shelter is bound to continue (202). "The politics itself is chaotic, immature, and incomplete. Allowing radical difference to thrive is fundamental to the survival of the shelter. The transitory friendships and alliances that develop inside the shelter are a microcosm of solidarities that are now emerging in Afghanistan." (202) How "these fragmentary solidarities, which allow for a multiplicity of radically different subject positions to coexist alongside with each other" in an increasingly dictatorial context remains to be seen.

Methodologically, Ahsan-Tirmizi coalesces granular, well-researched ethnographic data into a fresh take on the agential role of Afghan runaway women. Their stories are both local and global, particular and general. Runaway wives of early-20th-century Beijing, for instance, found in modern transportation, especially passenger trains, reliable ways to escape abuses.⁶ The Afghan women are following in the same footsteps to start and end relationships on the margins of society. These familiar survival tactics create an autonomous sphere and a moral conviction that empowers women in their negotiations within the state's rhetorical and disciplinary framework.

Pious Peripheries is the model of engaged scholarship based on ethnographic research among marginalized groups. Compared with Sally L. Kitch's work on the personal and professional lives of Afghan women elites and Torunn Wimpelmann's reflections on Afghan activists' efforts to fight for women's rights, Ahsan-Tirmizi shifts the analytical focus to the recipients of gender violence who use the shelter system as a transitional space to escape abuses and rebuild their lives.⁷ The diverse experiences of these runaway women reveal the confluence of concerns about subtle feminist and religious expressions and their yearning to reinvent a new sense of belonging inside the shelter system. It is in this dynamic process that a variety of identities have emerged, juxtaposing tradition and modernity, local and global forces, and religious heritage and feminism. The most effective way to exercise individual agency is to carve out personal space without subverting the hegemonic regime. The scope of agency for Afghan women today may be restricted because of the unfavorable set of circumstances, but their determination to reinvent themselves and rework their situations

⁶ Zhao Ma, *Runaway Wives, Urban Crimes, and Survival Tactics in Wartime Beijing, 1937–1949* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015).

⁷ Sally L. Kitch *Contested Terrain: Reflections with Afghan Women Leaders* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), and Torunn Wimpelmann, *The Pitfalls of Protection: Gender, Violence, and Power in Afghanistan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017).

embodies a certain degree of agency in challenging the hegemon. One can only hope that Afghanistan would soon be stable enough to welcome Ahsan-Tirmizi and others to return and conduct further research on women's lived experiences in times of rapid changes.

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