



## REVIEWS

**Jean-Pierre Pautreau, Patricia Mornais and Tasana Doy-Asa, *Ban Wang Hai: Excavations of an Iron-Age Cemetery in Northern Thailand*, with a foreword by H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn. Chiangmai, Silkworm Books, 2003. pp. iii + 250. 1,200 baht.**

This book is the product of a collaborative research project between the Division of Archaeology, Fine Arts Department, Thailand and a team of French archaeologists from the Guimet Museum, Paris and the French National Center of Scientific Research, with support from the French Government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is the second part of the joint project which commenced in 1985–1995. The first part revealed the Paleolithic culture at the Ob Luang archaeological site in Hot district, Chiang Mai province; this second expedition, conducting research between 1996 and 1998, has revealed the extensive Bronze and Iron Age site at Ban Wang Hai, Muang District, Lamphun province. Together, the two projects have made a valuable contribution to knowledge of the prehistory of northern Thailand and the material culture present here around 2,000 years ago. In the words of H.R.H. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn who kindly contributed the foreword to the volume, the ‘fruitful collaboration’ between Thailand and France has illuminated ‘our understanding of our history and our civilization.’ (p. v)

The book is printed in both English and Thai, thus enhancing its accessibility to a range of scholars and students interested in the varied cultures of this region before it became known as Thailand. It contains a useful bibliography (pp. 245–48) for those wishing to explore further in the archaeological discoveries of northern Thailand, and related regions, without attempting to overwhelm the reader with the vast amount of material appearing in this field. The editors have thoughtfully presented their discoveries in a logically structured manner, focusing on site excavation history, stratigraphy, funerary deposits, grave goods, general comments, and catalogue of material finds. The beautiful illustrations ably support the meticulous description of each item, grave, burial jar, bead, ceramic, or jewellery which the team’s excavations revealed. In a very concise introduction, (pp. 1–2) Jean-Pierre Pautreau succinctly identifies the significance of the team’s discoveries at Ban Wang Hai in the context of our knowledge of the Bronze and Iron Age cultures of northern Thailand. He states: ‘Iron Age burials were rare in the northern provinces; however, there are some inhumations at Ban Yang Thong Tai (Doi Saket) and at Ban San Pha Ka (San Kamphaeng). The cemetery at Ban Wang Hai, with more than thirty graves, some with interesting ceramic items, ornaments, and iron tools, is now the

major reference in the north.’ (p.1) The editors are careful to present their findings in a restrained tone, resisting the temptation to claim more than might be able to be justified by the evidence.

Particularly impressive is the assemblage of material culture, giving the reader an insight into the quality of life of the people of Ban Wang Hai. They valued the beautiful beads, some in stone, some in glass, agate or cornelian, possibly traded from other areas; they wore bronze bracelets decorated with spherical bells of a type found in the late levels of Ban Chiang, northeastern Thailand (p.57). The patterns of decoration on other bronze bracelets and glass earrings are said to connect the site to the Dong Son culture of north Vietnam. Other finds included necklaces of glass beads and disk-shaped shell beads, found often with the graves of children. Cornelian and agate beads were evidently accorded only to children as they are found only with children’s graves. Based on analysis of the beads, the team believes that while the stone beads were made locally (p.46), the cornelian and agate beads came from other parts of Southeast Asia or India (pp.45, 49). Some adults also wore necklaces of blue-green or red-orange, occasionally yellow or purple glass beads numbering from 100 to 342 beads in each necklace (p.45).

The Ban Wang Hai site clearly attests to interment of iron instruments with the dead. Many graves included the *vek*, or iron age reaping sickle similar to those used today to harvest rice (pp.38–44).

The editors describe in detail the placement of this implement: against the head, right side of the head, in contact with the hipbones, against the right arm, at the level of the elbow, or against the right thighbone. The *vek* was clearly an important tool for this Iron Age culture. The significance of the *vek* resides in the fact that to date no other similar instruments have been found at other proto-historical Thai sites (p.39). Other iron instruments found interred with the graves included knives for everyday use or for harvesting knives, large bifid blades with tangs, which may have been either daggers or spearheads, a chisel about 326 mm in length, leather knives or axes, and a blade with concave asymmetrical edges 320 mm in length and 96 mm in width.

The weapons found in the graves of the people of Ban Wang Hai include iron spearheads with circular or oval shaped sockets, and a sword with a long leaf-shaped blade. All these iron instruments were found usually placed on the right side of the dead.

A special feature of this book is the concerted attempt by the authors to compare their discoveries to those at other Iron or Bronze Age sites in Thailand—at Ban Don Ta Phet, Noen U Loke, Ongbah, Khao Chamuk, Ban Na Di, Non Pa Kluai, Non Muang and Ban Chiang. This deepens the sense of a widespread Iron and Bronze Age culture in this region, trading artifacts or raw materials between sites or with the outside world. The possible links between the people of these proto-historic cultures



and their present-day descendants are also occasionally suggested as the authors draw comparisons with the customs of some of the ethnic minorities living in northern Thailand.

The authors' close examination of the more than thirty graves at Ban Wang Hai gives a sense of the lifestyle of the people, their short lifespans, high infant mortality, and care for children. Many of the graves contained the remains of very young children, often associated with urn burial, sometimes interred alongside an adult, possibly the mother. Observation of spatial proximity between the graves of some adults and children led the team to suggest that these represented groupings of the dead. One group is distinguished from the others by its east-west orientation and three metre wide band of cleared ground separating it from the other graves. The authors resist the temptation to speculate on the reasons for this apparent grouping and separation from the other graves.

Of significance, however, is their conclusion that the interments of 27 individuals on their backs, with upper limbs close to the chest and lower limbs stretched out, took place in coffins made of hollowed-out tree trunks and that burial pits were utilized (p.16). The archaeological team believes that the outlines of a burial container could be seen in the surrounding sediment for four graves in the western sector of trial excavation no.7. For others, taphonomical evidence is used, as attention is drawn to the visible, lateral effects of

compression on the majority of skeletons at the level of shoulders or upper limbs, and restriction on the head. The authors draw attention to similar customs of burial in coffins of hollowed out, boat-shaped tree trunks practiced by the Akha ethnic group living in the Chiang Mai region today (p.20). Moreover, they emphasize that whilst no similar examples occur in cemeteries in the Thai lowlands, they are numerous in the Mae Hong Son region. Carbon dating placed these protohistoric coffins between 200 AD and 900 AD, and that of burnt bone deposits at Ban Wang Hai to between 400 AD and 700 AD (p.21). It appears that the containers usually held only one individual, but were made sufficiently large to include others if necessary, as in the case of one such burial which included two children and one adult.

The richness of the material culture presented by the Thai-French archaeological team whets the reader's appetite for further such discoveries to bring to light the full extent of the Bronze and Iron Age civilizations in Lanna and the links with other areas of Thailand. The discoveries of the joint research project have provided much valuable new evidence of these civilizations. It is hoped that this volume will provide inspiration for further investigation by similar joint research teams to unearth the story of Thailand's proto-historic heritage.

Helen James

**David Snellgrove**, *Angkor Before and After: A Cultural History of the Khmers*. Bangkok, Orchid Press, 2004, pp. 250 pages, 10 maps, 2 figures. Preface by Olivier de Bernon (in English and French), photographs by Suthep Kritsanuvarin

*Angkor—Before and After* traces the Khmer civilization from its known origins to the present day in seven chapters and an epilogue. The text is illustrated with an impressive 243 quality photographs, which are almost all in colour and are conveniently integrated with the text. The British author, David Snellgrove, is a Doctor of Literature of the University of Cambridge, Professor Emeritus of the University of London, a Fellow of the British Academy and the recipient of a Royal Asiatic Society honorary award in June 2004. Snellgrove is a renowned scholar of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism and the author of several books, including *Khmer Civilization and Angkor*, which comprises extracts from his earlier book, *Asian Commitment: Travels and Studies in the Indian Sub-Continent and South-East Asia*. The author resides part-time in Cambodia and travels extensively within the country. To his credit, the octogenarian has visited most, if not all, of the sites mentioned in *Angkor—Before and After*. Snellgrove's writing style of intermingling tales of his travels with his copious knowledge of the region adds a personal element to the book.

The author acknowledges some inevitable overlap with his earlier publications. This new book, however, includes recent findings, new interpretations of previously published research and the text and photographs of temples in outlying regions are expanded substantially. The 'Before and After' Angkor sections of the book are particularly enlightening as they are periods of Cambodian history with little published information, partly because on-the-site research was not possible for over two decades due to civil war and its aftermath, but also because the majority of publications have focused on the Angkor period (AD 802–1432).

Snellgrove correctly refers to mainland South-East Asia (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Malaysia) as Indochina, but the term is more commonly associated with only three countries—Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam—that were administered by the French from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century.

The first two chapters discuss Khmer civilization from its origins to the early ninth century. While the author accepts that Indian influences penetrated Khmer linguistics, written scripts, culture and religions, he also presents a convincing argument for indigenous origins of other aspects of the Khmer civilization, which contribute to counteracting the long-held theory that the Khmers were subsumed by the culture of India. He reports on a recently discovered and excavated Iron Age burial site in Banteay Meanchey



Province, north-west Cambodia. A variety of bronze artifacts, ceramic vessels, beads and iron tools and weapons was discovered, which give clues to the social and economic conditions of the period. The site is believed to have been occupied in the early centuries AD, according to Dougald O'Reilly.

Two examples of expanded text and photographs on pre-Angkor sites are Angkor Borei and Sambor Prei Kuk. Angkor Borei and temples in the environs are located south of Phnom Penh in Ta Keo Province, near the Vietnamese border. Recent research has determined that Angkor Borei may have been the centre of the early third century state identified as 'Funan' in Chinese annals. A canal connecting Angkor Borei to the trading port of Oc-geo, which was the dissemination point of Indian influence in to Cambodia, has been discovered. The author's detailed coverage of the seventh century site of Sambor Prei Kuk, which was largely inaccessible until recently, is a welcome addition. The Hindu site, dedicated to the god Shiva, is located in Kompong Thom Province east of the Great Lake, and served as the capital for Ishanavarman I (reigned c. 611–c. 635).

The identification of several temples at Angkor, which are located in the vicinity of the Western Baray and are dated before the early ninth century when the Angkor period began, are of particular interest and have attracted considerable research recently. Snellgrove has assigned the name 'Baray Group' to these

temples on the basis that the construction of the vast Western Baray in the eleventh century contributed to the disuse of the earlier temples. The 'Baray Group' comprises the seventh century Hindu temple of Ak Yom, dedicated to Shiva (which may be the earliest example of a pyramid temple in the Angkor area), Prasat Prei Kmeng, Phnom Run and Prasat Kok Po.

The remaining chapters progress through Khmer history chronologically and highlight kings recognized for their outstanding achievements. The author acknowledges that 'in writing a cultural history of Cambodia one is bound by the very nature of the stone inscriptions' because they constitute the only extant source that enables one to present a chronological genealogy of the Khmer kings and their reigns (p. 43). As such, the author correlates relevant inscriptions, genealogy and sculpture with specific sites throughout the text. These chapters draw on previously published information but also include details of recently accessible and little known sites such as the Kulen Mountain, Kabaal Spean (the 'River of a Thousand Lingas'), Beng Mealea, Koh Ker, Preah Khan of Kompong Svay, Preah Vihear and sites in Battambang province. Surveys of temples in this province have only recently begun after mine clearance was completed following the civil war. The associated ceramic finds in this province are of great interest as they provide material evidence of the period in which they were used. The author also dis-

cusses temples built on the Khorat Plateau, northeastern Thailand, which was part of the Khmer empire between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.

The type of irrigation system used at Angkor, the canals and interconnections and the function of the *barays* ('man-made reservoirs') are hotly debated topics in Khmer studies today. Snellgrove presents the prevailing views of several previously published scholars on the subject, but he does not mention the most recent findings of a joint project between the University of Sydney and the Ecole Française d'Extrême Orient (EFEO). Teams employing the use of radar ground-images and conducting extensive excavations in the environs of Angkor and around the *barays* have unearthed a wealth of information on this topic of irrigation and have also delineated the perimeters of the city of Angkor and determined some causes for its demise.

Chapter Five focuses on the activities of two great Khmer kings—Suryavarman II (reigned 1113–1150), builder of Angkor Wat, and Jayavarman VII (reigned 1181–c. 1218), builder of the royal city of Angkor Thom. Snellgrove concludes the chapter with an interesting assessment on the religious beliefs of Jayavarman VII. He installed Mahayana Buddhism, rather than Hinduism, as the state religion at the beginning of his reign and expressed its ideals in his architectural sites. The court rituals, however, remained Brahmanical. Jayavarman VII is noted for building 102

hospitals throughout the kingdom and 121 rest houses along the royal roads extending from the capital of Angkor to the provincial centres. The chapels at these sites were dedicated to the Buddha Master of Medicine (*Bhai-sajyaguru*), who is considered part of the Mahayana Buddhist pantheon, yet in this period he is depicted in the posture and hand position of a typical image of the seated Buddha, Shakyamuni, of the Theravada school. His right palm is turned outwards in the gesture of generosity, and he holds a begging bowl and a *myrobalan* fruit, a typical medicinal plant. Snellgrove, therefore, believes Jayavarman VII may have had the vision that Theravada, not Mahayana, Buddhism was the form that held promise for the future. And indeed it is the one practiced in Cambodia today.

Even though the Khmer capital did not move southward from Angkor until sometime after 1432, the period 'After Angkor' in this book begins from the time of Jayavarman VII's death, as no more major temples were built. Only one first-hand extant account from this period is known and it was written by Zhou Daguan, a Chinese emissary who resided in Angkor for about one year, from 1296 to 1297. He kept a detailed diary of his observations and translations of Zhou Daguan's notes are included in this book, which shed light on Angkor at the end of the thirteenth century.

Chapters Seven through the Epilogue cover the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries and begin with a



detailed historical summary of the period, which consisted of frequent internal wars and invasions from Thailand and Vietnam. In the late eighteenth century, Siem Reap (including Angkor) and Battambang provinces belonged to Thailand. A treaty of 1907 between France and Thailand returned the provinces to Cambodia, where they remain today. This section also includes a discussion of the Riemker, which is the Khmer version of the great Indian epic, the Ramayana, and how they differ. He identifies indigenous additions and changes and notes similarities between later versions of the Riemker and scenes depicted on the bas-reliefs at Angkor Wat.

Some statistical errors, typographical mistakes and inconsistencies, which should have been picked up in the copy editing or the proofreading, detract from this otherwise excellent book. The author writes, for example, that he visited some thirty-two Khmer sites in north-west Thailand, but surely he means north-east, the area of the greatest Khmer occupation (p. xv). The middle name of the author, Lawrence Briggs, is Palmer, not Stanley (p. xvi). The French established a protectorate over Cambodia in 1863, not 1853 (p. 1). Angkor was founded in the early, not the late, ninth century (p. 4). The distance between Prasat Andet and Kompong Thom differs in the text (p. 33) and the caption (p. 33). The pyramid shrine of Rong Chen, which was built for the first *devaraja*, was consecrated on Phnom

Kulen in 802, not 902 (p. 51, plate 56).

The uneven content of the captions is annoying. A colour photograph of a corpse and the remains of funereal offerings, for example, gives no details as to its date or location (p. 8, plate 9). Conversely, the caption for the early shrine of Hanchei (or Hanchey), a little known and rarely visited site, is highly descriptive and informative (p. 36, plate 39). Plate 181 (p. 154) is a photograph of the Buddha that is depicted above the door on the south, not east side, of the *gopura* as described in the caption. Omission of page numbers in numerous instances is irritating to the reader and references to the illustrations in the text would have been helpful.

At least one change since publication has out-dated the text. The author writes: 'it is regrettable that no English edition has so far been produced' of the French guide book by Maurice Glaize (first published in 1944). An English translation of the entire book is, however, available on the Internet and can be downloaded at: <[www.theangkorguide.com](http://www.theangkorguide.com)>

Detailed endnotes, a glossary, bibliography, appendix and index complete the text. The content of this book surpasses the author's previous publications on the subject and reveals Snellgrove's individual style and his immense knowledge of Khmer civilization.

Dawn F. Rooney

**Claudine Bautze-Picron**, with photography by Joachim Karl Bautze, *The Buddhist Murals of Pagan Timeless vistas of the cosmos*. Bangkok, Orchid Press, 2003, pp. xiii + 242, 254 plates and 5 maps.

The Buddhist murals of Pagan compose a unique ensemble in the Buddhist world of the eleventh to the fourteenth century, giving a glimpse of past splendor and showing that Pagan held a major political, spiritual and artistic position during the period. Claudine Bautze-Picron in her research on Pagan murals did not confine herself to just a small select grouping as has often been the case with earlier art historians, but over a five year period studied the numerous monuments that cover the whole plain of Pagan. In her learned and eloquent text she points out that the monuments once must all have been gorgeously adorned, thus constituting evidence that painted ornamentation was a fundamental part of the sanctuary, giving its real meaning to the temple. Her method of research was, as she puts it, to 'dissect' the monuments. The first step was to isolate the various components of the different iconographic programs painted on the walls and ceilings of the temple in order to identify the respective iconographies; the next step was to reconstruct the complete program and understand its meaning in the light of its various components. She maintains that while this dissection is required, it should never blind one to the fact that the inner space of each monument has

to be apprehended globally, in its total, since this reveals the monument as a visualization of the cosmos and reflects the cosmological nature of the Buddha and his identification with the monument which in turn becomes the living presence of the Buddha.

In Chapter 1, The Murals of Pagan, Presentation, the author reviews the works of historians and art historians on the Pagan murals. She criticizes Gordon H. Luce, writing that he was a historian, not an art historian, because in his monumental work, *Old Burma-Early Pagan*, he claimed a Mon ancestry and style for the murals of early Pagan, dating them to late eleventh to mid-twelfth century, on the basis of glosses in Mon describing the murals. What, she asks, can the languages used in glosses tell us about the inspiration of the murals and monuments containing them? Then she goes on to relate that their style and part of their iconography of the period clearly find their inspiration in the Pala art of eastern India, in Bihar and Bengal. Hers is a long-needed stylistic and iconographic interpretation and one that she is very qualified to make. Indeed, the main focus of her research for many years has been the art of eastern India, about which she has published a large number of articles considering stylistic as well as iconographic issues. That research culminated in the catalogue *Eastern Indian Sculpture in the Museum of Indian Art, Berlin*, Berlin, 1998. She writes that Pagan in the late eleventh to mid-twelfth centuries appears to have been a place of transition where Indian





models, both contents and form, were assimilated and transformed into a genuinely local formulation. That formulation coincided with the introduction through Mon Thaton to the south of new spiritual values based on the Sinhalese Theravada canon, at times in both Mon and Pali scripts. The peak of the Indian and Mon influences was reached in the monuments built to the east of the walled city of Pagan and around Myinkaba south of the city, after which they started to dilute. Often, moreover, the same monuments, such as the Abe-ya-dana or the Kubyauk-gyi, combined the ground plan traditionally considered to be of Mon origin and murals of east Indian style and iconography based on Sinhalese Theravada texts. She emphasizes that while eastern Indian styles and iconography were employed in the murals, the iconography does not relate to the Vajrayana Buddhism then blossoming in eastern India. This is significant because, beginning with Charles Duroiselle in an article in the *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India 1915–1916*, several scholars have suggested evidence of Vajrayana Buddhism in the Abe-ya-dana and other murals. One of the iconographic programs, she points out, in constant use, which finds its source in Bihar, is the depiction of the eight great events. Bodhgaya was the center of the Buddhist world at this time and thus the presiding Buddha in each monument was represented seated under the Bodhi tree and touching the earth with the fingers of his right hand as in Bodhgaya rather than having his hands in the meditating posi-

tion as was traditionally depicted in Sri Lanka. Indeed she points out that what has survived from the murals of Sri Lanka before the eleventh century reveals inspiration entirely different in iconography and style from that in the late eleventh century Pagan murals, one which relates to South Indian tradition. However, the presence of *Jataka* murals in the entrance hall, a frequent feature at Pagan, found its first rendering in Sri Lanka.

Later murals clearly reflect a blossoming of growing local stylistic and iconographic traditions as best illustrated in the monuments of Minnanthu east of the walled city of Pagan and can be globally dated to the thirteenth century. King Narapatisithu (r. 1174–1211) had sent a mission to Bodhgaya to get a precise picture of the political situation where Buddhists were practically thrown out of their homeland and the entire north was swept by Muslim armies. From this grew a new perception of Pagan as the center of the Buddhist world and serving as a substitute for Bodhgaya and a place of influence for Buddhist monks from all over the world.

The author points out that specific topics were illustrated in the murals of Pagan, where they were distributed according to very strict rules. A major theme illustrated in practically every monument is the life of the Buddha. This is the subject of the latter part of Chapter I and Chapters II, The Miraculous Life of the Buddha. The plates accompanying the text are arranged in such a manner that the reader witnesses the changes in styles of painting over the two



centuries. Included are welcome scenes from the rarely published murals in Yanzatthu in Sale at the south of the Pagan plain. The reference work for the life story, including the 'seven stations' or weeks after Enlightenment, was the fifth century Pali text, *Nidana-katha*, in the Theravada Buddhist canon and the author quotes liberally from the N.A. Jayawichrama translation of it. One of the most important ideas introduced in *The Buddhist Murals of Pagan* is that at Pagan the Buddha was perceived as a cosmological being, while the temple was felt to be a reflection of the universe. The cosmological Buddha is usually associated with Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism rather than Theravada. The author, however, prevails when she provides sufficient evidence from the *Nidana-katha* text and murals based on it. She argues that in the five dreams that the Bodhisatta had prior to Enlightenment given in that text reveal the cosmological nature of that Bodhisatta and in turn that of the Buddha:

'While he was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, the great earth was his couch; Himalaya, king of mountains, was his pillow. His left hand lay in the Eastern Ocean, his right hand lay in the Western Ocean; his feet in the Southern Ocean. That was the first dream. While he was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, a creeper grew up and out of his navel and stood touching the clouds. This was his second dream that appeared to him...While he was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, white grubs with black heads crawled from

his feet to his knees and covered them. That was the third dream...While he was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, four birds of different colors came from the four quarters, and, as they alighted at his feet, they all became white. This was his fourth dream...while he was still only an unenlightened Bodhisatta, he walked upon a huge mountain of dirt without being fouled by the dirt. This was his fifth dream...'

Depictions of the Buddha reclining on cosmic waters as in the first dream with a creeper growing out of his navel as in the second and birds as in the third and fourth appear in murals in Maung-yongu and Monument 585 north of Minnanthu and Yanzatthu at Sale. These paintings relate to a particular understanding of the Buddha as a cosmological being arising out of cosmic waters. In the Monument 585 mural flames accompany the image. In fact the Pagan murals often depict the Buddha with flames bordering his body. The author writes, 'The presence of flames irradiating from the entire body of the Buddha clearly relates this type of image to the miraculous deeds of Savatthi, but we may wonder whether selection of this particular iconography was not made to meet another criterion, to illustrate the Buddha irradiating light erect at the very center of the universe. Over and above the fact that these images evoke the fire miracle of Savatthi, the overall presence of flames recalls the 'six glories', or rays of different colors irradiating from the body of the Buddha, or the golden light pervading the universe at specific mo-

ments in the Buddha's life, such as his birth or his awakening.'

Chapter III, The Previous Lives of the Buddha, is devoted to murals based on the Jataka stories in the Nidana-katha. The author demonstrates that the early murals had various scenes of each Jataka depicted and how their importance was marginalized until only one scene from each of the 547–550 Jatakas was given, and in the late murals often only a small number of Jatakas were painted and placed in a broad frame surrounding a depiction of the Buddha.

Chapter IV, Dipankara and the Buddhas of the Past - Metteyya, Buddha of the Future, describes the 28 Buddhas of the past in accordance with the information in the fifth century Pali *Buddhavamsa*, yet another text in the Sinhalese Theravada canon. The Bodhisatta Metteyya, prophesized by the Buddha Gotama in that text as the Future Buddha, appears in but a few murals and not with the 28 Buddhas who are arranged in rows.

Chapter V, Iconographic Ornamentation, addresses specific iconographic motifs: Sakka and Brahma, the pair of Bodhisattas, the monks, the army of Mara, the sun and the moon, the Budhapada, the universe, Lake Anottata, and the horoscope.

Chapter VI, The Ornamental Decoration, stresses that the ornamentation is not purely decorative but constitutes a frame, a scaffolding behind the official iconography and articulates the different zones of the programs from each other. The author urges that the decorations be carefully analysed and their

evolution traced since that it would appear that their evolution could help suggest a chronology for the monuments.

Chapter VII, The Murals of Pagan, the Guide, introduces the reader to the sections of the Pagan plain where monuments with murals are extant and guides the reader through the most important murals.

*The Buddhist Murals of Pagan* has an extensive and excellent bibliography and almost all the author's comments are accompanied by one if not more references placed at the rear of the text in the endnotes. Preferably the latter should have been placed at the end of each chapter. This reader found that photocopying the endnotes and keeping them to one side while reading the text made following the many references quoted much easier.

Augmenting the text are Joachim Karl Bauze's superb photographs. He has illuminated for the reader many of the wonders of Pagan murals, especially what is at times fantastic ornamentation high in the ceilings, which is hardly visible to the viewer.

*The Buddhist Murals of Pagan* is not for the casual tourist but rather to be savored by a scholar familiar with the Pagan monuments and their murals or for the uninitiated who want to learn in depth about them on the spot with the book in hand.

Virginia McKeen Di Crocco

**Dirk Van der Cruysse**, *Siam and the West, 1500–1700*, translated by Michael Smithies. Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 2002, pp.xviii + 565, Bt.1,125.

This book, written by Belgian Dirk van der Cruysse, was published in French by Fayard in 1991, and now appears in translation. Van der Cruysse is an expert on the history of French culture and literature, teaching as professor at the University of Antwerp. He has also written the biography of the Abbé de Choisy, highlighting the historical period of Louis XIV and Siam in the seventeenth century. Even though there are so many detailed books about this famous period in Thai history already, especially from Professor Michael Smithies, who lives in Thailand, the compilation of the events including the Portuguese sixteenth century in Asia is highly important and very useful to understand the coming of European influence and mercantilism to Southeast Asia.

Without going into the complex theme of mercantilism, the book's contents are divided into five parts, neatly separating the Portuguese, Dutch and English contacts with Siam from those of the French missionaries and merchants, leading to the first French embassies before the great embassies of 1685 and 1687, so finally coming to the end of the mirage with the revolution in Siam of 1688 and its aftermath. All the notes for the preface, twenty chapters and epilogue are listed at the end of the book, making it very easy to read. Besides, there is a detailed chronology, starting with Afonso de Albuquerque's embassy

to Siam in autumn of 1511 and concluding with the arrival of Father Tachard in Versailles on 12 June 1700. Also, there is a list of the kings of Ayutthaya from 1351 to 1767, when Ayutthaya was destroyed by the Burmese. The huge bibliography includes manuscript sources of Paris, The Hague, Rome, Merseburg and London. Personnel, geographical and shipping indexes bring the whole paperback volume to 565 pages, including two poorly checked maps and some pages of black and white photos.

Interesting to note is that chapter one, which introduces Portugal's golden age, starts with the mention of the Venetian merchant Nicolo di Conti, who seems to have been the first European traveller in Siam, three-quarters of a century earlier before the discovery of the sea route to the East Indies and the amazing geographical expansion of the Portuguese about 1500. With the conquest of Malacca in 1511, the Portuguese established themselves in Southeast Asia and sent Duarte Fernandes to the court of Ayutthaya, the Siamese capital. In 1516, it was Duarte de Coelho who signed a treaty of friendship and commerce between Portugal and Siam, thus selling firearms and opening the door to Christian missionaries.

How was this brilliant achievement of the Portuguese possible? One reason is obvious, but never mentioned in European history books. In the fifteenth century, the Chinese ruled the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. Under the command of the Yunnanese eunuch admiral Zheng He, huge fleets made



seven epic voyages, reaching the east coast of Africa and beyond. So, when finally the Portuguese sailed around the Cape of Good Hope in 1488, they could easily utilize the experiences of the Chinese before them to reach India, the ports of Southeast Asia and China.

The most important portrait of Siam was compiled by the Portuguese Fernão Mendes Pinto, who spent some ten years in Siam in the middle of the sixteenth century, but the clear observation of Portuguese decline became a leitmotiv in the accounts of other travellers, who reached the East Indies and Siam after him. Van der Cruysse singles out Jacques de Coutre, a native of Bruges, who spent eight months in Siam in 1595 during the reign of King Naresuan, who until today is the model king for the Thai army. The author does not mention Peter Floris, who visited Bantam, Pattani and Siam on his voyage to the East Indies in the *Globe*, 1611–1615.

In chapter 3, van der Cruysse describes the founding of the Dutch VOC in 1602, also the beginning of the end of dismantling the Portuguese colonial empire to the profit of the Dutch. Worth noting is the embassy the King of Siam sent to Holland in 1608, where it spent seventeen months. But the Dutch had no great expectations of trade with Siam, and in 1619 Batavia, the present-day Jakarta, became the nerve center of the company, concentrating on trade with China instead.

In chapter 4, the establishment of the English East India Company in Siam is explained. Ralph Fitch was the first

foreigner to reach Chiang Mai, coming in 1586 from Burma. In 1612 the English reached Pattani and Ayutthaya, where the King of Siam allowed them to open a godown in competition with the Dutch, and immediately started trade with Japan. The year 1616 saw the foundation of the Danish East India Company whose Dutch captain Roland Crappé reached Tenasserim in 1621. But fame fell to Joost Schouten of the Dutch VOC to become a well-informed observer at the court of King Prasat Thong, when he published his book on Siam in The Hague in 1638. Even more extensive is the description of the Kingdom of Siam by Jeremias van Vliet, the new director of the VOC in Ayutthaya 1636–1641. Under King Narai, the Dutch obtained diplomatic immunity with a treaty signed on 22 August 1664. The private trading in which the English EIC engaged, especially from Mergui, forced King Narai to look for a third nation to counterbalance the influence of the Dutch. So, finally the French were to appear.

The French missionaries who arrived in Ayutthaya in 1662, preceding the diplomats, traders and soldiers of Louis XIV, seemed to have been sent by heaven. It was not by accident that King Narai enlarged and improved the town of Lopburi as his second capital, similar to Versailles near Paris, the French capital. Nicolas Gervaise described Lopburi in his book, published in Paris in 1688. Louis XIV had meanwhile made official the existence of the French CIO to trade in the Indies on condition of propaga-

ing the Christian religion. Madagascar was established as a French colony, before Surat in India became the way into Siam, leading to the first embassies between France and King Narai in part three of the book, followed by the great embassies in part four.

The young trader André Deslandes-Boureau left Surat on 2 May 1680, reached the newly established colony of Pondichéry on 31 May and continued for Ayutthaya on 16 June. On 3 September a ship of the CIO showed the French flag at the mouth of the Menam Chao Phraya. The missionary Laneau prepared the meeting with the Phra Khlung official and also with King Narai. After that followed the first Siamese embassy of 1680–1681, which owing to shipwreck never reached France. It was due to the Greek Constantine Phaulkon and his irresistible rise in the favour of King Narai that a second Siamese embassy of 1684–1685 was sent to Louis XIV, described by the priest Vachet.

The idea of converting the Siamese monarch to Catholicism was raised with the Abbé de Choisy and then a great embassy assembled under the guidance of the Chevalier de Chaumont. Many accounts were written of this first embassy, which on the outward journey was accompanied by six Jesuits sent by Louis XIV to China in the year 1685. Interesting to note is that at the same time a Persian embassy was on the way to convert King Narai to Islam.

The voyage to Siam was aptly described by Father Tachard and published in Paris and Amsterdam in 1686.

However, the era in which the French missionaries, diplomats and traders were the only ones in Siam was close to the end. After the Siamese embassy to France January 1686–February 1687 led by Kosa Pan, was to come a military phase, with the assistance of the Society of Jesus. The intriguing Greek Phaulkon had worked well behind the scenes to sell Siam to France.

The La Loubère/Céberet embassy and Father Tachard's second voyage to Siam March–December 1687 was more arduous than the first. Kosa Pan was worried about the French proposal to give to their king's troops Bangkok and Mergui as outposts. But after the arrival of the mission in Siam, Father Tachard and Phaulkon agreed on a treaty allowing the late disembarkation of the French troops in Bangkok with General Desfarges. Céberet was sent to inspect the port of Mergui in Tenasserim. On his return to France in 1688, La Loubère wrote his masterly book about the Kingdom of Siam, published in Paris in 1691.

In chapter twenty of his book, van der Cruysse relates the events of 1688, General Desfarges' treason, Phetracha's coup d'état and the end of Phaulkon. Finally, after the death of King Narai, the French endured the siege of Bangkok, suffered an inglorious departure and withdrew from Mergui. The end of the mirage had arrived.

From a very different point of view is a description of the Kingdom of Siam, made in less than a month's stay in 1690 by the German Dr. Engelbert Kaempfer,



posthumously published in London in 1727. In addition, Father Tachard had the opportunity of further voyages to the East Indies. After having visited Ayutthaya again for three months in 1699, he died in Chandernagor in Bengal in 1712. The local events in the eighteenth century Siam led to the destruction of Ayutthaya by the Burmese

and the resurrection of independence under Phaya Taksin. But this is another story, which Dirk van der Cruysse in this well-researched book has intentionally left out. Much credit goes to Silkworm Books for publishing this book.

Reinhard Hohler



**Father Adriano di St. Tecla**, *Opusculum de sectis apud Sinenses et Tunkinenses (A Small Treatise on the Sects among the Chinese and Tonkinese): A study of religion in China and North Vietnam in the eighteenth century*, Olga Dror, translator and annotator; with collaboration of Mariya Berezovska in Latin translation; with a preface by Lionel M. Jensen; foreword by Keith W. Taylor. Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 2002, pp. 239.

From the 1960s into the 1990s, much English-language scholarship on premodern Vietnam fell under the influence of an imagined vision of the past. This vision pictured a world in which two distinct nations, Vietnam and China, stood side by side, each maintaining its own unique culture. For the Vietnamese this was difficult, given China's size and influence. However, Vietnam's long tradition of "resistance to foreign aggression" ensured that despite the odds, its independence and unique culture endured.

In recent years scholars have gradually started to acknowledge that this picture of the past was based more on emotion and interpretation than on a culturally-informed reading of the historical evidence.<sup>1</sup> This is fortunate, for if scholars today were still in the grips of this paradigm, it is unlikely that they would have taken the recently-discov-

ered treatise of an eighteenth-century Italian missionary by the name of Father Adriano di St. Tecla as seriously as it deserves, and hopefully will be.

Adriano di St. Tecla was a member of the Order of the Discalced Augustinians, also known as the Barefooted Augustinians, named for their austere practice of not wearing shoes. He arrived, of course, unshod, in the northern part of Vietnam, which was then known to Europeans as Tonkin, in 1738 to engage in missionary work. There he remained until his death in 1765. In between these two dates, Adriano di St. Tecla drafted a treatise in vulgar Latin which he entitled *Opusculum de sectis apud Sinenses et Tunkinenses (A Small Treatise on the Sects among the Chinese and Tonkinese)*. This work examined the religious beliefs and practices of the Chinese and Tonkinese, that is, the people living in what is today the northern part of Vietnam, and was based on Adriano di St. Tecla's own observations, as well as his extensive perusal of the writings of Vietnamese and Chinese authors as well as European missionaries.

That we now know of this book and can read it in English translation is thanks to the painstaking efforts of Professor Olga Dror, a recent graduate of Cornell University. Dror discovered this text while conducting doctoral research in the archives of the Missions Étrangères in Paris. Realizing its impor-

<sup>1</sup> For a succinct critique of this earlier scholarship, see Grant Evans, "Between the Global and the Local there are Regions, Culture Areas, and National States: A Review Article," *Journal of South-east Asian Studies* 33.1 (2002): 147–162.





tance, Dror, with assistance from Mariya Berezovska, set about translating the entire work. She also provided extensive annotations and a lengthy introduction. This in itself is an astonishing accomplishment for a graduate student and speaks volumes about Dror's knowledge and abilities. The ultimate treasure in this book, however, is Adriano di St. Tecla's treatise and its depiction of the religious world of eighteenth century Tonkin.

Adriano di St. Tecla divided his work into an introduction and six chapters. In his introduction, Father Adriano places the religious world of eighteenth century Tonkin in the context of the rise of idolatry following the flood. In particular, he relates how following the flood the legendary early Chinese rulers Yao, Shun and Yu continued to believe in one god, but that the people in China subsequently turned to idolatry. Adriano argues that this condition only worsened as the centuries passed, so that by his day it was rampant in every area of society.

From this general setting, Adriano di St. Tecla then examines what he perceives as different "sects" of idol worship. He begins with "the Sect of the Literati," or what we would today refer to as Confucianism. However, rather than focusing on the aspects of Confucianism which are so well-known to us today, namely its socio-political doctrines, Adriano di St. Tecla details its religious aspects. This turns out to be one of the greatest strengths of Father Adriano's book, for in the pages that follow he describes countless ritual practices in what can only be described as

photographic detail. This is particularly the case in his second chapter on "the Sprits and their Cult" in which the author discusses the worship of such spirits as Heaven and Earth, tutelary deities and figures like Ma Yuan, the Chinese general who in the first century A.D. suppressed the Trung sisters' rebellion, an episode which Vietnamese today consider to mark the beginning of their hallowed tradition of "resistance against foreign aggression." Again, the details that Adriano di St. Tecla provides in describing some of these rituals make this work one of a kind.

From investigating these various examples of spirit worship, Adriano di St. Tecla then turns to "the Sect of the Magicians," or Daoism. Like the chapter on Confucianism, readers familiar only with the philosophical aspects of Daoism are in for a treat, for Father Adriano's attention here falls not on the musings of Zhuangzi but on the "magic" performed by Daoist priests. This is followed by a short chapter on "Fortune Tellers and Diviners." Western missionaries rarely deigned to comment on what they saw as such blatantly "superstitious" practices as fortune telling, so Adriano di St. Tecla's devotion of a chapter to this topic is unique. Unfortunately this chapter was apparently left unfinished, and although intriguing, is quite short. The fifth chapter of Adriano di St. Tecla's treatise focuses on Buddhism. Here he discusses the history of the religion, its transmission to China, and aspects of its daily practice in rituals in Tonkin. The work then ends with

a short, because it is incomplete, chapter on Christianity.

While the details that Adriano di St. Tecla provides about religious practices in eighteenth century Tonkin are priceless, the other great strength of this book is the direct way in which it challenges the manner in which so many of us have been programmed to view the premodern history, culture and religious practices of this part of the world. Adriano di St. Tecla knew nothing of the academic categories that we have created for ourselves in recent decades, and his observations belie their limitations. Readers whose minds still contain discrete mental categories labeled “Confucianism,” “Buddhism,” “Daoism,” “Vietnam,” and “China” will find the borders of these categories crumble as they read through this work, to say nothing of the distinction between “great” and “little” traditions. In their place they will be confronted with the syncretic *mélange* of beliefs and practices that made up premodern life in Vietnam and China, and indeed, all throughout Asia if not the entire world.

While this reviewer cannot comment on the quality of the translation from the original Latin (the Latin text is included in the book, however, for those who wish to check), Olga Dror clearly demonstrates tremendous skill and intelligence in the numerous notes that she has appended to the translation. With an eye to philological precision, Dror marshals a working knowledge of eight languages to leave no point, no matter how minor, unexplained. While at times this passion

for notation tends toward excess (is it really necessary to note that Fujian is a province?), at others it takes the reader down unfamiliar trails through such fascinating topics as Vietnamese historical linguistics. Specialists are therefore encouraged to forge their way through the familiar, for they will also find much here that is new.

Ironically, while Dror regales her readers with a cornucopia of new facts and insights, she herself does not appear to have fully grasped the import of the work that she has translated and so dutifully annotated. In her lengthy introduction, we see Dror struggle with some of Adriano di St. Tecla’s observations. She is at pains to explain, for instance, why the “Vietnamese” might have worshipped a “Chinese” like Ma Yuan, the general who suppressed the Trung sisters’ rebellion. The answer to this conundrum is best found not in Dror’s searching questions and hypotheses about this issue, although the reader learns a tremendous amount in the process, but in the observations recorded here by this eighteenth-century barefoot missionary. For not only did Father Adriano di St. Tecla know nothing about the academic categories that we have created for ourselves, but I suspect that he would have found them downright perplexing as well. This is what makes his work so valuable, and why we are so deeply indebted to Professor Olga Dror for discovering, translating and annotating it.

Liam C. Kelley



**Choi Byung Wook**, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mang (1820–1841): Central Policies and Local Response* Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 2004, pp. 226.

Choi Byung Wook's study of what he calls the "Gia Dinh Regime" is a major contribution to our understanding of Viet Nam during the late eighteenth century and the first four decades of the nineteenth. Indeed, *Southern Vietnam under the Reign of Minh Mang* is the first book-length study of this significant period to appear since Alexander Woodside's *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* (Harvard, 1971) was published more than thirty years ago. Wook's work takes its place alongside a small but growing body of English-language scholarship exploring regional differentiation within Viet Nam. Li Tana's *Nguyen Cochinchina* (Cornell SEAP, 1998), was among the first such works, offering a detailed study that argued for a Dang Trong distinctiveness against a long-standing and nationalist-inspired assumption of Vietnamese unity. Wook's study is in some ways a natural extension of Tana's work. Chronologically it picks up almost precisely where Tana's work ends, at the outbreak of the Tay Son uprising in the 1770s. More importantly, Wook takes Tana's focus on the southern half of what would become Viet Nam and narrows it further still to look at just a part of that Nguyen realm and to show how it was transformed as a result of the events set in motion by the

Tay Son. The author offers a nuanced account of the regional dynamics that defined southern Viet Nam, and of the changes that gradually developed in its relationship with the imperial center during the reign of the second Nguyen emperor, Minh Mang (r. 1820–1841). Ultimately, he shows that it was only during the reign of Minh Mang that there was a shift away from the rough and ready political structures of Gia Dinh, and toward the more bureaucratically-structured, Confucian-influenced approach to governance being advocated by the court.

The book is divided into two parts, the first describing the emergence of a Gia Dinh regime and its political, social, and cultural bases, and the second relating Minh Mang's efforts to assert central control over a region that retained its autonomy into the early decades of Nguyen rule. Although these efforts began in the 1820s, the real point of rupture is not Minh Mang's ascension to the throne in 1820, but rather Le Van Khoi's Gia Dinh rebellion of 1833 and its suppression. Wook shows that while the Gia Dinh region was already feeling central pressure during the early years of Minh Mang, it was not until the death of its autonomous overlord, Le Van Duyet that the Hué court could more firmly exercise its authority. While the rebellion sparked by this growing pressure has been previously described, Wook's study is the first to offer a detailed exploration of the circumstances that provoked it. He describes how growing pressure from Minh Mang, and

his attempts to impose political and social orthodoxy both spurred the violent rebellion by Christians, ethnic Chinese, convicts, and others, and then defined the direction of Nguyen policy in its aftermath.

One of Wook's central points concerns the existence of a unique Gia Dinh identity, one shaped by historical, cultural, and ethnic circumstances. This identity, he suggests, first gained a political coherence during the late 1780s, as Nguyen Anh worked to create a Gia Dinh-based coalition to defeat the Tay Son rulers. Wook shows that after 1802 the Hué court viewed this region as distinct, referring to its inhabitants as *nam nhan*, (lit. "southern people"). He argues that although this term had once been used to refer to those living in the entire territory of the former Dang Trong (the Nguyen lords' realm), its meaning changed in the nineteenth century to designate only those living in the Gia Dinh region, also called Nam Ky. Even so, Wook's discussion begs the question whether a sense of "Gia-Dinh-ness" ever emerged in this area. That is, did people recognize themselves as "Gia Dinh" people, or as "Dong Nai" people, as some outsiders labeled them? Although the term Gia Dinh was used historically to describe this region, it is a geographical area whose borders are in places quite indistinct. What tied these people together seems to have been an amalgam of geographical proximity, cultural openness, and a degree of ethnic tolerance in a highly heterogeneous place. Whether these factors actually coalesced

into a distinct regional identity is open to debate, and while it is likely that they did not particularly identify with the central court at Hué, or view themselves as "Vietnamese," the question of just how they did view themselves remains. Indeed, Wook's argument for Gia Dinh self-awareness, rests on what Thongchai Winichakul has called "negative identification." People of the region identified themselves as being those who were "not central or northerners."

Having argued for the existence of a distinct southern region, Wook shows how the Gia Dinh regime, long dominated by local military figures and political leaders, retained its autonomy into the nineteenth century through and beyond the Gia Long reign (1802–1820). He describes a region that continued to rely on local leaders and to preserve existing social patterns even as an emergent Nguyen regime sought to create a stronger central administration that could eventually rein in such autonomy. During Gia Long's rule the prominent autonomy of Gia Dinh was in part a result of that emperor's debt to the people of the southern reaches of his newly unified kingdom. This was his power base, one he had nurtured through long years of war and hardship. Thus, the autonomy that Gia Dinh retained after 1802 reflected not merely the weakness of the newly-established central court, but also the favor of the new ruler. Gia Long's successor Minh Mang had been shaped by long residence in the central court at Hué, and did not share his father's debts to the southern Gia Dinh



region. The new emperor reflected that it was time to complete the political integration of Viet Nam, and as Wook shows, it was efforts toward this objective that substantially contributed to the violent upheaval of 1833.

Wook argues that Minh Mang's shifting attitudes toward the Gia Dinh region can be traced on a number of policy fronts. He considers the emperor's attempts to "cultivate" southerners by inducing them to follow the cultural lead of the court, and especially to participate in an educational system that would prepare them to take part in the civil service examinations. Wook argues that the emperor accepted existing stereotypes of Gia Dinh people as lazy, arrogant, and addicted to extravagance, and that this drove his decision-making (p. 102). He suggests, quite plausibly, that there was considerable indifference among southern elites to the civil service examinations and state service, as trade and commerce were frequently more appealing avenues for personal advancement. He concludes that Minh Mang's aggressive promotion of education and the examinations created a shift in attitude that increased Gia Dinh participation in state education and the career advancement it offered.

Wook also studies the policies of ethnic assimilation pursued by Minh Mang, arguing that there was a concerted effort to integrate ethnic groups such as Khmers, tribal peoples, and ethnic Chinese into the Vietnamese cultural sphere. In a sense, this was closely linked to the policy of "cultivation" that itself

sought to bring southern "Vietnamese" into that same sphere. That is, while Vietnamese living in this region were being cultivated through the emperor's policies, those even further beyond this cultural realm were also being slowly drawn into it. Wook shows that Minh Mang pursued demographic strategies, including creating new political units that joined Vietnamese and ethnic communities, and educational ones that emphasized instruction in written Chinese characters and the spoken Vietnamese language. Ultimately, he suggests that this policy stirred considerable tension within the region, as Vietnamese came to define themselves as subjects of the court, distinct from other ethnic groups.

He cites considerable ethnic conflict in the 1830s and 1840s as evidence of this, challenging Communist historiography that argues for close solidarity between ethnic groups and Vietnamese peasants united against oppressive landlords. While I share Wook's skepticism about such interpretations, I am not convinced that the Gia Dinh people, long accustomed to living in an ethnically heterogeneous environment, easily or completely abandoned their ability to live alongside other ethnic communities. Minh Mang's policies may have spurred some opportunistic land-grabbing, but whether their impact truly transformed Gia Dinh society is less clear. More fundamentally, I question Wook's assertion that these policies spurred a growing sense of Vietnamese identity. I do so both because Wook's sources for this claim

are quite limited, and because I suspect that the ethnic distinctions he appears to take for granted were not nearly as clear in early nineteenth century Viet Nam.

Wook's final chapter, "Land Measurement and the Protection of Private Land Ownership," looks at the impact of Minh Mang's efforts to create new cadastral records for land in the southern regions. He notes that Minh Mang's land registration program created circumstances that reinforced existing patterns of private property holding, rather than assuring the expansion of public land as some court officials had apparently hoped. Indeed, the new, more precise plotting of property divisions only further facilitated private land transfer. Wook's analysis of the consequences of the program is convincing, though at one point he argues for a distinction between a "government" that sought to expand public land holdings, and an emperor who favored private property. In the context of what was essentially an absolute monarchy, such a distinction is blurred at best, though it hints at divisions within the court that Wook also does not elaborate.

While broadly convincing, Wook's work does have a number of flaws. First, the author does not always question the extent to which Minh Mang's policies were actually implemented. No doubt many were, but to what degree? For instance, Wook discusses Minh Mang's "Ten Moral Maxims" (pp. 119–121) and suggests that they had a considerable impact, but he then concedes that it is not clear whether local officials were

regularly reciting and explicating them as required. If the policies were not being fully implemented, can such changes as Wook discusses be ascribed to them? It is of course much easier to find information about policy statements than about policy implementation, and yet I would like to see a higher degree of skepticism by the author regarding the extent to which policies were put into practice. Secondly, although Wook argues that Minh Mang's policies transformed the Gia Dinh region, tying it strongly to the central court, I am skeptical about the degree to which the area was fully integrated into a supposedly unified realm. Rather, I see a strong southern distinctiveness in culture and political outlook that survived these policies and endured into the twentieth century. Wook might not disagree with this observation, but he does not spell out his own sense of the limitations of the southern transformation.

Finally, a few technical notes. In many places this book still has the feel of a dissertation. Too many sections begin with a bald statement of the author's intentions, and the overall writing style lacks the refinement of a well-crafted book. The section headings and sub-heads frequently look like lists (a,b,c), and occasionally are poorly related to one another, or are nested in peculiar fashion. On these points the author would clearly have benefited from better editorial oversight. There are also a number of rather poorly constructed tables (89–90; 92–93; 111–112) that spill over several pages, leaving the reader



hunting for column labels to make sense of the material. While none of these technical concerns obscure the author's clearly-argued theses, they do give the work an unfinished feel.

These shortcomings aside, Wook's study is a significant addition to the field of precolonial Vietnamese history. His arguments are important, nuanced, and wide-ranging, offering substantial in-

sights concerning the complex relationship between the Gia Dinh region and the Nguyen central court. This study will become a standard reference for scholars exploring the first decades of Viet Nam's nineteenth century. I hope that it will spur the writing of further Vietnamese regional histories that continue to disaggregate what has too long been treated as a unitary realm.

George Dutton

**Yos Santasombat**, *Lak Chang: a reconstruction of Tai identity in Daikong*, Canberra, Pandanus Books, 2001, pp.181, Bt. 695.

Yos Santasombat is Professor of Anthropology at Chiang Mai University and obtained his PhD from the University of California at Berkeley. He published his study about Lak Chang in Thai first in Bangkok.

As the village Lak Chang is in the Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture of Yunnan province in south-western China, it is the first village study of the Tai outside Thailand and written by a Thai scholar. The author spent between 1997 and 1998 in rural China and another two years at work in libraries and archives.

The book comprises an introduction, seven chapters, bibliography and index, but a listing of photographs is missing. The preface is written by Dr Andrew Walker as director of the Thai-Yunnan Project of the Australian National University, Canberra, making the work a significant contribution to the ethnography of the Tai people in a wider perspective.

Not going into the subject of the different meanings of Tai, Dai, and Thai, it becomes clear in the course of the study that there is a characteristic inter-connection between the Han Chinese world on one side and the Tai world on the other side. But, even then, there are the common roots of Tai culture still easy to recognize, such as wet rice cultivation, kinship terms and spirit worship.

Finally, the book is a comprehensive model for working in the borderlands of northern Southeast Asia and southern China, where there is somewhere the homeland of all Tai people.

In the introduction, the author gives an overview of the history of the Tai Yai to which ethnic group the villagers of Daikong belong. Tai Yai live also in Shan State, Burma, and in Mae Hong Son province, Thailand. In China, they are called Tai Dehong and split in two groups called Tai Nua and Tai Dai.

There are different local Tai Yai chronicles, but most interesting is the legend of the Muang Mao chronicle mentioning a son of a Naga princess as an appointed ruler in AD 762 by the King of Nan Chao further to the east. The legend of a Naga princess is well known from the Kingdom of Funan in the Mekong Delta already 2000 years ago. With the defeat of the Nan Chao kingdom in 1253 by Kublai Khan's Mongol army, it seems that the Tai Yai of Muang Mao became vassals of the Mongols and later developed into different Buddhist principalities in Shan State, Burma, and also in Western Yunnan along trade routes to India.

By a much later date, with the construction of the Burma Road, a marked Chinese influence set in, so it seems timely to analyse the ethnography of the Tai Daikong, before they get swallowed by the Chinese even further.

Chapter One gives the setting of Lak Chang village in Muang Khon district of eastern Daikong prefecture. After the Chinese Revolution of 1949, Muang



Khon was called Mangshi and Muang Mao district became Ruili. In 1953, the *chao-fa* rulers were made district rulers and their abundant land confiscated and given over to co-operative farming and communes.

During the Cultural Revolution, the Buddhist monastery in Lak Chang was destroyed. But nowadays the peasants get allocated their own rice fields and Buddhism is practiced again. A capitalistic market economy emerged, which is duly explained in Chapter Two of the book.

The main part of the book describes the ethnography of Lak Chang with the kinship and marriage regulations in Chapter Three and the political and social organizations in Chapter Four. In Chapter Five the author focuses on religious beliefs and rituals and mentions gender roles and gender relations. Finally, continuity and reconstruction of Tai ethnic identity is the theme of Chapter Seven.

The Tai ethnic group reconstructs and reinterprets its own history with the help of folk tales and chronicles. The most

famous Tai Yai hero is Chao Sua Kham Fa of the Muang Mao kingdom which disintegrated in the sixteenth century. There are records of many battles with the Chinese and Burmese, until the Tai Yai were broken up into small states under the rule of China and Burma, a situation which persists up to the present time. Only rice, *poi* (from Burmese *pwe*) festivals, Buddhism, strict marriage rules and traditions will guarantee the future of the Tai Daikong communities.

There are some minor flaws and printing errors in the bibliography, such as the entry Garthew (read Carthew) and Reynard (read Renard). But all in all, we have to be grateful to the Thai-Yunnan Project Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University, Canberra, for publishing this valuable and outstanding work of Professor Yos in an easily readable and handy volume.

Reinhard Hohler

**Peter Jackson**, *Buddhadasa: Theravada Buddhism and Modernist Reform in Thailand*. Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 2003, pp.200, Bt.625.

The second edition of Peter Jackson's well-known study of Buddhadasa has been released ten years after the venerable teacher's death. The merit in Jackson's new edition is not its novelty, but in the re-introduction to Buddhadasa's new approaches to Buddhist textual exegesis, social ethics, and monasticism. The new edition will hopefully inspire a new generation of critics who respect Buddhadasa's legacy by questioning the very foundation of his arguments.

Jackson made no changes to the contents of the first edition even though it was published in 1988 by the Siam Society (as *Buddhadasa: A Buddhist Thinker for the Modern World*). The only new content is a short preface and an extensive epilogue. The epilogue traces the last days of Buddhadasa's life, the controversy surrounding the use of extraordinary medical means to keep him alive for several weeks after his stroke in May, 1993, and short sections on a wide range of subjects including: "Buddhadasa Bhikkhu's legacy for Thai Buddhists," "Buddhadasa and Thai Buddhist identity in the era of globalization," "Buddhadasa's legacy for Western students of Thai Buddhism," "Buddhadasa and political dissent," and "Buddhadasa and the Thai monarchy" among others. Two sections that are particularly novel in scope and subject

are "Buddhadasa, the Thai working class and the normativization of rationalist monks," and the related "Buddhadasa's will." These sections are succinct and important for an understanding the various accounts of Buddhadasa's life. Jackson cites Grant Olson's notion of "normativization": Olson and Jackson believe that Buddhadasa, despite his "intellectual accomplishments" and "rationalism" had incorporated "traditional types of devotion" and was seen as an enlightened *arahant*, a powerful magician, a "great warrior monk," and "holy man." Buddhadasa's "scholarly importance," Jackson asserts, only exists "within a small and limited, albeit growing, circle" of those intelligent enough to understand that he was opposed to "traditional religious beliefs and practices." (292–293) Jackson acknowledges that Buddhadasa's writings have become more widespread in the past few years among a diverse range of people, but that there is still a disconnection between his stated "rational" views on a number of subjects and the way many ritually treat him.

Buddhadasa's last will and testament emphasized that there should be no Pali chanting and no holy water sprinkling at his cremation. He wanted his funeral to be simple. After he was cremated he wanted his ashes divided and placed in three locations in Suratthani province. Jackson accurately conveys Buddhadasa's attitude towards what he saw as superstitious magical practices and the arbitrariness of chanting Pali when most cannot understand its semantic meaning.



However, he seems unwilling to question Buddhadasa's (and apparently his own) condescending approach. He unabashedly associates Buddhadasa with the liberal intellectual elite of Thailand and reifies the simplistic division between "traditional Buddhism" and "socially engaged Buddhism" or "Dhammic Socialism." He makes no effort to examine critically possible contradictions between Buddhadasa's stated "non-attachment" to his physical body and his request to have his ashes scattered near the remains of his parents. He does not question the manner in which Buddhadasa claimed to represent the Southern Thai poor, but gained his greatest admirers and hagiographers among Western or Western-educated intellectual elites.

This division perpetuates the myth of an essential Thai Buddhism or even essential Buddhism. It depicts "blue collar" Thai "traditional" Buddhists as unsophisticated, superstitious, and materialistic simpletons. In this way it differs little from Orientalist interpretations of Thailand as a place in which the pure Indian and Sri Lankan Buddhism has been corrupted by local belief. It quietly depicts the masses of Thai Buddhists as static, supine, and impacted by globalization, consumerism, and their own ignorance. This is surely not Jackson's intention and not reflective of his diverse and sophisticated scholarship. However, Jackson's new epilogue tends to be little more than an informative hagiography, which laments the poor masses whom he unwittingly

suggests could not possibly understand Buddhadasa while he was alive and certainly have not since he has died. What needs to be questioned is the notion that there is an essential Buddhism that Buddhadasa supposedly represented, not a criticism of everyday, "common," "blue collar," Thai religious belief and practice based upon a dubious heuristic division. Jackson is quick to vilify the important role protective magic and relic worship plays in Thai Buddhism. There is little effort to understand or respect the insight and methods of these supposedly "superstitious" common folk.

However, there is little point in attacking Jackson for what he did not question or critically assess in this book, especially in light of the great contributions to the understanding of Buddhadasa's life that it does make. Jackson's study differs from the equally excellent work of Louis Gabaude and Donald Swearer in the way he seriously emphasizes Buddhadasa's pedagogical and exegetical methods and his incorporation of Zen into his teachings. Buddhadasa's emphasis of the term "*chit wang*" or emptiness and his incorporation of the teachings of the seventh century Chan master Hui Neng into his teaching reflects a trend in modern Buddhism by others like Luang Pu Tien and Maechee Sansanee Sathirasut. These thinkers want to move beyond the stereotype of Theravada Buddhism as excessively conservative, canonical, isolated, and mundane. Jackson offers insight into the creative, and often polemical, ways in

which Buddhadasa interwove Theravada and Mahayana beliefs and broke down the questionable divisions between them. He also places Buddhadasa's use of Zen teachings in its historical context. He notes that these teachings were in direct criticism of the notorious Phra Kittivuddho, who represents the hyper-nationalistic and religious conservative wing of modern Thai Buddhism. Jackson gives the reader a clear understanding of Buddhadasa's exegetical methodology. This method divides the words of the Buddha into either *phasa khon* (in common/worldly language) or in *phasa tham* (supra-mundane/timeless/the language of "people who have gained a deep insight into the truth, Dhamma") (83). Jackson notes that this method was drawn in part from the *Netti-Pakarana*. Finally, Jackson must be credited with generating much of the great interest in Buddhadasa's theories of socially engaged Buddhism and his campaign against consumerism since the first edition in 1988. There have been numerous attempts to convey the "heart" of Buddhadasa's wide-ranging and often conflicting views; Jackson's is rare in its blend of sophistication and clarity. It is an excellent companion study to Gabaude's in-depth *Une herméneutique bouddhique contemporaine de Thaïlande : Buddhadasa Bhikkhu* (Paris, Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1988).

Still, Jackson's work is not rare in the way that it avoids questioning Buddhadasa's theories themselves. He certainly notes when Thai conservatives

like Kukrit Pramoj, Phra Kittivuddho, Winai Siwakun, and Anan Senakhan have attacked Buddhadasa, but instead of acknowledging the legitimacy of some of these criticisms (or rather choosing more complex alternative voices), or questioning Buddhadasa's logic or often dubious historical and textual evidence himself, he continually falls back into the role of a hagiographer (96–97). There are plenty of hagiographies of great Buddhist monks; this process is as old as Buddhism itself. However, in order to respect Buddhadasa's teachings perhaps we need to question him. I imagine, Buddhadasa, whose name translates as "slave of the Buddha" would acknowledge the need to question every teacher and teaching. For, as the Buddha said in the Kalama Sutta, "it is proper for you to doubt, to be uncertain...do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing, nor upon tradition, nor upon rumor, nor upon scripture, nor upon surmise, nor upon axiom, nor upon specious reasoning, nor upon bias to a notion that has been pondered over, nor upon another seeming ability." Buddhadasa has been transformed not only into a "holy man" or "great warrior monk" by the "common" people, but also into an infallible, liberal, gentle, pure prophet of modern elites of Buddhist studies and social critics. For many Western students of Thai Buddhism, Buddhadasa is the first and often only face that represents Thai Buddhism. Jackson's book does not doubt and is never uncertain about the simple perfection of Buddhadasa. In this way it moves away from a scholarly study to a hagiography.



Nevertheless, the second edition of this book is a welcome addition to the growing number of studies of Buddhism in modern Thailand. Its meticulous research, clarity, and comprehensiveness are characteristic of Jackson's consistently thorough and unique work in Buddhist studies. As a person who eagerly read the first edition of the book as a young student who, at that time, had

not yet been to Thailand, I was thrilled to be offered an opportunity to read this second edition and reflect upon the significant changes in Thai Buddhism and society in the last seventeen years or so. Jackson thankfully has asked us to revisit the ways in which Buddhadasa saw Buddhism and modernity and I am certain that this second edition will spark new questions and generate new debates.

Justin McDaniel



**Jane Werner and Danièle Bélanger**, eds, *Gender, Household, State: Doi Moi in Viet Nam*. Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 2002, pp.151.

The Vietnamese government's implementation of the policy of *doi moi* (renovation) in 1986 ushered in a period of tremendous change. With the move from a command economy toward one based more on market principles, and with increased exposure to the outside world, Vietnamese have found themselves in the years since 1986 having to navigate their way through a new world. Jane Werner and Danièle Bélanger's edited volume, *Gender, Household, State: Doi Moi in Viet Nam*, opens a fascinating window onto the lives of women in this period of transformation and in the process provides a refreshing new look at contemporary Viet Nam.

The scholarship in this volume is new not only in that it examines current conditions in Viet Nam, but also in that it represents some of the first empirical studies of Vietnamese women's lives in a generation. As Werner and Bélanger explain in their introduction, gender first became a prominent topic of Viet Nam-related research in the 1960s as Western scholars, inspired by the rise of feminism, examined the effects on gender equality of the revolutionary movement in Viet Nam. In the years following the war's end in 1975, Viet Nam remained closed to Western anthropologists and sociologists. It was only in the 1990s, with the *doi moi* reforms, that scholars,

both Vietnamese and Western, have been able to resume their examinations. The six essays in this volume are the results of this new scholarship, with all of the scholars having conducted ethnographic research in Viet Nam in the late 1990s, in some cases in collaboration with Vietnamese colleagues.

The book is divided into three thematic sections of two chapters each. The first section, "*Doi Moi* and the State," begins with a chapter by Werner entitled "Gender, household, and State: renovation (*Doi Moi*) as social process in Viet Nam." Here Werner argues that *doi moi* is not just a series of economic reforms, but is a "socially embedded process shaped by many gendered components." She illustrates this, for instance, by demonstrating that while the initial emphasis of the *doi moi* reforms on the expansion of the household economy did indeed lead to increased incomes, it nonetheless also economically disadvantaged women, for it was women who drove this expansion of the household economy while men gravitated toward more lucrative salaried positions in the cities.

Tran Ngoc Angie's "Gender expectations of Vietnamese garment workers: Viet Nam's re-integration into the world economy" echoes Werner's argument in its examination of the experiences of women garment workers. The author finds that while gender equality is a professed goal of the Vietnamese state, the fragmentation of the multi-level, piece-work subcontracting system in which garments are produced conspires



with socially constructed expectations of “feminine” work characteristics to relegate women to the lowest-paying positions in the production process.

The second section of the book, “Household and Family,” moves the focus of examination further toward the micro level by looking at these two critical institutions. Nelly Krowolski examines the composition of households in a rural village located close to Ha Noi, as well as the origins of spouses in these households, in “Village households in the Red River delta: the case of Ta Thanh Oai, on the outskirts of the capital city, Ha Noi.” Through data collected in the field, as well as from information culled from colonial archives and village household registers, Krowolski makes some surprising discoveries about both the present and the past. First, she finds that even though Ta Thanh Oai is close to the rapidly-changing city of Ha Noi, endogamy remains the norm in this village, as it was in the past, with most villagers finding spouses within a three-kilometer radius of their homes. Krowolski also finds another continuity with the past in the prevalence of nuclear families in Ta Thanh Oai. While we might expect the nuclear family to be the norm today, Krowolski discovers through her examination of colonial era records that this has been the norm in Ta Thanh Oai for the past century, not the extended family as writings on the “traditional” Vietnamese family have suggested.

In “Too late to marry: failure, fate or fortune? Female singlehood in rural

North Viet Nam,” Danièle Bélanger and Khuat Thu Hong continue the focus on the family by investigating the reasons behind the relatively high proportion of rural women who remain single in their thirties and forties. From in-depth qualitative interviews in two villages outside of Ha Noi, the authors discover that the decision to remain single is often based on a combination of factors. First there are contextual constraints, such as the need to assist in the care of siblings, which prevent women from marrying when they are young. Then there is the issue of women’s agency. With rising incomes since *doi moi*, and with the war years having made non-marriage more acceptable, rural women are increasingly able to envision a life of “singlehood”. Nonetheless, in a society that still places great value on marriage, the refusal or inability of women to marry often carries a significant cost.

The final section of the book, “Intimacy,” narrows the focus of analysis even further. In “The irony of sexual agency: premarital sex in urban northern Viet Nam,” Tine Gammeltoft investigates issues of virginity and premarital sex by interviewing unmarried women seeking abortions in Ha Noi. The author discovers that these women inhabit an ambiguous space between a liberalizing society and the specter of a perceived past of “traditional” sexual moralities. Gammeltoft’s informants related that they offered their virginity to their respective boyfriends as “gifts of love” in an effort to secure a relationship that they felt would lead to mar-

riage, but then saw this act transformed into what Vietnamese society still considers a moral transgression when the relationship subsequently failed.

Nguyen-vo Thu-huong's "Governing sex: medicine and governmental intervention in prostitution" ends the book by examining marital and extra-marital sexuality in the late 1990s in the light of changes in the focus of the Vietnamese health care system. Under *doi moi*, health care in Viet Nam switched from an emphasis on preventive measures for the masses which drew legitimacy from Marxist-Leninist ideology, to a focus on treatment based on medical advances which draws its authority from medical expertise. The rise of prostitution occurred as this transformation was taking place, and the author demonstrates how this new emphasis on medical expertise is employed by the state to delineate prostitutes as dangers to the state and to encourage wives to develop their expertise in the "science" of sexual pleasures in order to keep sex in the safer confines of the home.

*Gender, Household, State: Doi Moi in Viet Nam* is a wonderful addition to what is now a growing body of scholarship on contemporary Viet Nam by the first wave of Euro-American anthropologists and sociologists to conduct research in that country in a generation. As the first work to deal explicitly with gender, this volume makes a great contribution to our understanding of the experiences of women in Viet Nam today, but it also raises countless further questions, for ultimately this work merely skims the surface of a fascinating world of inquiry. In so doing, however, it will undoubtedly inspire many other scholars, both Euro-American and Vietnamese, to follow.

Liam C. Kelley





**Teri Shaffer Yamada**, editor, *Virtual Lotus: Modern Fiction of South East Asia*. Ann Arbor, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 2002, pp.332.

Although this is not the first anthology of South-East Asian short stories to appear, it is, in both breadth and depth, the most ambitious, consisting of thirty-three short stories drawn from Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Negara Brunei Darussalam, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam. It is especially pleasing to see the inclusion of stories from Brunei, Cambodia and Laos, countries whose modern literatures remain largely unknown beyond their own borders.

While this collection has a contemporary feel—twenty-five of the stories date from the 1980s or later—it also includes earlier pieces by famous writers such as Pramoedya Ananta Toer (Indonesia), Shahnnon Ahmad (Malaysia), and Nguyen Cong Hoan and Khai Hung (Vietnam). Most of the younger writers represented are also well-known or have won prestigious literary awards in their own countries, while those writing in English may already be familiar names within the region and beyond.

Stories are grouped by country, with each country represented by between two (Laos and Brunei) and four (Burma, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam) stories. The three stories from Thailand are ‘And the Grass is Trampled’ by Atsiri Thammachote, ‘Sita Puts Out the Fire’ by Sri Daoruang and ‘The Family in the Street’ by Sila

Khomchai—ably re-translated by Susan Fulop Kepner, who has done much to make modern Thai literature available to the English-speaking world.

Each section begins with a brief sketch of the country’s literary history, while each story is prefaced with a biographical note on the author and a comment on the piece. The editor helpfully draws the reader’s attention to other stories in the volume sharing a similar theme.

Co-ordinating and bringing to fruition a project of this breadth is deceptively time-consuming and inevitably there are the occasional editorial oversights: the reference to Kulap (p.191), for example, will be lost on the non-Thai specialist, the introduction to ‘The Music Child’ (p.236) at first seems to imply that the protagonist (‘a journalist from Manila’) is a Filipino, when in fact he is an American, and, try as I have, I still cannot find the ‘tragic and disillusioned bar-tender destined to live life half-dead, drinking his days into oblivion’ (back cover blurb) in the Lao story, ‘A Bar at the Edge of a Cemetery’. But these are minor quibbles. The editor, Teri Shaffer Yamada, has performed an invaluable service in bringing together a team of talented translator/scholars, which includes established names such as Allott (Burma), Aveling (Indonesia), Kepner (Thailand) and Koret (Laos), as well as several new faces. Her prologue is admirably brief, placing the focus of this volume firmly on the South-East Asian writers. More detailed discussion of the development



of the short story genre in individual South-East Asian countries will appear in a companion volume, currently under preparation and also edited by Professor Yamada, entitled, 'The History and Cultural Significance of Modern Southeast Fiction'. Professor Yamada and her publishers, the University of Michigan Press, should be congratulated on these significant initiatives in making South-East Asian fiction available to the English-speaking world.

David Smyth



**Ho Anh Thai**, *The Women on the Island*, a novel, translated by Phan Thanh Hao, Celeste Bacchi, and Wayne Karlon. Chiang Mai, Silkworm Books, 2002, pp.176, Bt.425.

Ho Anh Thai's novel *The Women on the Island* reflects Vietnam's renovation policy (*Doi Moi*), launched in 1986. *Doi Moi* aimed at moving the country from a centralized state-run economic system towards a market economy. The atmosphere of greater freedom during this period enabled Vietnamese writers to explore new themes and experiment with new techniques. This marked a new period in Vietnamese literature, in which writers could move away from the party line imposing on them the duty of serving the nation and the people. In this period writers began to reveal the dark side in society and to touch upon urgent social problems rather than responding to government policy. *Doi Moi* literature can be seen as a reaction against the wartime literature of the 1945–1975 period, which was based on collectivism, heroism, nationalism, class struggle, and the construction of a Socialist state. After the war ended in 1975, Vietnamese writers and critics attempted to slough off this imposed political function, but their efforts were generally unsuccessful until the *Doi Moi* period. During *Doi Moi*, however, literature underlined individuality, particularly the individual's search for happiness, and rethinking the past from new perspectives. The novel *The Women on the Island* by Ho Anh Thai follows this literary stream.

*The Women on the Island* was first published in Vietnamese in 1988. It is set in the mid-1980s. It tells us the story of Tuong, a former Arts student, and a group of former female guerrillas on Cat Bac Island, and how they suffer from the changing values in the new consumer society. Tuong is rejected by his girlfriend's mother simply because she wants a richer son-in-law, and the single women on Cat Bac Island live a lonely life, consumed by a desire to be loved and have a family. During the war, Vietnamese women were evaluated by their sacrifice for the national struggle. But, in peacetime, they are judged by their being a good wife and mother. However, when the war is over, most of them are too old to get married. Also, in the post-war period, there are fewer men than women. Consequently, some girls on Cat Bac Island see a ray of hope when Tuong, a young handsome man with a seductive face, is sent to work at the turtle breeding camp in the island, not very far from where they live and work.

It is clear that Ho Anh Thai's novel responds to a chief polemic of *Doi Moi* literature. That is, the author highlights the conflict between individuality and collectivity. Like many works written in this period, Ho Anh Thai's novel speaks out for those whose personal happiness is not yet fulfilled, though their duties for national struggles are completed. The women on the Cat Bac Island suffer not only loneliness but also humiliation for being single and childless. For them, if they do not have a husband, then at least they should have a child. As a female veteran revealed:

‘During the American War, we lived at the edge of death, and we were able to control our instinctual desires. But now such a control is impossible. I know I lost my opportunity to get married. But if at least I had a child, I would be consoled in many ways. If I hadn’t been so concerned with ‘preserving’ myself all those years ago, I wouldn’t have to suffer like I do now. But he’s dead, with all the rest, and whom did I keep myself for? What do I need with my virginity, when all it does is bringing me loneliness? The collective can help me strengthen my willpower, it can console me a bit. But the collective can’t bring me private happiness.’ (pp. 94–95)

Each night, the girls will go to the beach and wait for the man from the turtle breeding camp. Most of them do not expect a long-term relationship, which is not common in Vietnamese society. However, the background information given by the narrator helps readers understand and even have sympathy for the girls who cannot resist their sexual desires.

Towards the middle of the story, a girl is pregnant. Quan, a local leader, tries to blame Vien, his rival, for her pregnancy. He orders that a public criticism of the pregnant girl be held, and he hopes to use this scandal to attack his rival. He even puts the pregnant girl in jail until she confesses who is responsible for her pregnancy. As clearly portrayed in this part of the novel, a woman, who once fought bravely and sacrificed her youth

for the motherland, is now humiliated and reduced to being merely a victim of a power struggle in the state-owned enterprise where the women on the island are working. Nevertheless, the women in the story are strong enough to maintain their dignity and not to be victimized by political conflict.

‘Mr. Quan, you’ve had your fun, but now it’s all over!’ Bao shouted angrily.

‘We aren’t sheep for you to open up and punish according to your mood.

‘We’ve had enough! No one in Brigade Five will tell you a damn thing!’

‘What we will do,’ another woman cried out, ‘is to report your abusive behaviour to the district level and make sure you’re punished.’ (p.102)

As shown in the story, the women on the island do not suffer just from their own desires to be loved and their yearning for happiness, but also from the pressure of social attitudes towards women. Due to the influence of Confucianism, boys rather than girls are preferred in Vietnamese society. Despite the attempt to promote gender equality, this idea of patriarchy still exists in the post-war period, as shown in the case of Tham. Unlike the majority of the girls on the island, Tham manages to get married, but she is not better off. She is heavily criticized and humiliated by her mother-in-law, who longs for a grandson. It seems that if a couple do not have children, the first person to be blamed is the wife. Seemingly, the ultimate task for



women is to reproduce a male heir for the family. If the wife cannot give birth to a son, then the husband considers that a good reason to divorce her. Tham is so desperate that she asks Tuong to do her a favour, that is to get her pregnant.

*The Women on the Island* also reflects the situation during the early period of the capitalist economic model in Vietnam, with its struggle between the belief in Socialism and the attempt to adopt a market economy. Hoa, the manager of a state-owned company, is accused of adopting decadent bourgeois ideas because he has introduced a new style of management, and the fact that he does not pay much attention to the personal background of workers in his company. As implied through this detail, the author seems to support Hoa's idea that the evaluation of a person according to his or her background, such as class origin or criminal record, should be abolished. Instead, people should be judged by their performance and given a chance to prove themselves. This also marks another attempt to move away from the practice of those old Socialist days when the idea of class origin had a vital role in determining a person's future or opportunity to progress in society.

As regards the approach of the writing, the way Ho Anh Thai constructs his novel is totally different from the Socialist-Realist writing that flourished during the period between 1945 and 1975. Socialist-Realist literature mainly focused on collectivism and the heroic deeds of the protagonists. In contrast, Ho Anh Thai's work highlights the tragedy

and the weaknesses of human beings. The characters in this novel are complex, with good and bad qualities. They are different from those in Socialist-Realist works where characters are represented as being either good or bad. This is illustrated through the character Hoa, the young and progressive manager of the state-owned export company. Hoa is a man who behaves correctly and has self-control. However, when he gets to know Tuong, he realizes that he is not as strong as he and other people think. Tuong's character is in contrast to that of Hoa, as he is the man who always yields to his sexual desire and indulgence. Tuong's paintings of nude women provoke Hoa's repressed desire and remind him that after all he is just another human being. The anxieties of the women on the island, and of Tuong and Hoa, can be shared by any of us. The author employs a classical Chinese poem to underline the continuity and subtlety of the vast 'boundary of unrequited desire' that human beings from generation to generation have to suffer.

The subjects of gender, human desire or corruption, that the author tries to convey in *The Women on the Island*, may not be totally unique, as they are echoed in many post-war Vietnamese short stories and novels, but nevertheless the book is worth reading. This is because it not only has artistic value but also provides a vivid picture of post-war society. It is beautifully written, and Ho Anh Thai skilfully moves back and forth between the city and the remote area of the Cat Bac Island, and between the past

and the present. He also manages to disclose the anxiety of those who live in this period when the wartime memory, though still fresh, is being challenged by the new values of the growing consumer society in post-war Vietnam. Thus, this novel would be an enjoyable read for those who are interested in Vietnamese literature, as well as being insightful for those who are following socio-political changes in post-war Vietnam.

Montira Rato



**Michael Smithies**, *Village Vignettes*, with sketches by Uthai Traisiwakul. Bangkok, Orichid Press, 2003, pp.168, \$18.

In *Village Vignettes* Michael Smithies takes us for a personalized and down-to-earth excursion along unpaved roads into one average north-eastern Thai village. Through a series of portraits we are introduced to a number of its ordinary yet memorable inhabitants. It is a vivid account of seemingly uneventful rural life, the virtues of which so easily vanish in the traffic congestion and inhumanely demanding city life of the country's capital.

In thirty portraits the author brings us an unveiled close-up look into the misfortunes, heartaches, daydreams and simple joy of such characters as Big Tits, the village Don Juan and the half-Chinese, just to mention few. Touching as they are, these portraits are a healthy read for anyone who takes modern commodities and so-called easy life, or life itself for that matter, for granted. At times, and more often than once, we feel powerless for not being able to intervene and give the villagers a helping hand in their earthly tumbles. On occasions the author himself offers suggestions and in some cases outright solutions as to how to rectify such annoyances as power cuts and waste management which, sadly, in many parts of rural Thailand are notorious.

Although Smithies rather often paints a somewhat gloomy-though realistic-picture of village life and the future pros-

pects in rural areas, he nonetheless also gives hope. Most effectively this is conveyed in "Orphaned" and "One-leg". Take the former, a heart-warming tale of little Panja whose stoic resilience against the odds is remarkable. In a way the survival and whole existence of rural Thailand under the pains of hardship depend on such a childlike yet so mature and exemplary ability to cope with adversity. Determined about what he wants from life, this little boy is not discouraged by what is lost or by things he does not have, but instead simply thrives from what is still left.

In the second case, Sit has lost his leg both due to an unfortunate workplace accident and to doctors' hasty decision and inexperience. Not giving in to self-pity or bothering to undergo the never-ending (and most likely fruitless) process of seeking compensation, he continued his life as before, not at all considering himself disabled. Now years later at older age, at the shady comfort of his home, he makes hammocks that sell well not only in the village, but also in the market in town.

And as it so often happens when eking out a living in less than favourable conditions, some will rise and some will fall. We are introduced to a scumbag such as every village community has at least one. Here, Mr Balls by name, is a public menace pestering the neighbourhood with his unruly behaviour and who, finally, ends up in the local prison. We might easily share the villagers' hope in the event that if he ever returns, he would not stay for long. Of course, there

is always a possibility that, given his character, some rough justice may take place while he is behind bars...

The author does not hesitate to approach one of the saddest events in human life, either. In the disheartening tale of Pum, this old man, defeated under life's body blows, finds his final solution on a hook high up in his toilet-cum-bathroom. There are also those who have traded their rural values for the lure of the decadence of the red light districts in Bangkok.

In between the portraits there are themes that throw light into many subjects that are, and some have become only recently, an inseparable part of village life. The function and philosophy of "ghetto-blasters", mobile phones and various forms of gambling are described in a humorous though not offending way by any means.

Michael Smithies is very attentive and diligent in his approach; nothing goes unnoticed in his vicinity. He takes us to

the heart of impoverished Isaan—as the North-East is called—in a fashion that can only grown from extensive hands-on experience and knowledge of the local culture, its people and their way of thinking. The more life-stories one reads, the more engrossed one becomes in the plight of the characters. Importantly, Smithies is also wise enough not to glorify their toil. The pencil and ink illustrations, drawn by Uthai Traisiwakul and beautiful in their simplicity, intensify the rural atmosphere of the book.

In this small village, that can be found somewhere beyond the second crossing of the railway tracks (mind you, it is thick with ghosts due to many fatal accidents), it is easy to imagine the author sitting at the village shop observantly taking mental notes of the goings-on while enjoying his *kanom chin*. From this vantage point he sends a useful reminder to all of us; no matter how down you feel, there's always someone who is worse off than you.

Tarmo Rajasaari