

REVIEW ARTICLES

A Regional Approach to Thailand: Reflections on the writings of A. Thomas Kirsch¹

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Southeast Asia as a focus of study has come under increasing critical examination, and most or all of the participants in this on-going debate are for all practical purposes Southeast Asianists.² This critical reflection is part of a larger intellectual critique of area studies, that draws some of its energy from Said's *Orientalism*.³ Appadurai, who writes on modernity, globalization, and South Asia, remarks that "area studies is a specific Western technique of research and can hardly pretend to be a simple mirror of the civilizational Other. What does need to be recognized, if the area-studies tradition is to be revitalized, is that locality itself is a historical product and the histories through which localities emerge are eventually subject to the dynamics of the global."⁴ But he also states that "area studies is a salutary reminder that globalization itself is a deeply historical, uneven, and even *localizing* process."⁵

An area-studies orientation, such as a focus on Southeast Asia, may come to be reworked in terms of current analytical concerns (in history, anthropology, and other fields) with the various interactions of local and global factors. Encounters with the global do not necessarily globalize or deterritorialize social worlds. Wendy Mee's study of internet communication in Malaysia, for instance, suggests that this transnational arena serves to heighten a sense of nationalism and national belonging.⁶ This issue is not new to Southeast Asian studies, if one considers for instance how Wolters reframed as "localization" what Coedès and other pioneers of inscribing Southeast Asia had characterized as the "Indianization" of the region.⁷ The point of these examples is not to suggest some immutable "Malay" or regional elements but rather to raise questions about the supposed

fitness of "global" factors. Nicholas Thomas, whose work is primarily concerned with Oceania, has argued for an area studies approach. His case is partly that as anthropology has come to concern itself with issues of history and change, a regional focus can provide "an intermediate level of theory and analysis" to counter both the narrow focus of conventional ethnography and the universalist tendencies of grand theory.

In a recent study of long-distance and cross-border trade in Laos, Walker shows how Lao women's prominence in trade draws on a particular combination of historical circumstance and changes in local notions of gender.⁸ He notes that in Thailand and Laos, women's mobility was traditionally quite limited, and links this to issues of Buddhist worldview. What made for the expansion of women into long distance trade was a mixture of the emigration of ethnically Chinese traders during the war in the 1970s, and Lao women's growing experience of, and experimentation with, mobility in these conditions of war. Walker uses this case to question the validity of analytical assertions about how modern conditions have played havoc with traditional gender categories and/or unmoored traditional gender roles. He situates these changes in relation to a world view that was never immutable, but where women's increased mobility was a relatively new feature. He cites Kirsch for the observation that "long-standing sexualized practices can now be profitably deployed on a broader and more mobile stage."⁹

Walker's study of trade and traders in a borderlands environment provides valuable insights in relation to recent speculations about economic prosperity that the "Economic Quadrangle" was to bring about, as much as in relation to a shifting larger context for trade in this region of mainland Southeast Asia. His work shows for instance a regulatory continuity between pre-colonial control and colonial regimentation over trade. His examination of

the shifting connections of "local" and "global" factors is an interesting study, suggesting, for instance, that globalization sharpens the focus on locality rather than contributing to its undoing.

Walker's works also relate to some neglected works of Anthony Thomas Kirsch (1930-99). My aim is to suggest the relevance of Kirsch's focus on, and understanding of, the region, in the context of the recent concern with the rationale for area studies. Kirsch's approach to area studies was directly influenced by his anthropology, particularly concerning issues of history and change. I suggest that theoretical and analytical aspects of Kirsch's work are relevant to the study of the region's places and peoples, in part because he never took the boundedness of "society" or "local" for granted. One thread running through all Kirsch's work is a concern with the social ramifications of particular value-orientations over time. His approach to Southeast Asia focuses on varieties of culture in history and how they bring about "peoples" as well as specific patterns and instabilities. In 1971 Kirsch argued that a regional focus was only one of the changes that anthropology had to endorse in order to overcome the limitations of its "classical" approach that was characterized by synchronic studies of supposedly-traditional (and unchanging) tribal and peasant peoples:

The study of "historic" processes, whether cast in the theoretical frame of "modernization," "cultural evolution" or whatever also involves new methodological strategies. The "historical" anthropologist can no longer devote himself to the traditional synchronic study of discrete tribes, minorities, villages, etc. He must expand his theory and methodology and extend his spatial and temporal boundaries. If he should focus on a single "society" (and it is becoming less clear what this term means) he must familiarize himself with the broad historical context of that society so that he is in a position to detect "changes" when they take place. Even in focussing on a single society it has become increasingly difficult to view "a society" in isolation. Societies must now be viewed as part of a larger process of change which is taking place throughout the world, processes of change which override

conventional societal boundaries. The historical anthropologist, it seems, cannot confine himself to single societies but must resort to some sort of broad comparative perspective that will enable him to simultaneously deal with numerous societies.

It should be clear that this focus on historical anthropology is one which would foster an area studies approach. Indeed, if one really wishes to "prove" an evolutionary theory perhaps the best strategy would be to approach it from the perspective of area studies. That is, one must show that "evolution" has actually taken place in some particular area over time (rather than making an *ad hoc* selection of instances of "evolution" which has commonly been the case).¹

A part of the attraction of this evolutionary framework was Kirsch's awareness of historical changes, and his sense that social orders were oriented, consciously or not, toward the future. In an iconoclastic paper on the history of anthropology that elaborates on some of the ideas he presented in his 1971 lecture,² he argued that anthropology was turning toward the future. He made this case both for the peoples and processes with which anthropology and area studies are concerned, and for these fields of study as disciplines. This argument was not specifically about Southeast Asia, but it holds for the region if one considers, for instance, the gradual disappearance of scholarly studies of "traditional peasant (or tribal) villages." One of Kirsch's arguments was that outsiders projected this notion of "typical peasants" on the countryside. In his earliest publication, "Development and Mobility among the Phu Thai of Northeast Thailand," Kirsch drew on his fieldwork experience to argue against the prevailing conception of peasant society and its problems:

Both popular discussions of Northeast Thailand and its problems and more programmatic statements defining development aims seem to be rooted in certain conceptions about the 'kind' of people Northeasterners are. Northeasterners are conceived, for example, as people with strong commitments to a particular mode of life, that of rice farmer; to a traditional set of village-based social relations and customs; and to particular

localities, whether native villages or the Northeastern region in general. That is, Northerners are seen as 'typical peasants'.¹²

After discussing how this stereotype related to the common framework for understanding and addressing issues of development and political insurgency, Kirsch proceeded to refute the wisdom of both the common perception of peasant populations and of the supposed efficacy of economic development to defuse political problems. His critique of the frameworks for development being applied to the Northeast region in the 1960s was first that the Phu Thai were quite enterprising, and thus already manifesting the attributes that development projects were meant to bring to the region. Equally important were the ways in which Phu Thai villagers, men in particular, were already linked to larger worlds through social and spatial mobility. These links to social frameworks beyond the village through the Buddhist monkhood, social mobility through education and official position, and the spatial mobility involved in men's sojourns (*pai thaoi*) provided some of the material that Kirsch worked on in subsequent writings on the relations of society and religion.

In his next publication, a contribution to the debate over whether Thai society was "loosely structured" as Embree had claimed,¹³ Kirsch made a strong case for redirecting anthropological understandings of social organization.¹⁴ The concerns of that debate no longer provoke much interest,¹⁵ but it is still worthwhile to examine Kirsch's perspective on the analytical and descriptive problems involved in determining whether Thailand was "loosely structured." He noted that the two sides of the debate largely talked past one another, and that there was little disagreement about ethnographic descriptions of Thailand:

That is, the controversy does not turn on the 'facts' of Thai society and culture but around what these facts 'mean' in terms of more general theoretical concerns. The problem then may not lie *out there* in some special features of Thai society (or the absence of such special features) but in the unstated theoretical assumptions with which Embree (and subsequent discussants) ap-

proaches *any* society. Thus the resolution of the dispute may depend more on recognizing what these unstated assumptions are and on theoretical discussion than on empirical investigation and demonstration. If this is the case, the resolution of the dispute may reveal more about the state of social science theory in general than about the special characteristics of loose structure or the peculiar features of Thai society in particular.... By stating the problem as he did, Embree masked the real problem which was located in conventional social structural theory.¹⁶

Among the theoretical influences that are evident in this paper, and which were to contribute to some of Kirsch's later writings, are Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and Leach's *Political Systems of Highland Burma*.¹⁷ In his contribution to the 'loose structure' debate, Kirsch drew on these works to address the complicated relationships among anthropological theory, method, and description, and between these and the social realities being described. Much of what Kirsch was arguing against concerned analyses confined by expectations about 'peasant society' and 'national culture.' He concludes his article by stating that, whereas Embree's identification of loose structure in Thailand had been taken as a solution to an analytical puzzle, or contested as such, it was more fruitful to view his identification as posing an analytical problem. Kirsch disentangles the problem by showing how Embree's article suggests a focus on the 'relative integration of a culture,' which addresses:

how the 'person' as an actor is articulated with his society. This involves more than the study of motivational systems, extending to how cultural elements serve to define and shape both individual actions and 'society.' The study of the relative integration of a culture can only be achieved after a revision and integration has occurred in social science theory itself. In this new theory, the analytic dimensions of cultural systems, social systems, and psychological systems will be distinguished, and the theory will be concerned with how these dimensions 'interpenetrate' without making *a priori* assumptions about the primacy or autonomy of any one of these dimensions.¹⁸

In these early analyses, Kirsch used material on the region to discuss theoretical and methodological issues of more general relevance. He formulated these studies within a broader analysis that assumed social life in mainland Southeast Asia possessed both a certain shape and a particular evolutionary direction to social formations. The studies had their roots in his graduate training at the Department of Social Relations at Harvard University in the 1960s. In *Feasting and Social Oscillation*, published in 1973 but drafted in 1964, Kirsch states that "religion is the repository of cultural values and conceptions which provide the cognitive and affective framework within which social action takes place."²⁰ He cites Talcott Parsons, Robert Bellah, and Clifford Geertz as his main influences in this regard. The emphasis on religion is an analytical and methodological choice, which opened up certain analytical possibilities. Kirsch drew on this perspective to offer an evolutionary synthesis of mainland Southeast Asian social formations. His challenge that the anthropology of Southeast Asia be historical and comparative emerged from what was essentially conventional village-based fieldwork.

Field research and analytical directions

Kirsch had planned to conduct research for his dissertation among a group of highlanders in Thailand. He wrote a prospectus outlining a set of research questions and a larger framework for analyzing them.²¹ His initial plan was to do research among Lisu, who at the time had not been studied by Western anthropologists. While Kirsch had plans for this study, he was discouraged from it because he had heard that Lisu were too fierce.²² He was advised to choose a more amenable population for his dissertation fieldwork, and thus he did research with Phu Thai in the lowlands of northeastern Thailand from 1962 to 1964.²³

In 1969, Kirsch wrote a paper based on his fieldwork in this community: Nong Sung.²⁴ It was twice slated for publication in edited collections of essays on village life in Thailand, but neither work came to fruition. This paper, which draws closely on Kirsch's dissertation,²⁵

ends by stating that "If nothing else, Nong Sung illustrates it is difficult to understand any village in Northeast Thailand today without taking into account the larger society in which it is placed and into which it is moving." "Nong Sung" contains valuable insights regarding social life in a rather marginal community on the eve of national integration. At the same time it provides a historical dimension to a Phu Thai settlement in the northeast. As in his dissertation, Kirsch was concerned with changes in local life that he characterized as the Thai-ization of social life and the Buddha-ization of religious life.

The paper describes village livelihood and social relations, and some of the ways in which Buddhism, education, and trade were drawing villagers into a larger and predominantly national world. The historical background in the paper draws on Erik Seidenfaden's ethnographic account of the Phu Thai²⁶ as well as the early history of Phu Thai enclaves within the tributary framework of Siam before national integration. This historical framing of the Phu Thai is then followed by a description of the village fieldsite in 1963. What initially appears to be no more than a detailed exercise in ethnographic minutiae regarding household formation, kinship, and inheritance yields interesting insights concerning complex patterns in social life that have tenuous relations to what older villagers and Seidenfaden describe for the preceding period. Kirsch's ability to account for changes in local social relations draws on his grounding in ethnography as much as on his ability to connect local social dynamics to larger fields of action such as religion, economy, and polities. His discussion of religion describes the indigenous Phu Thai religious system and how its role in coordinating particular kinds of social relations was undermined as Phu Thai populations engaged with Buddhist frameworks that persistently oriented people beyond their villages.

Rather than positing the village against the state, as if the two abstractions had a concrete reality and could be isolated in a straightforward manner, Kirsch describes a world where the local and the translocal are connected in various ways. One valuable insight is the notion that "power" was no longer local. Would-be leaders could only compete for local respect through

extra-local sources of power. This translocal dimension to village life did not, however, homogenize all dimensions of local social life. Kirsch points out, for instance, that the more aggressive demeanor which made traders successful beyond the village impeded them from gaining local respect. Tensions arose between the village headman and the school headmaster over the ability to mobilize villagers' attentions and labor, which they, in part, did through the rhetoric of development. Although Nong Sung emerged as a social entity through such mobilization, in 1963 this kind of mobilization was being achieved only in relation to the village's temple and school, sites fundamentally intertwined with a national world and translocal frameworks of motivation and mobility.

A few months after returning to Harvard from this fieldwork, Kirsch drafted a dissertation outline in which he planned to explore consistencies and contrasts among three religious types: the 'animism' of upland peoples, the 'sanskritic' religions of Khmer, Cham, and other early states, and the Theravada Buddhism of Thai states and their Burmese, Mon, Lao, and Khmer neighbors. His aim was to focus on the implications of religion and worldview for ecological adaptation, kinship, political power, role differentiation and allocation, degree of "rationalization," and "evolutionary" development.²⁸ The members of Kirsch's advisory committee discouraged him from this ambitious work. He complied with their recommendation that he significantly narrow the scope of his thesis. In all likelihood, the anthropological world was not prepared for the kind of dissertation that Kirsch had wanted to write. Be that as it may, this analytical framework concerning mainland Southeast Asia was to occupy him for a good part of his career, and serves as the link between his published and unpublished works. All of Kirsch's subsequent writings on Southeast Asia comprise parts of this 1964 thesis outline. The social universe that he comprehended during his time in Nong Sung was not simply that of a village and its encompassing nation-state, but a range of documented social formations in mainland Southeast Asia.²⁹ This analytical understanding of the region and its components drew on

Kirsch's theoretical inclinations and contributes to the questions he asked of the ethnographic and historical material.

Upland dynamics and a regional trajectory

In his 1962 thesis prospectus, Kirsch observed that studies of highland groups which were focussed on kinship and marriage systems tended to produce rather static models, whereas research by Leach and others had shown a marked degree of dynamism in these upland societies. Kirsch suggested that because of the many similarities among upland groups, they could be profitably analyzed as a distinct 'cultural type' "by examining the demands of the agricultural system and the structure of religious motivation."³⁰ This prospectus is an important precursor to *Feasting and Social Oscillation*, in its comparative focus and its emphasis on locating social dynamics in worldview and religious motivation, as well as in the attention he wanted to pay to determining what were the units of action and social recognition, such as individuals, couples, households, and kin-groups. Kirsch once remarked (personal communication) that *Feasting* was "a sentimental favorite" because of it being an anchor [for what he thought of] as a "trajectory" from uplands to ancient Khmer to 'modern' Thai.

Feasting and Social Oscillation drew on the insights of Leach's analysis concerning social dynamics in highland societies.³¹ Kirsch's concern was to suggest how a focus on religion and worldview helped reframe our understandings of social dynamics among the so-called hill-tribes. Leach's focus had been on political explanations, arguing that a desire to gain power was fundamental to understanding the repeated shifts in the political organization of the Kachin hills. In addition to shifting the explanatory logic from the political to the religious,³² and noting how another alternative is present in Stevenson's economic emphasis in his account of the Chin,³³ Kirsch expanded the ethnographic grounds for the analysis by including materials on additional social formations from the uplands of Burma and Laos.

One feature of *Feasting and Social Oscillation* that makes it a compelling work of

comparative analysis lies in the realm that has become known as practice theory.⁵² Kirsch's analysis is grounded in an imaginative examination of upland peoples' concern with feasting and their attempts to manoeuvre soul-stuff facts which many ethnographies describe. Rituals and feasting are conventionally portrayed as pertaining to the traditional cultures of "tribal" groups. In Kirsch's analysis, these practices instead become opportunities for negotiating and contesting social arrangements and rank. He also questions the ethnographic status (whether they are 'real' or not) of the innumerable, supposedly separate, and bounded ethnic groups. It is at this point in his analysis that he grounded his claim that the "facts" of ethnography were changing and he asserted that the various accounts of "tribes," "social structures," "societies" and the like were the product of Western preconceptions by the outside observers.⁵³ One important aspect of Kirsch's approach to the issues at hand involves a critique of the knowledge produced by conventional ethnographic fieldwork, interpretations which tend to assume and reproduce the notion of "peoples" as integrated and stable societies. In his conclusions to *Feasting*, Kirsch suggested that anthropology needed to shed the confines of structural-functionalism embedded in the conventional fieldwork methodology.⁵⁴ Instead, anthropology should become more cultural and more historical, expand its temporal and spatial frameworks, and reorient itself from assumed stability to "ranges of structural variability and processes of change."⁵⁵

The focus on worldview and religion allowed Kirsch to avoid the notion of kinship systems as central to the workings of "tribal societies." Rather, in this work he approached kinship systems as only one of many tenuous ramifications of contests over "soul-stuff" among many possible units of social action, ranging from households to villages and lineage groups.⁵⁶ This concern with the analytical significance of kinship is central to the article "Kinship, Genealogical Claims, and Societal Integration in Ancient Khmer Society,"⁵⁷ in which he addresses conflicting claims about the kinship structure of Khmer society. Ancient Khmer society was the second step in Kirsch's vision of an evolutionary trajectory for mainland

Southeast Asia. From the same scanty data, scholars had variously proposed that royal succession in ancient Khmer society was matrilineal or patrilineal. Kirsch's article reviewed royal genealogies and issues of Indianization to offer anthropological insights on problems of historical analysis, in part through an analysis of societal integration in light of the notion of the king as *devaraja*.⁵⁸

Kirsch's approach to diverse royal genealogies, in contrast with previous scholars, was that they do not suggest either patrilineal or matrilineal kinship systems. Rather, the genealogies manifest strategic appropriations of social connections that have less to do with their apparent past than their implied present. As such, the genealogies construct relationships that chart political connections. From this material Kirsch made a case for how ancient Khmer society was integrated. His approach in this paper reflected the engagement of an anthropologist with matters that at the time were predominantly the province of historians.⁵⁹ He raised questions that concerned an understanding of society, placed his reading of the genealogies within a framework that assumed certain commonalities within that society—such as the fact that kinship reckoning was bilateral among commoners and elites—and then inferred knowledge about this society from apparent inconsistencies in the genealogies. Kirsch's emphasis on worldview and motivations was central to his approach to historical social formations. This understanding of the region is relevant not only for bridging the disciplinary gaps between anthropology and history but equally for overcoming some Western biases of these disciplines. To do this, Kirsch aimed his analytical focus on the endogenous historicity of the social worlds of mainland Southeast Asia.⁶⁰

Kirsch refused to take an analytical shortcut to "society" through structural models similar to what anthropologists tended to imply by a "kinship system" and the like. Rather his approach was to see social dynamics as outcomes of motivated action regarding specific goals and configurations of values. His understanding of Southeast Asia as a unit of study or analysis assumed an evolutionary dimension. This non-structurally modeled and

evolutionary approach is apparent in his scaling of upland social formations from the more democratic to the more autoocratic. To some extent ancient Khmer society represented to Kirsch in terms of societal integration, an evolutionary move beyond the dynamics of upland societies.⁴¹

Kirsch wrote another paper on Ancient Khmer society that has not been published.⁴² This paper crystallizes Kirsch's perspective on Southeast Asia as a field of study, and shows clearly his method of rethinking an aspect of the region by examining the value orientations that give shape to particular patterns in social life. This paper is concerned with the historical fact (or puzzle) of the changing fortunes of Khmer and Thai polities in about the fourteenth century. "Cosmological Factors" pursued issues in "Kinship, Genealogical Claims, and Societal Integration," sharpening the analysis through a contrast with the societal integration of the Buddhist Thai. Kirsch questioned whether the changing fortunes of polities or peoples were the significant issue. Then he proceeded to resolve the dilemma, or at least, to show that the historical problem is of a different kind by placing the analytical emphasis on "the articulation between cosmos and the social order." His analysis in this paper is simultaneously theory, description, and a call for further imaginative uses of anthropology to better understanding of social realities in Southeast Asia past and present.⁴³

The paper examined the social processes implied in the so-called Indianization of Southeast Asia, but also critiqued the common historical equation of "society" and "nation."⁴⁴ The end of Angkor's political power was usually understood as resulting from the collapse of the Khmer and the rise of the Thai. Kirsch's paper imaginatively inquired into the underecurrents of social and cultural changes which created this historical shift. His central conclusion was that what "collapsed" was a version of societal integration centered on the king's supernatural status, and what arose was a form of societal integration centered on the monastic institutions of Theravada Buddhism. Kirsch's uniquely anthropological approach to this issue reflects a focus on the 'distinctive configurations of values and particular ways of life' that contribute to

specific social arrangements, shaping both the region in history and histories in the region.

Another element in Kirsch's analysis of pre-modern Southeast Asia is revealed in his "Cosmology and Ecology as Factors in Interpreting Early Thai Social Organization."⁴⁵ In this paper, he read the laws of King Mangrai as providing information on how society in the Chiang Mai valley at the end of the thirteenth century was changing as rulers adopted Buddhism. He suggested that the law code was part of a community of discourse which also included the contemporary inscription of the King Ramkhamhaeng Inscription.⁴⁶ At the time Mangrai and Ramkhamhaeng both were establishing political domains on the fringes of the Khmer polity, and in the context of multiple and more localist domains of villages and village-clusters. Both rulers drew on Buddhism to chart a new social order. In Kirsch's reading of the laws of King Mangrai, its significance for understanding societal integration lay in its rendering of hierarchy.

In his examination of the laws of King Mangrai, Kirsch argued against viewing the state as having a single and enduring social organization. Rather, Mangrai's law code set out principles of rank and relationships that may only have been effective in conditions of warfare. Along the same lines as his other papers on upland peoples, ancient Khmer society, and the "loose structure" debate, Kirsch was exploring fundamental questions of societal integration. All three analyses advanced a consistent vision and methodological framework that never took the structure of a society for granted. Rather, Kirsch offered a way of approaching social formations as the product of particular goals and value-orientations that motivated individual achievement and established patterned sets of social relationships. His analytical framework addressed a world that was continually in the making, and focussed equally on both its enduring structures and its dynamic tensions and contradictions.

Studies of Thailand

Kirsch's analytical emphasis on value-orientation was central to "The Thai Buddhist Quest for Merit,"⁴⁷ in which he argued against a

simplistic equation of Buddhist beliefs and Thai practices. His concern in this paper was both methodological and empirical, focussing on how "ritual provides the principal bridge between an abstract worldview and everyday life." He is interested in the long run of Thai history and the sets of values and religious action that have structured ambitions and activities in specific ways. At the end of his paper, he hinted at the possible ramifications of changes in the role of monks in Thai society, a topic he explored more fully elsewhere.⁴⁰ There are many ways to interpret this paper on the quest for merit. One as an ethnographic and methodological rejoinder to "Loose Structure." In contrast to "Loose Structure," where the presentation largely concerned analytical misconceptions, "The Thai Buddhist Quest for Merit," focussed solely on ideas and practices that crystallize particular orientations and dynamics that are problematic from several alternative approaches. From the perspective that he advanced, he could describe a complex social situation without having to assume that Thai society has a particular structure. The paper can also be juxtaposed with *Feasting*, "Cosmological Factors," and "Cosmology and Ecology" as an exploration of ways in which religion contains the values that motivate action, and of the kinds of social fields, dynamics, and conflicts that emerge from these specific value orientations.

Kirsch repeatedly questioned simplistic equations of religion and society. His examination in "Cosmology and Ecology" of the role of Buddhism as a worldview and an institution central to social integration and change reflects analytical concerns that he explored often elsewhere. His interest in this topic ranged from historical matters to nation-building and religious ferment in contemporary Bangkok. "Cosmology and Ecology" fairly represents his more general analytical emphasis on religion for understanding social dynamics, but the issues he examined in this paper are equally pertinent to his focus in his dissertation research.⁴¹ Among Phu Thai, Buddhism played an important part in their integration into national society in this century, and this is apparent in the paper on Nong Sung. The relations between religion and social life are not conveyed in simplistic functional terms in these papers, and Kirsch

asks probing questions about the place of religion in relation to other factors. He neither assumed that an understanding of Buddhism can be based on a single source, such as official texts or the proclamations of religious experts, nor did he assert that a society such as Thailand can be understood in terms of Buddhism alone. Instead he asserted that a religion must be understood in its social context(s). Not only did he recognize many dimensions to the reality of Buddhism in Thailand, but he saw there was more to religious life in Thailand than Buddhism, a topic he explored in a provocative synthesis on religious complexity.

"Complexity in the Thai Religious System: An Interpretation"⁴² is exemplary in its analytical clarity. In this paper, Kirsch distinguished three religious orientations in Thailand, Buddhism, Brahmanism, and animism, and examined them in terms of their configurations of values. He charted their similarities and differences in terms of goal orientations and worldview, after which examined the practitioners and participants. Then he postulated how the three have related differently to a changing historical context, and suggested their uneven relevance within a changing Thai society. This paper involved a more complex dynamic between religious orientation and social life than those on uplanders, ancient Khmer, or Tai of the thirteenth century, in that it examined the continuing interplay of alternative systems of religious values within a single social formation over time.

This case study was an outgrowth of the analytical problem that Kirsch analyzed in his dissertation on Phu Thai. Considering how Phu Thai had gradually reoriented their social life toward Thai society, and how Thai society in turn was integrating outlying areas such as those of the Northeast, this focus on Thailand was to some degree inevitable. In "Modernizing Implications of Nineteenth Century Reforms in the Thai Sangha," Kirsch dealt with an aspect of the changes in Buddhism as a national religion, in particular attempts to engage Buddhist monks in the "practical" concerns of society. Regarding the historical context of changes dating to the reign of Rama IV (Mongkut), Kirsch finished the piece with a rare example of personal commentary, about the place of Buddhist monks in Thai society:

In recent years there has been a movement in Thailand, encouraged by a number of westerners among others, to make Buddhism and the monkhood "more relevant" to the daily lives and problems of the Thai peoples and nation. Monks have been encouraged to take on tasks of "community development" and to serve as "religious ambassadors" to the non-Buddhist hill peoples. Perhaps a lesson that could be learned from Mongkut's religious reforms is that the Buddhist monk is most relevant to Thai society when he lives a more orthodox monastic life, a life which does not intrude too deeply into the everyday cares of secular society.¹¹

"Economy, Polity, and Religion in Thailand" concerned economic activities in relation to gender and ethnicity, particularly the engagement of Thai women and of ethnic Chinese in the Thai economy, and how the Buddhist worldview tended to orient Thai men toward religious and political pursuits. As in *Complexity in the Thai Religious System*, this analysis is framed by somewhat functionalist concerns with social integration, at the same time as it fields a vision of society as the outcome of people's motivated action. The relations among worldview, goal orientation, action, and relative social integration were lasting analytical problems in Kirsch's writings, and there are thematic as well as methodological links among his various papers regarding how he addressed these issues.

"Buddhism, Sex Roles, and the Thai Economy"¹² considered the analytical issues on women's role vis-à-vis petty trade in relation to a Buddhist worldview and how the quest for merit plays unevenly to men and women. "Text and Context: Buddhist sex roles/culture of gender revisited" expands on these explorations, particularly in relations to changes in Thai society that brought much greater mobility to the lives of women than had the previous context of peasant farming. "Text and Context" was a reply to Keyes,¹³ who had drawn on female imagery in certain Buddhist texts to challenge Kirsch on the place of women in Thai society. Suggesting that a focus on texts was misguided, Kirsch contended that "the search for cultural coherence should focus not on texts, not on actions as such, nor on everyday discourse, but on the lives of those we attempt to understand,

be they rural mothers, village maidens, urban prostitutes, monks, or laymen."¹⁴

Reflections

Kirsch was always more a theorist than an ethnographer. At least in part, this can be explained by his inclination to ask questions of wider scope than ethnographies typically accommodate. But while he did not write ethnography in the conventional sense, many of his papers reveal a keen ethnographic sensibility and awareness of the social realities that it can convey and/or confuse. As he argued in his paper on religious syncretism, there was a particular logic to Thailand's religious complexity. Finding a means to describe such a complex situation and an analytical angle through which to untangle it was what satisfied him as an anthropologist of Southeast Asia. He was always more of a thinker than a writer, and his concern was primarily with method and the economy of analysis.¹⁵ It would be out of character with his work to introduce an element of self-importance to call attention to its value for the study of the region, as he always presented his interpretations of aspects of the region's social life in an understated way. This tone in Kirsch's work is significant for understanding him as a person, a teacher, and a scholar, but his modesty can be misleading for those trying to appreciate his work.

Risking an oversimplification of Kirsch's work, I suggest that there are two directions that are fundamental to it as a whole. One is his analytical and methodological emphasis on worldview, the orientations that inform the lives and social formations of the peoples of mainland Southeast Asia. The other is his concern to redirect anthropological inquiry, through a focus on the articulation of cosmos and the social order, toward imaginative synthesis that contribute to new kinds of knowledge about the region and its social life in ways that illuminate the relations among theory, description, and ethnographic reality. That is, the features that unite his work are a concern with method, the analytical orientations of anthropologists and other scholars, and an analytical quest to examine the social outcomes of particular value-orientations comparatively and over time. Kirsch's anthropology was not only about mainland

Southeast Asia, he wrote also on modern America and on anthropological theory. He approached these sites from the same analytical perspective, and thus had already worked out some of the issues that subsequent critics of anthropology were calling attention to in the 1980s.¹⁷

Kirsch's finished papers are so thoroughly worked that it is difficult to get a sense of how he arrived at his insights and syntheses. To give an indication of the questions and analyses behind his approach, I want to briefly discuss a project that he had started but then had to abandon because of his failing health. This project was an exploration of the relevance of notions of fun for analyses of Thai society. The notion that Thai people are oriented toward fun (*sanuk*) is rather standard in tourist literature, and had considerable currency within anthropological studies of "culture and personality."¹⁸ What Kirsch wanted to explore was the apparent decline in the importance of fun, and, the way scholars nevertheless located fun in their accounts of Thai social life. The former, which concerns the orientations of the people being studied, seemed to indicate that fun was becoming less valued as Thai social life was increasingly dominated by middle-class concerns. The latter, concerning the analytical orientations of scholars, indicated that with a few exceptions the foreign academics writing about Thailand "had a very dark view of Thai personality, so *sanuk* seems out of place."¹⁹ It is possible that the contemporary Thai devaluation of *sanuk* draws on social visions similar to those of the earlier foreign academics. If Kirsch had finished his exploration of this issue, he might have spelled out some of the class-based notions that inform predominant portrayals of Thai society, both locally and in academia.²⁰ Assuming that fun-orientations have or had a social reality, this study might have revealed some of their politics and the relevance of such politics for understanding social integration. Among the examples given in the academic literature concerning fun-orientation are that peasants would sometimes abandon projects such as road construction on the grounds that they were not fun. In retrospect, such examples are very suggestive of other culturally accepted forms of everyday peasant resistance to authority,²¹ and seem, in that context, far-fetched as indications of a national character. This study would have

crystallized social and cultural aspects of contemporary national integration, at the same time as it would have contributed to a rethinking of anthropology and its object of study along the lines that Kirsch offered in several of his papers.

In this unfinished exploration of the place of fun, as in many of his published papers, Kirsch was concerned to rethink an issue in a manner that would sharpen a sense of the entanglements of theory and ethnography as it clarified these same entanglements. In the past anthropologists and others had arrived at different schemes for accounting for fun or for explaining it away, but the issue gradually faded as anthropological concerns changed. The issue was of interest to Kirsch because it provided a focus through which he could explore anthropological theories and descriptions against changes in Thai society. In this sense, *sanuk* would have provided another case in which an understanding of theory, ethnography, and a changing social reality illuminated each other.

Given one of the lessons from Kirsch's exploration of fun, I am tempted to suggest that his studies display the *sanuk* of anthropology: how a comparative, regional and historical focus can provide a productive alternative to simplistic analyses. His work offers various models of how the concerns of area studies can invigorate anthropology and related disciplines. The terrain that Kirsch charted with his analyses, including his call for a confrontation with the future, is both provocative and challenging. The complexity of his approach and his insistence on simultaneously exploring patterns of social life and how they can be analyzed, continues to raise new questions, at the same time as it expands the possibilities for area studies to offer reflections on and challenges to disciplinary academic pursuits. This feature of his work is a lasting contribution to an analytical focus on Southeast Asia as a relevant frame of reference for studies of modern Thailand, its marginal populations, and its historical precursors.

Notes

¹ I am indebted to Yoko Tsuji, Nicola Fannenbaum, Richard O'Connor, and the late Oliver Wolters for encouragement and helpful comments on an earlier form of this essay.

³ Examples include Charles Hirschman, Charles F. Keyes, and Karl Hutterer, eds., *Southeast Asian Studies in the Balance* (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 1992), and Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparison: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).

⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

⁵ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 17–18.

⁶ Wendy Mee, "National Difference and Global Citizenship," in *Southeast Asian Identities* (Joel Kahn, ed. Singapore: ISEAS, 1998), pp. 227–259.

⁷ O.W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives*, revised ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1999). George Coedes, *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1968).

⁸ Nicola Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 6.

⁹ Andrew Walker, *The Legend of the Golden Boat: Regulation, Trade and Traders in the Borderlands of Laos, Thailand, China and Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999).

¹⁰ Walker, *Legend of the Golden Boat*, p. 162.

¹¹ A. Thomas Kirsch, "Anthropological Theory and the Future of Area Studies," remarks made at a meeting of the Department of Asian Studies Faculty seminar, Cornell University, October 15, 1971.

¹² Kirsch, "Anthropology Past, Present, and Future: Toward an Anthropology of Anthropology," in *Crisis in Anthropology: View from Spring Hill* (F.A. Hoebel, R. Currier, and S. Keiser, eds. New York: Garland Publishing, 1982), pp. 91–108. This paper, which draws on Kirsch's library research during 1974–1975, advances an understanding of anthropology in terms of paradigmatic traditions. He presented earlier versions of this analysis at the University of North Carolina and at Princeton University in 1972, and at Harvard University in 1974. He then presented a revised form in 1976 at a major conference on the status and study of anthropology. At this conference, George Stocking, an influential historian of anthropology, was critical of the applicability of the notion of paradigmatic traditions in anthropology, suggesting that "the most likely candidate for paradigmatic status is a kind of biosocial evolutionism." George Stocking, "Anthropology in Crisis: A View From Between the Generations," *Crisis in*

Anthropology, eds. Hoebel, Currier, and Keiser, pp. 407–419, quote from p. 416. Subsequently, Stocking has written on the history of anthropology in terms of paradigmatic traditions, with no acknowledgement of Kirsch's earlier insights and analysis. See George Stocking, *The Ethnographer's Magic, and Other Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

¹³ Kirsch, "Development and Mobility among the Phi Thau of Northeast Thailand," *Asian Survey* 6 (7), (1967) pp. 370–378, quote from p. 370.

¹⁴ J.P. Embree, "Thailand: A Loosely Structured Social System," *American Anthropologist* 52, 2 (1950): pp. 181–193.

¹⁵ Kirsch, "Loose Structure: Theory or Description?" in *Loosely Structured Social Systems: Thailand in Comparative Perspective* (Hans-Dieter Evers, ed. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1969), pp. 39–60. The book edited by Evers contains a reprint of Embree's original article and a critical discussion by seven scholars in addition to Kirsch.

¹⁶ Eric Wolf, one of the later references, refers to the debate about "loose structure," though only to make his point that social organization needs to be seen "as the outcome of the expansion of commodity production." Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 321. As part of his argument that ethnography needs to expand its horizons beyond the village, the point is well taken. As an indication of the state of the field in the ethnography of the Thai countryside at the time, the point indicates familiarity with the ethnography and the contents of this debate.

¹⁷ Kirsch, "Loose Structure," pp. 41, 56.

¹⁸ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) and Edmund R. Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (London: G. Bell & Son, 1954).

¹⁹ Kirsch, "Loose Structure," p. 59.

²⁰ Kirsch, *Feasting and Social Oscillation: Religion and Society in Upland Southeast Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1973), p. 3.

²¹ A. Thomas Kirsch, "Thesis Prospectus," (9 pages, undated, most likely written in 1962).

²² On this issue of Thai notions of Lisu and other highlands, see E. Paul Durenberger, "Understanding a Misunderstanding: Thai-Lisu Relations in Northern Thailand," *Anthropological Quarterly* 48, 2 (1975): pp. 106–120.

²³ Some of this history has been questioned. Yoko Tsuji, Kirsch's wife, suggests that he never had

seriously intended to study Lisu, because at the time the highlands of northern Thailand were not safe for research. Jane and Lucien Hanks' account of their work in the hills of Chiang Rai Province in the early 1960s suggests that there were numerous difficulties in conducting research there. See Jane R. Hanks and Lucien M. Hanks, *Tribes of North Thailand Frontier* (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies, in press). In personal communication with me, Kirsch said his eventual choice of a site for his fieldwork arose out of a disinclination to work with the fierce Lisu. I took this for a fact at the time, and I only heard this questioned after Kirsch died.

¹⁰ Kirsch, "Nong Sung: A Changing Phu Thai Commune Center in Northeast Thailand" (unpublished paper).

¹¹ Kirsch, *Phu Thai Religious Syncretism: A Case Study of Thai Religion and Society*. PhD Thesis, Harvard University, Department of Social Relations.

¹² Erik Seidenfaden, "Regarding the Customs, Manners, Economics and Languages of the Kha (So) and Phuthai Living in Amphoe Kutchinmarai, Changwat Kalasinjai, Monthon Roi Et," *Journal of the Siam Society* 34, 2 (1943): pp. 145–181, and Seidenfaden, *The Thai Peoples* (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1958).

¹³ A. Thomas Kirsch, "Religion and Society in Mainland South-east Asia: A Study of Three Contrasting Religious Types," unpublished thesis outline, May 1964 (over 30 pages. My copy ends on p. 31 but at the bottom of that page there is a handwritten note indicating an additional section).

¹⁴ Of course, his theoretical framework contributes to defining the range of social formations in a way that makes them analytically manageable, and the theory contributes to defining the issue that require analysis. In his "Thesis Prospectus," Kirsch notes that an analyst must construct a theory of the society with which he is working. Among the implications that he had formulated strands of much of his subsequent work at this time is that in 1965 he presented papers on "Buddhist Values and Thai Sex-roles" at the American Anthropological Association's annual conference, and on "Patterns of Syncretism in Thai Religion" to a Thailand Seminar at Cornell University. I do not suggest that his work was more or less complete by 1964 or 1965, but rather that by that time he had arrived at an understanding of the region that he expanded and elaborated upon in his later work.

¹⁵ Kirsch, "Thesis Prospectus," p. 1. The notion of "cultural type" is from Julian Steward, *Theory of*

Culture Change (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1955).

¹⁶ Leach, *Political Systems*.

¹⁷ Lehman suggests that Kirsch's departure from Leach's framework, the shift from "power" to "ritual efficacy" is "not radical." F.K. Lehman, "Can God be Coerced? Structural Correlates of Merit and Blessing in Some Southeast Asian Religions," in *Merit and Blessing in Mainland Southeast Asia in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Cornelia A. Kammerer and Nicola Tannenbaum (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies Monographs, 1996), pp. 20–51, note 10 pp. 50–51. I maintain that a more telling contrast between *Feasting and Political Systems* lies in their respective portrayal of the dynamics of social organization, where *Feasting and Social Oscillation* can be seen as a rejoinder to Leach's article, "The Structural Implications of Matrilateral Cross-Cousin Marriage," in *Rethinking Anthropology*, by E.R. Leach (London: Athlone Press, 1961), pp. 54–104. From this perspective, Kirsch's analysis is about the structural implications of an open-ended scheme of ritual practice, and as such it highlights the contentious aspects of uplanders' social life and calls for nuanced ethnography.

¹⁸ H. Stevenson, *The Economies of the Central Chin Tribes* (Bombay: Times of India Press, 1943).

¹⁹ Sherry B. Ortner, "Theory in Anthropology since the Sixties," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26, 1 (1984): pp. 126–166, provides a good overview and a strong argument for applying the insights of practice theory in anthropology.

²⁰ *Feasting*, p. 35. For similar critiques of conventional ethnography which propose alternative theoretical frameworks, see Peter Hinton, "Do the Karen Really Exist?" in *Highlanders of Thailand*, ed. John McKinnon and Wanat Bbruksari (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 155–168; and Anna L. Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-Way Place* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). For recent discussion of the descriptive and theoretical implications of such critique, see *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, ed. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

²¹ See also his discussion in "Anthropology Past." Fieldwork and the status of "the field" in anthropological theory and practice have subsequently become topics of serious and critical analysis more generally, see *Observers Observed: Essays on Ethnographic Fieldwork*, ed. George Stocking (Madison: Univer-

sity of Wisconsin Press, 1983); *Colonial Situations: Essays on the Contextualization of Ethnographic Knowledge*, ed. George Stocking (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); and *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science*, ed. Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

¹¹ Feasting, p. 36.

¹² Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* (New York: Routledge, 1988) provides a thorough discussion of the history and importance of kinship theory in anthropology, and a critique of how such theories informed understandings of "primitive." Kuper tends to offer a blanket dismissal of explorations of kinship frameworks because of the assumptions about "primitive society," made in many kinship studies, ideas that to him are fictitious. Kuper's approach is interesting for the kind of "anthropology of anthropology" that Kirsch engaged in, because Kuper's earlier work investigated kinship. See Adam Kuper, "Preferential Marriage and Polygamy Among the Tswima," in *Studies in African Social Anthropology*, ed. M. Fortes and S. Patterson (London: Academic Press, 1975), pp. 121–134 and *Wives for Cattle: Bridewealth and Marriage in Southern Africa* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982). In his subsequent repudiation of kinship studies, Kuper is then engaged less in a somewhat Oedipal attack on the theories of a previous generation than an exorcism of some of his own theory-demons. But changes of this sort are not simply a matter of individual psychology and rituals. The world encountered by anthropologists no longer matched the concerns of kinship theorists, if it ever did. Kuper's reaction is to dismiss the theories. Another option, more amenable to the concerns of area studies and the practice of anthropology, would be to revisit the ethnographic realities. Kirsch's *Feasting* is one such rethinking of previous material.

¹³ Kirsch, "Kinship, Genealogical Claims and Societal Integration in Ancient Khmer Society," in *Southeast Asian History and Historiography: Essays Presented to D.G.E. Hall* (C.D. Cowan and O.W. Wolters, ed. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), pp. 190–202.

¹⁴ Judy Ledgerwood, "Khmer Kinship: The Matriline/Matriarchy Myth," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 51, 3 (1995): pp. 247–261, discusses some of the same theorizing about royal descent and the place of kinship in more recent

formations of Cambodian social organization. For a recent overview of the issue and of early Cambodian history and society more generally, see Ian Mabbett and David Chandler, *The Khmers* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995). The fundamental study of *devaraja* is Claude Jacques, "The Kamraten Jagat in Ancient Cambodia," in *Indus Valley to Mekong Delta: Exploration in Epigraphy*, Noburo Karashima, ed. (Madras: New Era, 1985), pp. 268–286. For other discussion on the subject, see Nithi Aeu Sriwongse, "Devaraja Cult and Khmer Kinship at Angkor," in *Explorations in Early Southeast Asian History: The Origin of Southeast Asian Statecraft*, Kenneth R. Hall and John K. Whitmore, ed. (Ann Arbor: Center for South and Southeast Asian Studies, 1976), pp. 107–148; Hermann Kulke, *The Devaraja Cult* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 1978); Wolters, *History, Culture and Region*, pp. 19–20; and J.G. de Casparis and I.W. Mabbett, "Religion and Popular Beliefs of Southeast Asia before c. 1500," in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, Vol. I, pt. 1, Nicholas Tarling, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 322–326.

¹⁵ The paper was published in the festschrift for the historian D.G.E. Hall, best known for his *History of Southeast Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1955).

¹⁶ The term "endogenous historicity" is from John and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnography and the Historical Imagination* (Boulder: Westview, 1992), p. 24; "a truly historical anthropology is only possible to the extent that it is capable of illuminating the endogenous historicity of all social worlds" (emphasis in original). For examples of a focus on endogenous historicity in Southeast Asia, see Renato Rosaldo, *Hangot Headhunting 1883–1974: A Study in Society and History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980); Janet Hoskins, *The Play of Time: Kodi Perspectives on Calendars, History, and Exchange* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and *Perceptions of the Past in Southeast Asia*, A. Reid and D. Marr, ed. (Singapore: Heinemann Education Books, for the Asian Studies Association of Australia, 1979).

¹⁷ The clearest statement of this evolutionary trajectory is spelled out in an introductory anthropology textbook that Kirsch wrote with James Peacock (Chapters 3 to 5), James Peacock and A. Thomas Kirsch, *The Human Direction: An Evolutionary Approach to Social and Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970). To a reader thirty years later, the terms "primitive," "archaic," "historic," and "early modern" society may seem

dated or even objectionable. These terms are indicative of the analytical climate of the 1960s, when the book was written, and they draw directly on Robert Bellah's article, "Religious Evolution" (*American Sociological Review* 29 (1964): pp. 358–374). Few works of anthropology stand outside the time of their writing. In context of a dated terminology it is worth noting that *The Human Direction* was well ahead of much introductory and other anthropology of this period in placing aspects of contemporary American society alongside the material on non-Western societies and cultures. These terms are useful to the degree that they allow for the recognition of different forms of social organization. The more common terminology used by anthropologists today, such as "bands," "tribes," "chiefdom," and "states" implies that "society" can be identified by the political organization that presumably holds it together. The use of Bellah's framework and term, rather than the alternatives, is an attempt to refocus ideas about evolution from technological and political matters to cognitive and cultural factors. There is no easy answer to the question of terminology for different social formation, but whatever choice is made has various implications for the scope of anthropology.

⁴¹ Kirsch, "Cosmological Factors in the 'Collapse' of the Khmer and the 'Rise' of the Thai: Speculations," presented at a conference of the Association for Asian Studies, 1985.

⁴² Kirsch presented this paper at a panel on culture and region in Southeast Asian perspectives which he organized and chaired, on the occasion of O.W. Wolters' retirement from active teaching. Given this framework, one can see this paper as a statement of his anthropological perspective regarding approaches to the region's history.

⁴³ The regional approach that O.W. Wolters applies in *History, Culture and Region* eschews this problem. For recent critiques of the historical charting of supposedly national trajectories, see Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), and Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). The way historians are currently writing against national narratives parallels the anthropological reaction against the study of ethnic groups as bounded entities.

⁴⁴ *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 15 (1984), pp. 253–265.

⁴⁵ The inscription attributed to King Ramkhamhaeng has been the subject of much inquiry following allegations that it was a nineteenth century forgery. Historians, art historians, anthropologists and linguists engaged in this debate. See *The Ram Khamhaeng Controversy*, James Chamberlain, ed. (Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1991). The only anthropologist included in this collection, Richard A. O'Connor compared the polities and politics of the kings Mangrai and Ramkhamhaeng. O'Connor, "Sukhothai: Rule, Religion, and Elite Rivalry," in *Ram Khamhaeng*, pp. 273–308. For a critical discussion of King Mangrai's relation to Buddhism, and the ways in which the history of his domain has been framed by a Bangkok-centered (national) perspective, see Ronald D. Renard, "Blessing and Northern Thai Historiography," in *Merit and Blessing in Mainland Southeast Asia in Comparative Perspective*, Cornelius A. Kammerer and Nicola Taimenbaum, ed. (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asia Studies Monographs, 1996), pp. 159–180.

⁴⁶ The paper was originally presented at a conference of the American Anthropological Association in 1967 and then expanded. An abridged version was published in 1973, in John McAlister, ed. *Southeast Asia: The Politics of National Integration*. The abridged version truncated Kirsch's argument and left out the discussion of methods and theory, which in many ways vitiated the essay. In its full length, the paper then published in Thailand in a mimeographed collection of essays aimed at providing missionaries and other Westerners with an introduction to Thai culture and society. See *Clues to Thai Culture* (edited by Central Thai Language Committee, OMP, Bangkok: Kanok Bannasan Press, 1982), pp. 120–136.

⁴⁷ Kirsch, "Modernizing Implications of the 19th Century Reforms in the Thai Sangha," in *Contributions to Asian Studies* 8 (1975), pp. 8–23, reprinted in *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Thailand, Laos and Burma*, Bardwell Smith, ed. (Chambersburg: Anima, 1977), pp. 52–65. Among other issues that he raised in "The Thai Buddhist Quest for Merit" and discussed more fully elsewhere were various dimensions of Thai society which he explored in "Economy, Polity and Religion in Thailand" in *Change and Persistence in Thai Society*, G. William Skinner and A. Thomas Kirsch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), pp. 152–196; and the ways gender was implicated in these aspects of society, the topic of "Buddhism, Sex Roles, and Thai Economy," in

Women of Southeast Asia, Penny van Esterik, ed. (DeKalb: Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, 1982), pp. 16–41; and of "Text and Context: Buddhist Sex Roles? Culture or Gender Revisited," *American Ethnologist* 11, 2 (1984): pp. 223–241. These thematic connections hint at ways in which Kirsch's individual articles reflected discrete but interconnected elements of larger analytical projects.

⁷ Kirsch, *Phu That Religious Syncretism: A Case Study of Thai Religion and Society*. PhD Thesis, Harvard University, 1967.

⁸ *Journal of Asian Studies* 36, 2 (1977), pp. 241–266.

⁹ Kirsch, "Modernizing Implications," p. 63.

¹⁰ Charles F. Keyes, "Mother or Mistress but Never a Monk: Buddhist Notions of Female Gender in Rural Thailand," *American Ethnologist* 11 (2): pp. 223–241.

¹¹ Kirsch, "Text and Context," p. 317.

¹² This is my interpretation. Kirsch did not make any declarations of this sort. My concern here is to address the puzzle that his writings are not numerous, and only a portion of the materials that he explored, analyzed, and thought through. Much of Kirsch's genius was manifest in conversation, lectures, and in the hallways at conferences and never made into writing. His ability to synthesize theoretical and ethnographic materials contributed to his ability to rethink aspects of the histories of Southeast Asia and of anthropology.

¹³ One strand of this critique was the notion that implicit in the anthropological effort was a bifurcation of the world into the West and "the Rest"; see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). Another strand, a critical examination of ethnography as a form of writing, crystallized in the book *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, James Clifford and George E. Marcus, ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). In their vision of a "neomodern" anthropology, John and Jean Comaroff state that to overcome Western "rationalizing cosmology posing as science" anthropology must "regard our own [Western] world as a problem, a proper site for ethnographic inquiry, and... to make good this intention, [to] develop a genuinely historicized anthropology." See their *Ethnography and Historical Imagination*, p. 6. I quote these remarks as an example of efforts similar to those of

Kirsch, in order to place his writing in relation to critiques of anthropology as an Orientalist project.

¹⁴ For culture and personality studies in anthropology, see Roy D'Andrade, *The Development of Cognitive Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 6–7, and F.C. Wallace, *Culture and Personality*, 2nd edition (New York: Random House, 1970). For the case of Thailand and a treatment of *sanuk*, see Herbert Phillips, *Thai Peasant Personality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), pp. 16, 59–61.

¹⁵ Kirsch, personal correspondence, 1998. His exploration of notions of fun was intended as a commentary on Graham Fordham, "Northern Thai Male Culture and the Assessment of HIV Risk," *Crossroads* 12, 1 (1998), pp. 77–164. Kirsch's preliminary examination indicated that the issues of *sanuk* would provide another perspective to Thai men's social patterns of drinking and brothel visits that were the focus of Fordham's article.

I learned of the unfinished project when I wrote to ask Kirsch some questions about the literature on *sanuk*. One example of the tendency to explain away *sanuk* comes from a Thai psychologist. "All these socially necessary traits, including *sanuk* behavior... are essentially functional as defense mechanisms to maintain the 'cosmetic' cover of mutual respect and acceptance while leaving the ego untouched," Suntaree Komlin, "The World View Through Thai Value System," in *Traditional and Changing Thai World View*, Amara Pongsapich, ed. (Bangkok: Social Research Institute, Chulalongkorn University, 1985), pp. 170–192, quote from p. 185. Suntaree cites Niels Mulder, "Interpreting Thai Behavior: Reflections on Presentation and Power," *Journal of Development Administration* 17 (1977), for the view of *sanuk* as a defense mechanism. Her subsequent research through a value survey indicates that among her respondents, the valuation of *sanuk* was inversely related to their income. Suntaree Komlin, *Psychology of the Thai People: Values and Behavioral Patterns* (Bangkok: National Institute of Development Administration, 1991), p. 193.

¹⁶ For perspectives on this issue, see Benedict Anderson, "Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies," in *The Study of Thailand: Analyses of Knowledge, Approaches, and Prospects in Anthropology, Art History, Economics, History and Political Science*, E.B. Ayal, ed. (Athens: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1978), pp. 193–247; William A. Callahan, *Imagine Democracy: Reading "The Events of May" in Thailand* (Singapore: Institute

of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), and Niels Mulder, *Thai Images. The Culture of the Public World* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm, 1997).

¹⁰ See James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). "In the villagers' way of thinking, no activity is really worth doing unless it has potentiality for fun," Phillips, *Thai Peasant Personality*, p. 61. I do not suggest that Kirsch would have "translated" the concern with fun as disguised politics. In light of his other work, he would have most likely examined the ideas and practices in their own right in terms of articulations of worldview and social formation. Among the examples that reflect this style of analysis are his approach to ligiousness in *Festivity*, and his treatment of sojourning and the quest for merit in his papers on Thailand.

Dark City, White Space: A review of books featuring black and white photography on life and death in Bangkok

Oliver Hargreave

Bangkok in Black and White, Manit Sriwanichpoom; *Vanishing Bangkok*, Surat Osathanugrah; *Bangkok: Subways, Skyscapers and a City Redefined*, John Hoskin; *The Cars that Ate Bangkok*, Philip Blenkinsop; *Pagong: Bangkok's Twilight Zone—a photographic diary*, Nick Nostitz.

Two life-sized props, one of a Thai man and the other of a woman, both in early twentieth century costume, stand in a temple courtyard awaiting people to insert their faces in the holes provided for a photograph. Manit Sriwanichpoom leaves the props faceless in 'soulless', the first image in his *Bangkok in Black and White* (Chang Puak Nga Dum, Bangkok 1999, 167 plates, 172 pages, 28x23 cm., paperback).

A cemetery and a high rise, an abandoned car beneath an expressway, the contrasts in (Khun) Manit's pictures reach great strength in images such as his 1995 shot titled 'SAM New Petchaburi Rd.' The scene shows a line of traffic on the road and two sleeping figures on a footbridge above. Cropped tight and slanted from horizontal frame for impact, the highlights of reflected sunlight shine a paper white and the

shadows beneath the sleeping figures turn into pure black in this high contrast shot. Manit does not make use of photomontage, nor does he appear to use Photoshop in this collection of photographs built up in the 1990s.



Bus stop near Chulalongkorn University, 1990
(Photo by Manit Sriwanichpoom)

Manit uses billboards, posters, statues and mannequins to illustrate his takes on the icons of the popular culture, especially if they can be juxtaposed with human subjects. New Buddha images glisten on the side of a lane as a shiny Benz passes. People eat at Central Pinklao food center dominated by a Romanesque statue, and passengers sit at a bus stop in front of an advertisement for Lux soap.

As we pass through the city such images, if noted at all, may seem ordinary to senses dulled by the visual onslaught of Bangkok's streets. Yet through Manit's lens they take on a new vitality. A model holds a pot of Nescafe, the word 'shake' blazoned across the vast billboard overlooking lines of traffic in foreground. Pick-up trucks and store-front signs at Pratunam are dominated by a woman's legs advertising stockings. Through his compositions Manit emphasises incongruity,

Elephants, dogs, chickens, dead ducks—Manit loves props that reinforces a sense of improbability, a visual presentation of the enigmatic. Surely an outsider in his or her right mind would flee Bangkok after but a momentary exposure to the city's environment, and yet it is home to millions. Manit has no need of sensational imagery from bars or slums as he exposes the life on Bangkok's streets.

We see a sleeping couple, the woman on a bamboo platform, the man suspended in a hammock above what looks like detritus in a canal below. 'Under Taksin bridge' is an oblique shot of a man with his head on a rock for a pillow. People who have succumbed to the enervating pace of life are a favourite subject, the photographer does not have to worry unduly about the reactions of his subjects.

'Old Man and His TV' works well as a portrait of a slum dweller (p. 95), though the image may have been more effective with less heavy shadow round the subject. It is regrettable that such structured portraiture appears less often in this book than the grabbed shots of people going about their daily activities.

On the next page we see a man rowing his wife and their child in a small wooden boat on a *khlong*. Between them a large TV sits on the floor of the boat. The blurring in this allegorical image may have been intentional as it appears to have been used in some other images in this work.

A photographer trying to freeze the dynamics of street life can seldom order his elements. When he is shooting from a car, chaos is virtually guaranteed; thus a few of Manit's captured moments are soft or out of focus—the photographer caught in his own rush. Nevertheless, Manit's takes in the icons of commerce, faith, classical art and fashion and fuses the comic and the grotesque. Though some images seem to miss the target, there is much in this book to stimulate young photographers and connoisseurs of the bizarre.

It is a pity, then, that the binding is so poor that the cover separates from the book with barely a few pages turned. In her short introduction to this work, Ing K makes no excuses for Bangkok. She likens it onto a 'Sodom and Gomorrah reborn', a fascinating city whose hysterical heart brings vitality to life. With nothing

more than titles of images, locations and dates for captions, it is left to the images themselves to evoke the bewildering variety and paradoxes of life in Bangkok. Perhaps it is fitting that this low cost volume will fall apart so quickly: an allegory in itself.

Surat Osathanugrah's *Vanishing Bangkok* (Swasdee 2001, full page plates 44 cropped or part page images, 210 pages, 25x25.3 cm., paperback) similarly illustrates the dangers of weak binding on heavy paper books.

On page 11 is an image of a wizened if not grumpy looking monk paddling a small boat along a *khlong*. The scene is very strongly backlit, with the side of the boat, foreground reflections on the water and other highlights around him turning into paper white, rendering detail in the shadows on his face and robes and the water hyacinth he is towing past. The rest of the image is in deep shadow if not pure black, with only a hint of gray tones showing the retaining wall of the *khlong* and other elements in the background. Perfectly composed according to the third rules (elements like the horizon should fall across one or two-thirds of the height of the page—not across the middle), this picture alone makes the book worthwhile, especially if the folios were to separate and you wished to frame a strong image.

On the facing left page (Khun) Surat reproduces an extreme crop from the main image. It shows the side of the boat and the foreground reflections, omitting the monk, the water hyacinth and the rest of the image. Printed at the foot of the left page, the cropped image is small enough to allow the rest of the page to remain as white as space. Given already strong focus on the subject in the main image, this crop adds nothing.

On page 30 another reproduced tight crop focuses on the back of a bicycle loaded with newspapers. Perhaps this should have been printed large across the right facing page instead of, or in addition to, the main image of the newspaper vendor and a random pedestrian shown almost in silhouette against a bright receding background. Without any publishers imprints one can only assume that it was Surat's decision to regularly use this stylistic device of reproducing tight crops from the main image in the facing page.

Good images are rendered all the stronger by the choice of printing papers and darkroom technique. Particularly effective are some of the shots showing life along the canals. But just as some of Surat's images are very strong, a few seem so weak that it is surprising to find them on the pages of a book at all, unless they were printed to reassure others that even a photographer who was born in 1929 (according to the jacket flap) can also make mistakes. At least two of the images of boys playing in the *khlongs* fit into this category.

Surat also shows a fondness for animals, particularly dogs and cats, and, though well executed, one really wonders what this has to do with a vanishing Bangkok. The same can be said about the portraiture and some of the other subjects in this book—there are some lovely images, but unless the world stops turning, boys will be boys and old people will be wrinkled in a Bangkok fifty years from now. Perhaps this is the crux of a criticism of this book, and that is the title seems inappropriate. The Bangkok that Surat portrays is a Bangkok of people living along the *khlongs*, working in markets and living in wooden houses. Vanishing this may be, but not more or less than the Bangkok of Manit. What we see might better be described as the city of small things. Surat's Bangkok—a place beautifully rendered in black and white, a touch of sepia toning emphasising the warmth Surat feels for his subjects.

Bangkok Subways, Skytrains and a City Redefined (photography by Nic Dunlop, text by John Hoskin. Curiosa, Bangkok 2000. 97 plates, 125 pages, 22.9x30.4 cm., hardback)

This work suggests that it will take cataclysmic change before the subjects in his book disappear, and the book appears as solidly bound as one hopes its subjects have been constructed.

Like Ing K, who wrote that she both loves and hates the city, Hoskin writes that Bangkok is "essentially a paradox that makes it simultaneously wondrous and woeful in equal regard ... Bangkok is singular in the extent of its innumerable contradictions and the way it makes them seem consistent".

Entitled *A City Redefined*, the first section discusses the unprecedented change brought

about by the building boom and the infrastructure projects of the last twenty years. Hoskin suggests that the scale and pace of change is more significant than its nature. He sees continuity in the way monks bless the "parvenu high-tech towers" that "thrust their way onto the skyline", hemming in the temple roof. The Buddhist acceptance of impermanence allows the Thais to more easily demolish the old for the new. The changes are more of a veneer over the enduring Thai character that has long adopted and adapted alien styles. The more the city changes, the more it stays. Bangkok, Hoskin would seem to say.

Around the City looks in more detail at the form of the change. Hoskin comments on the way quality in design and construction became subordinate to quantity as new money drove the construction boom of the 1980s.

Not only were styles outrageously mixed, proportions were completely ignored. In classical Greek architecture proportions were essential to a structure's success in both aesthetic and functional terms. With Bangkok, only surface appearances have been aped without regard for the structural purpose of size, scale and stylistic devices. As such proportion becomes mere ostentation.

Hoskin explains that the architectural aberrations resulted from the lack of a building code, a decline of traditional patronage of major architecture, and from a disregard for "climate, economy, energy conservation, appropriate technology, durability and safety". The fashionable field of architecture became increasingly competitive, constraining architects from advising their high status clients about their needs. "Clients deserve the building they get" stated architect Robert Boughey quoted by Hoskin.

Spread across two pages each, the first image in the book is a close crop of people in traffic and the second is of a skytrain construction site at night—the big problem followed by the technological fix as it were. On the following pages images of labourers on construction sites progress to shots of a slick finished building.

Dunlop is adept at seeking out locations for his compositions—construction worker labour

on a balcony jutting high above a street across which a BMT train is travelling over a bridge. His images rise above the chaotic to support Hoskin's definition of architecture as being about ordering part of the environment for the benefit of the people. Hoskin suggests that Bangkok has resisted this ordering architecturally, but he praises the expressway system as an advance through the city's architectural maze.

Dunlop's images in *Above the City* portray the swath of the skytrain across the urban landscape. Glistening trains sweep through graceful curves above the city like heralds of an engineer's paradise. Hoskin reinforces the upbeat note by reminding us that it was a singular feat of engineering to have completed the skytrain without a road closure and with but one fatal accident involving a member of the general public below.

Beneath the City will be an eye-opener to those who have not seen images of the subway project under construction. The text necessarily includes more technical description, which Dunlop's emphasises through skillful use of the available lighting used by the contractors underground. His shots of workers labouring with mattocks are particularly evocative. Hoskin's text assures us that undersea tunnel-boring techniques have been used and that entrances have been built one metre above the highest flood levels recorded. Only time will tell if the system is secure in a flood-prone city in this century of global warming.

But for the fact that Dunlop's photographs are in black and white, his images of workers scaling skyscrapers, building flying arches and toiling in endless tunnels could be on the pages of a company's annual report. Chaos is reduced to rubble littering the floor of construction sites as the engineers' visions levitate into the sky. The layout of the book down to the selection of the typeface reinforces a sense of soundness and solidity.

Yet construction is something many of us try to ignore. We block out the noise and rush past the obstacles they present to our progress. How come, then, that this paean to construction was published? The answer lies with the sponsors—Siemens, Italian-Thai, Louis Berger and others. Who approached who is uncertain, but what has resulted is a well-crafted vision of

their fixes to Bangkok's chronic traffic problems.

Expressways and mass transit systems are not the only result of city traffic. Philip Blenkinsop's *The Cars that Ate Bangkok* (White Lotus, Bangkok, 1996 limited edition 1000 copies, 100 pages, 21x29.5 cm., hardback) stands in dark contrast to optimistic visions. It focuses, quite literally, on the impact of cars on people, and describes itself as the 'true and terrifying pictorial account of the Thai people's struggle for survival in the age of the automobile'.

The book is an eclectic pastiche of photomontages, cartoons, posters, typewritten notes, hand-written sheets, newspaper cuttings and photographs. To flip through the book is to have text and images rushing at you like two-stroke motorcycles from a Bangkok traffic light just turned green. As if smothered in exhaust fumes the whole book is grey, for Blenkinsop uses crumpled silver foil and the cloth used for wrapping accident victims as page background instead of white space. From the bloody cloth



Tuk-tuk at traffic lights (Photo by Philip Blenkinsop)

on the end-papers, the imagery is as relentless as rush-hour traffic.

Many pictures appear without captions—they are hardly necessary—or with news stories pasted to one side. Text is either hand-written or typed, not typeset, and often reversed as white on black. Blenkinsop uses cartoons and other ready-to-hand graphics such as traffic signs to add to the imagery. Sometimes the decision-making behind the layout is strange, such as when Blenkinsop's hand-written text is reproduced a little too small to be conveniently read.

Blenkinsop's writing appears in the introduction, as a feature story about motorcycle racing at night, and as a short description of a fatal accident he witnessed. In his feature he describes how a midnight motorcycle racer is doomed to have an accident:

His beast knows the limit is over. Fear and dread permeates the air and that chilling scream of the doomed animal claws at my stomach and for a moment checking the bite rising in my throat, I worry I may be sick. Like a dentist's drill gone mad and broken-through to the other side, there's no escaping that scream of the ensuing nights of tossing and turning as it fills your dreams with realities you don't want to face.

Would readers want to face Blenkinsop's takes on reality?

Of about one hundred photographs printed larger than quarter page, eighteen are stark portrayals of accident victims. A half-page image of a student lying on the road face up with half his skull crushed is accompanied by a handwritten caption which says "Thais who've heard it like to tell me that a head under truck-wheels sounds like a watermelon exploding". The other half-page image is a detail shot of the tyres that crushed the student. A stain on the tread is highlighted by a white arrow and the word "BRAINS" imposed over the image. "MANGEING wheels. Tread LIKE carnivore's



(Photo by Philip Blenkinsop)

TEETH" is written in the bottom corner. At times Blenkinsop wallows in the gross.

While the "comic-strip collage" format is followed throughout, it is more than a parade of bloody scenes, however. Several shots taken by

Blenkinsop at night depict the crowds on Bangkok's streets in a manner that neither Manit nor Dunlop achieved (or perhaps wished to show). Blenkinsop's shot of people with a huge road roller on a trailer behind them aptly symbolises the crushing effect of Bangkok's traffic on its citizens and makes an interesting comparison with the first image in Dunlop's work. The next page shows three people on a motorcycle riding through rain at night, the raindrops forming squares of light when Blenkinsop panned and exposed with his flash. Whatever the images, the photography is always interesting, always good.

We learned about the "body-snatching" work of the Poh Teck Tung Foundation, about *malaeng wun*—or "flies" as motor-cycle racers are known in Thai slang—and about the use of amulets and yantras in place of safety belts and helmets. But above all we learn about Thailand's traffic accidents. Double-page collages of newspaper articles and photo-montage deal with the horrors of Thailand's highways from trucks reversing over victims to finish off the job to policemen losing their patience and shooting at traffic offenders.

Whether readers would want to face this imagery is in part answered by Blenkinsop and his publisher, for each volume in this limited edition has been numbered by hand. If he could do this work over again, would Blenkinsop take the same approach? Would a wider view that looked on the Thai love affair with the motor vehicle in general, perhaps to have made accidents just one part of a larger work, have been better? As it stands, the book is as blunt as the fender of a jeep.

At the beginning of the work Blenkinsop writes about why he started the project and about the senseless waste of Bangkok's traffic. It was as if the story had taken control of him as vehicles had taken control of Bangkok. He describes how the faces of the victims in his darkroom brought their souls into his home, and how he could not just leave them on prints in a dark drawer. By letting them into his work, he felt that if one person were dissuaded from a reckless act behind the wheel, this would in some way help set those souls at rest. Let us hope that this is so.

With this work, brutal and flawed as it may be, Blenkinsop has achieved something just in

getting it published. Though this book has probably sold slowly, if only to other photographers and serious collectors of photo-essays, it is no bad thing that the world has this dark record of such madness. For when, if ever, Thai traffic is as regulated as Singapore's, then this book will stand as an interesting historical document. The comic-strip approach may be just Blenkinsop's reaction to the morbidity of its subject, but he will have moved on and any similar work he publishes in the future should be the greater for it.



(Photo by Philip Blenkinsop)

Could the same be said for Nick Nostitz's *Putpong: Bangkok's Twilight Zone—a Photographic Diary* (Westzone Publishing Ltd, London 2000). Over 130 plates include some color images, 204 pages, 20.5x25.5 cm, hardback)?⁹ The choice of cover photograph suggests something unusual—an oblique shot taken from near ground level showing the back of a woman's legs as she is about to walk past a spirit house into a hotel. Background signs in English show that the shot has been taken in a tourist area, but otherwise the image says little more until you open the book and see the continuation of the photograph on the back cover. There is a dog (out of focus and over-exposed) and partly hidden signs indicating the entrance to a coffee house. The sleazy tone of the work is set.

We are assured on the jacket flap that this book's author is a member of Hamburg's Focus Agency, that this project is the 'fruit of seven year's work' and that the book is about more than just 'prostitution and exploitation'. It is about addiction to a 'subculture where the exchange of money for sex is only superficial'.



1/2/96

* I'M NOT HAN,
I'M NOT UNHAN,
I'M AN ANGEL! *

(Photo by Nick Nostitz)

The book opens with the author introducing himself with a typewritten text on yellowing paper pasted photographically onto the book page with masking tape. The text concludes:

Bangkok's twilight zone Enjoy, but never love. Love makes you vulnerable. Love is the only thing that can't be bought here and, if found, is usually an illusion. Hedonism is pure—if rarely simple. You can leave the zone but it will never leave you.

Beneath the first of three pictures of the author on the facing page the caption runs "on acid in star of love 8/2/94". On the following pages more typewritten sheets tell us about "Jeff the philosopher", "George the alien from a faraway star", and other "Bangkok warriors". The adjoining pictures of these people are a varying quality that is typical of the photographic work in this book.

Though quite a few of Nostitz's images do stand as satisfactory portrayals of their subjects, too many photographs appear to be the work of an amateur. Subjects are blurred or badly exposed, compositions are unbalanced or just plain bad. Between the chapters of black and white photography appear full-colour double-page spreads. Probably chosen to strike a mood, these colour pictures only make matters worse. Evidently short of images to fill the folio, six full pages of white gloss at the back of the book are devoted to just 10 words, and three of them are vulgarities. One remarkable thing about this book, then, is that someone paid for publication of these images in such a format.

Most photos depict sordid scenes and not-quite pornographic actions of Thai people and Western foreigners involved in the night life of Bangkok. We learn something about Patpong and prostitutes, but we learn much more about foreigners' lost in the "twilight zone", and the reader can only wonder at the relationships Nostitz cultivated as he recorded his photographic diary. While it should be noted that photography is not often welcomed in Bangkok's bars, it is only regrettable that after so many years Nostitz couldn't have shown better photographic results.

In fairness to Nostitz, he makes no excuses for himself. Having barely finished high school he writes how he chose hedonism on the road to the East in preference to university, job and family. After five dissolute years dissatisfaction drove him to Bangkok, where he became intoxicated and addicted to Bangkok's bar scene.

There is nothing remarkable in this story of a Western kid going astray. Over the decades many have similarly lost themselves in Bangkok's low-life for a time, but mercifully most only exposed themselves in private. To those who have never seen this kind of thing, the scenes shown on these pages will be disturbing if not merely disgusting; to others they will be interesting if not fascinating. To this reviewer's knowledge it is the only extensive photo essay in black and white published on this topic.

On the jacket flap Nostitz states that he wished to show the stages of "an emotional addiction" of everyone caught up in the night

life. Whether "bar girls and transsexuals, transients and tourists", they were all "refugees from their respective societies" caught in "an endless cycle of happy illusion, ecstasy, intensity, doubt and despair". A more concise explanation might suggest that most of the locals were there because of perceived necessity while the foreigners were there by choice. A more polished presentation with better images might have obfuscated what Nostitz and his publisher have most successfully shown, and that is how otherwise fortunate Westerners can bring degradation upon themselves in Bangkok.

The photographers in these works deliberately set out to look at aspects of life in Bangkok. The five volumes reviewed stand apart from the proliferation of souvenir and coffee-table editions portraying the refined and beautiful. One may not like what the books show, but the cameras lies less in these pages than on those presenting 'beautiful Thailand'. This makes a welcome change in a culture where so much depends upon appearance. The images of Bangkok emphasize the bizarre if not the horror, and yet they also show how humanity expresses itself despite the city's overbearing burden on the senses. Like plants that sprout through cracks in concrete, it would seem to defy all logic.

How is it that people in Bangkok as portrayed in these books seem the very opposite of 'soulless'? Is it by ignoring that which upsets that people can stay sane in such oppression of the senses? In her introduction to Manit Sriwanichpoom's work, Ing K provides an explanation:

Rationalisation is our specialty of genius. It's the key to our happy attitude. Every version of reality, every excuse however preposterous, is valid to its author. It will be listened to and, if not actually believed, looked on indulgently. Even hard reality — can be adapted to, made bearable, even amusing, given the right slant. All we have to do is persuade ourselves that it is so.