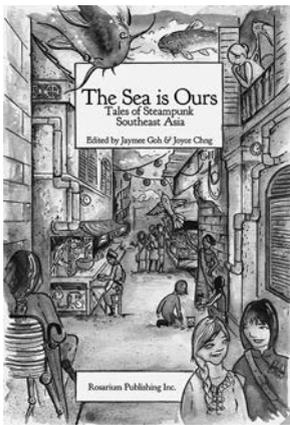


⚙ Southeast Asian Retrofuturism

The SEA Is Ours: Tales from Steampunk Southeast Asia, edited by Jaymee Goh and Joyce Chng, Rosarium Press, November 2015, 270 pp., \$21.95 hardcover, \$15.95 paperback.

reviewed by S. Qiouyi Lu

Goh and Chng reject the assumptions that steampunk must center on Victorian England and use colonial powers as its foundation.



“How do you make something steampunk? Just stick a gear on it.” You may have heard a quip like this, but of the twelve stories in *The SEA Is Ours*, only some make use of gears, and just a couple of those use the classic image of brass gears. Yet each story rings with the spirit of steampunk, which editors Goh and Chng define in their introduction as “an aesthetic that combines retrofuturism, alternate history, and technofantasy...”

The fact that this definition does not mention a specific locale is a strategic choice. Goh and Chng reject the assumptions that steampunk must center on Victorian England and use colonial powers as its foundation. The title also asserts this stance in its double meaning: it is not only a declaration of ownership over the ocean routes that have been so vital to the various maritime cultures of Southeast Asia, but also a declaration of ownership over the narratives of the peoples of Southeast Asia, or SEA. Through retrofutures and alternate histories, Southeast Asian narratives, particularly those written by Southeast Asians themselves, can push back against colonial and imperial powers.

It is not surprising, then, that many of the stories in *The SEA Is Ours* find creative ways to play around with established history and portrayals of the past. Marilang Angway’s “Chasing Volcanoes” presents readers with a vision of the Philippines where two governments centered in New Manila and Cebu City are in conflict. Subtle details, such as Caliso’s nation being named Pina instead of the Philippines, suggest a timeline that did not involve colonization. A broader history and a personal narrative create each other in Timothy Dimacali’s “On the Consequence of Sound,” where extracts from academic texts punctuate a story of a young girl working with her father to become a Navigator. The academic snippets fill in the details of the

worldbuilding and root “On the Consequence of Sound” in a larger conversation, one that understands the hybrid nature of colonial and postcolonial subjects. Kate Osias’s “The Unmaking of the Cuadro Amoroso” positions itself during the Spanish colonial period of the Philippines via its language use. One character becomes “a deviant in the eyes of the *colonia*” (emphasis added); other key terms and locations also use Spanish. Its setting in the Spanish colonial period allows Osias to create an anti-imperial narrative of rebellion.

Although each of the stories in *The SEA Is Ours* stands alone, some images and themes recur. Notable is the disruption of the strict dichotomy between nature and machine, organic and inorganic, which often features in Western interpretations of steampunk. In “Between Severed Souls” by Paolo Chikiamco, Nur and the carver Domingo use not metal, but wood to create a mechanical body for an anito, or guardian, that emerges from a strange log. The world of Alessa Hinlo’s “The Last Aswang” pits magic-fueled wooden snakes and floral automata against the steam-powered Spanish Empire. In “The Chamber of Souls” by z.m. quynh, the guardian Ngoc provides another image of nature and machine working together: “Underneath its skin...were several layers of rotating gears that intertwined with leafy vines and moss that made up the substance of its body.” Meanwhile, Robert Liow’s “Spider Here” focuses on a character who engineers casings for spider fights with unusual organic materials.

With nine of twelve stories focused on women, *The SEA Is Ours* is delightfully woman-centric. These are not stories of the lone woman in a group of men, either. Instead, *The SEA Is Ours* focuses on relationships between women. Nghi Vo’s “Life Under Glass” tells not only the story of two sisters discovering

Notable is the disruption of the strict dichotomy between nature and machine, organic and inorganic, which often features in Western interpretations of steampunk.

a startling creature, but also the story of Thi learning to put herself first after her breakup with her girlfriend An. “Working Woman” by Olivia Ho introduces us to three women who start off in conflict, but quickly come to support each other in their pursuits of personal agency. Pear Nuallak packs a vast story into the small space of “The Insects and Women Sing Together,” one that explores intergenerational experiences between mother and daughter, as well as Amphon’s apprenticeship to two other women. Whether romantic, platonic, antagonistic, diplomatic, or something else entirely, the relationships between women in *The SEA Is Ours* are vast and many.

The wonderful illustrations for *The SEA Is Ours* do a fantastic job of complementing their respective stories. They span a range of styles: Kim Miranda’s loose brushwork contrasts with Shelley Low’s carefully rendered pencils; Trungles’ and Stephani Soejono’s character-driven inks are stark and stylized next to Borg Sinaban’s moody, atmospheric pieces. Pear Nuallak’s pencils feature clean, tight lines that bring the fantastic worlds of three stories to life. Their work for “Ordained” by L.L. Hill is particularly evocative and captures so much of the story in just one image. “Ordained” is not as character- or event-focused as the other stories in *The SEA Is Ours*; instead, its strength is its lush imagery filled with clockwork insects, which Nuallak brings to life. Wina Oktavia’s stunning illustration for Ivanna Mendels’s “Petrified” is epic in scope, capturing the grandness of Mendels’s retelling of the Malin Kundang folktale. Although some readers may find the writing in “Petrified” somewhat unpolished, the tale itself is fascinating.

With so many excellent stories, *The SEA Is Ours* is a necessary addition to any speculative fiction collection. More importantly, *The SEA Is Ours* is a reminder to those of us in the margins that steampunk is for everyone: at its best, steampunk offers a space to create new narratives and reclaim old ones.

Finally, the fact that this anthology is a transnational one is no coincidence ei-

ther. Whether we are in the lands of our heritage or in the diaspora, steampunk allows us to collaborate and to engage with our collective pasts and futures. Stripped of its colonial tethers, steampunk becomes boundless: it is theirs, yours, and, most of all—ours.

... at its best, steampunk offers a space to create new narratives and reclaim old ones.

S. Qiouyi Lu lives in Columbus, Ohio with a tiny black cat named Thin Mint. Their poetry has appeared in *inkscrawl*. You can visit their website at s.qiouyi.lu or follow them on Twitter at @sqiouyilu

Rachel Carson’s Prix Fixe

by Mary Alexandra Agner

Honeysuckle. Heart of palm. Pali. Sand sucked from under your feet as the surf goes out. Street light, sodium lamp. Constellations. Stories that turn overhead. Dying suns still sparkling. Atmospheric interference, particle scattering. Particle collider. Corridor of grass, green ring a human racetrack. Dirt, amended: soil. Aerated, worm-wended, microbe monitored. Seeds sprout cotyledons, roots, ions across permeable membranes. Axons, nerves, electrical impulse, point and click, liquid crystals, photonic crystals, colors of weevils created by the way light refracts, wavelengths, arm lengths, tibia, fibula, calcium. Cancer. Not a sky story. Develops our taste for destruction. Our mouths so full, with watercress and physics, free-flowing lava on Venus, holes in the bottom of the ocean that encourage extremophiles, the wonder is we’ve any wonder left to spare for the fraying interface of man vs. nature. Look. Tide pools. Dolphins. Stellar clusters. The flavor of those photons aged like rare vintages. Why do we reach for the deep-fried green-house gases, the sugar-free individually wrapped 100-calorie industrial pollution, the cotton candy spun up clockwise into the Pacific Ocean’s gyre of anthropocene plastic?

“The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and the realities of the universe, the less taste we shall have for destruction.”

—Rachel Carson