

REVIEWS

Rachel V. Harrison and Peter A. Jackson, editors, *The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press and Cornell University Southeast Asia Program, 2010, xxiii + 268 pages. Hardbound: ISBN 978-962-209-121-4; paperbound: ISBN 978-962-209-123-8

This ambitious book with its aptly alliterative title has at least a trio of agendas. First, to examine “the Thai encounter with the *farang*, and all that it constitutes,” especially over the last century and a half. Second, to bring Thailand into postcolonial theory which is enjoying great popularity in cultural studies syllabi in Western universities. And third, in order to enable the second objective, to dispose of the mantra of Siam/Thailand “never being colonized” as the basis of a larger claim that the country’s history and culture are unique. In a sense, the book is an answer to two questions posed by Benedict Anderson thirty-two years ago. The first was the mocking query, “What damn good is this country—you can’t compare it with anything.” The second was his impish thinking-aloud whether avoiding colonialism was such a good thing, given the result.

That’s a long time to wait for answers. It’s also a lot of agendas for a modestly sized book. But the task of such a volume is to provoke, not to prove. The project involved several more writers than are captured in this volume. Some

of the overflow has already appeared in a special issue of *South East Asia Research* in 2009.

Much of the weight of the first task, tracing the encounter with the *farang*, falls on Pattana Kitiarsa. He takes Edward Said’s famous proposition that the West constructed the Oriental to suit Western purposes, and flips it over as Occidentalism, the Thai construction of “the West” to suit Thai purposes. In mid Ayutthaya, the Siamese elite found *farang* useful as craftsmen and engineers, but boorish as missionaries. In late Ayutthaya, the *farang* disappeared and were not missed. But from the second quarter of the nineteenth century, they could not be avoided. The elite then selectively adopted things and techniques from the *farang*, both in order to fend them off, and in order to present themselves as more modern and thus more special than the rest of the population. However, this succeeded only in the short term. Soon fascination with the West spread beyond the elite to new people who found that adventures in the West or just in Western thinking helped to release them from the strictures of their own society. In the last generation, the situation has been transformed again with many more resident *farang*, easy access to global media, and proliferation of mixed-race *luk-khreung* offspring. Now everyone wears a (fake) Armani T-shirt and supports Manchester United, and the easy familiarity with the outside world has become part of a leveling trend in the culture which the old elite finds so hard to accept.

Thongchai Winichakul adds that one of the enduring ways to deal with the West has been to concede Western superiority in material culture, but to assert Thai or Asian superiority in matters spiritual. This strategy can be traced from Chaophraya Thiphakorawong's writings in the mid-nineteenth century through to the latest soap operas. Other contributors note a similar strategy to welcome Western values and institutions in the public sphere, but deny their relevance to the private and intimate worlds of family and community.

The other articles on this theme are more like vignettes, chosen not because they are typical, but because they illustrate the frontiers of the relationship.

Thanes Wongyannava wonders why Foucault, and especially his concept of discourse, should have enjoyed such *éclat* in the Thai academy. After all, things French and things philosophical are usually given a wide berth. Thanes first slyly proposes that this popularity came about because Thai academics love anything American, and Foucault was popular in America. He then points out that Foucault is the most historical of the postmodern theorists and the Thai academy has cherry-picked his middle and most historical period, conforming with a taste for history rather than abstract theory. Moreover, Thanes shows that very little of Foucault's work has been translated into Thai, and most Thai scholars have relied on Thai commentators, particularly Thanes himself, who have filtered Foucault's work through a Thai consciousness.

Some of these commentators are reluctant to attribute their ideas to Foucault because they are not sure they understand the original. The Thai translation of discourse as *wathakam*, a word that bears little lexical resemblance to the original, broke free and became widely popular among journalists and others who have only an inkling of its origin and original meaning. The vignette illustrates Thongchai's proposition, "In Thailand 'The West' is in fact always the Thai-ized West."

May Adadol Ingawanij and Richard Lowell MacDonald review the celebration of Apichatpong Weerasethakul on the international film-festival circuit. They suggest he was lionized by *avant garde* American cineastes, who were bitterly opposed to Hollywood's domination, precisely because his work is so quirky and so non-commercial. As a result of this lionization outside Thailand, he became "a national figure whose creative efforts are nonetheless considered irrelevant to Thai public life." They raise the fear that he will be converted into a symbol of national pride, totally smothering the transgressive and provocative content of his films. Since the article was written, Apichatpong's story has moved onwards and upwards, and the result has rather belied the authors' fears. Increased fame with the Palme d'Or has made him more disturbing and less manageable for the cultural police. His story fits another theme running through the book—of the outside world as a resource for evading authoritarianism in various guises.

Rachel Harrison reviews the role of the outside world in Thai films, especially in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 1997. Film directors expressed fear of globalization in many ways—from the bombastic nationalism of historical epics through to the quirky intimacies of *Monrak Transistor*. Harrison concentrates especially on two films. In *February*, the director portrays globalization as a threat to Thai identity by having the principal characters lose memory, passport, and eventually lives in New York. Subtle stuff. In *Siamese Renaissance* the characters time-travel between the present and the era of high colonialism, and are able to save Thailand from utter colonial domination. Harrison points out that the director has chosen a distinctly *farang*-looking *luk khreung* for the female lead, and concludes “the need to repel the Other is intricately interwoven with the desire for the Other, with its allure and with the wish to incorporate it into the Thai self.”

Of course this batch of essays leaves whole continents of the encounter with the West uncovered. Readers eager for more on this theme can go to *South East Asia Research* 2009 for Thanet on Thais eating spaghetti, Thak Chaloemtiarana on adaptations of the late Victorian novel, Sud Chonchirdsin on selective borrowing in the Fifth Reign, Thanapol Limapichart on the early development of a public sphere, and Thanet Aphornsuvan on Thai reactions to missionaries. But in truth, the editors seem much less interested in the allure of the *farang* than in the allure of postcolonial studies.

The various contributors argue that the mantra of Siam “avoiding colonialism” is misleading in two ways. First, Siam was very well integrated into colonial trade, and unavoidably part of a colonially dominated world. Second, Siam’s own court elite enthusiastically played the role of colonial rulers, importing institutions from neighboring colonized states to strengthen their own dominance. While this argument is now quite mainstream, Tamara Loos pushes it a bit further by showing how the Siamese went toe-to-toe with the British in the contest to control the mid peninsula.

Five of the chapters address this theme, but fail to agree on the crucial point of how to characterize the process in words. Peter Jackson and Rachel Harrison prefer “semi-colonialism” because of continuities with earlier usage of this term. Loos thinks the semi- prefix weakens the term and undersells how truly colonial the Thai elite was. Michael Herzfeld pushes for “crypto-colonialism” but wins few votes. “Internal colonialism” and “quasi-colonialism” are mentioned in passing.

The purpose of putting colonialism into Thailand and Thailand into colonialism—apart from alignment with academic fashions—is squarely political. The boast of avoiding colonialism and the claims to national uniqueness are pillars of conservative nationalism. It’s no coincidence that Anderson asked his two provocative questions during the intense conservative reaction of the late 1970s, and that this book

of answers comes against a similar backdrop. Only Loos, Herzfeld, and Thongchai explicitly address this political dimension. Thongchai suggests how a specter of “domination by the West,” especially within the realm of knowledge, is an increasingly prominent and insidious part of conservative nationalism. Herzfeld points to colonial legacies which almost invisibly underlie structures and practices of authoritarianism. Loos points out how colonial practices and mentalities have continued to underlie Bangkok’s handling of the Muslim south for more than a century.

The editors wisely refrain from drawing any broad conclusions from the collected articles. The book is a landmark in Thai studies. Its various articles will serve as idea-starters for projects of many kinds.

Chris Baker

Johan Fischer, *Proper Islamic Consumption: Shopping among the Malays in Modern Malaysia*. NIAS Monographs 113, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008. xix+258 pp. Hardbound: ISBN 978-87-7694-059-1; paperbound: ISBN 978-87-7694-060-7

Of the thousands of scholarly articles and books and academic seminars that have been devoted to the study of Islam in Southeast Asia in recent years, attention has focused mostly on issues concerning religious revivalism, politics, education, history, law, gender, morality, finance and economics, and of course, extremism and terrorism. It is surprising, therefore, that much less attention has been given to the activity that most Southeast Asian Muslims, like their counterparts in other religions, spend an ever-increasing amount of their time doing today: shopping and consuming. This activity is the subject of Johan Fischer's original study of Islam and consumerism in Malaysia.

Fischer began conducting his fieldwork in 2001 shortly after the September 11 attacks in the US. The event, he acknowledges, changed the political, religious, economic, and even consumption context in which his fieldwork was carried out, as Muslim groups called for a boycott of American products. A large part of his fieldwork data is drawn from interviews with Malay informants, of varying incomes and degrees of religious piety, in which Fischer probes their consumption practices.

The focus of Fischer's study is a number of Malay middle-class families living in the suburbs of Malaysia's capital, Kuala Lumpur. The anthropology of suburbia in Southeast Asia lags far behind the anthropology of village society, so Fischer's attention to suburban life in Malaysia is another novel and welcome feature of the book. The suburban middle-class family is the focus of anxieties about the effects of consumption and official measures designed to overcome these anxieties. For Fischer, the suburbs are designed so that "families can turn in on themselves as the primary model of social and moral identification". Moreover it is in the suburbs where space is ordered into "manageable and exploitable form", and where government planners have the greatest opportunity to create what Fischer calls the "new national Malaysian family" (p. 11).

Underlying the book's central argument is the tension between consumption and religious piety. The much-discussed Islamic revival that has taken place in Malaysia since the 1970s is contemporaneous with the country's rapid economic growth as one of Southeast Asia's "tiger economies" and the development of a consumer society. In most developing countries (not just Muslim ones) the materialism that is the unavoidable product of capitalist economic development tends to be regarded as an obstacle to spiritual fulfillment. Moreover, a significant proportion of the products and services that become available for consumption, thanks to the opening up of the economy,

are “foreign”, raising issues not only of economic nationalism, but also, at a deeper level, of purity and pollution. Consumption thus becomes an activity that various parties seek to regulate, among them political and religious authorities. The central question that Fischer seeks to address in the book is, “why and how has the question of Malays’ proper Islamic consumption become a key concern for state nationalism in Malaysia over the last three decades?” (p. 32).

Consumption tends to be regarded as a sphere outside of state control. It is often conceived, particularly in Western economies, as the sphere where individuals may seek and find self-realization. Yet Fischer clearly shows that in the case of Malaysia the state has a ubiquitous presence in its citizens’ consumption practices, and indeed, these practices constitute a form of submission to a state agenda.

Fischer argues that the principal means by which the state regulates consumption among the Malays is through the mobilization of the Islamic concept of *halal*—that which is permitted in Islam. The central argument of Fischer’s book is that, as a result of the “nationalization of Islam” in Malaysia under the auspices of the state, the notion of *halal* has been transformed into something much greater, encompassing not just food but a wide array of commodities and lifestyles including dress, housing and interior decoration, even the type of car one drives. “State national Islam” provides the government with a powerful discursive tool to regulate the way

Malaysians consume. The result is the “halalization” of consumption, where the new and the foreign are domesticated and approved for consumption by Malay consumers in such a way that they can be assured (by the state) that they are conforming to “proper Islamic practice”. While *halal* food requires certification by state institutions like JAKIM (the Islamic Development Department of Malaysia), halalization in the broader context is promoted by a host of state and private enterprises. Indeed, commodities almost become “non-commodities” (p. 75) via this process of halalization, since they are thereby rendered part of the religious realm, rather than the secular, material world of Western capitalism which is at least potentially *haram* (“forbidden” to Muslims). Fischer argues that the “invisible hand” of “millennial capitalism” in Malaysia is, in effect, provided by the state and Islam. The process of halalization allows Malays to safely engage in “patriotic shopping for the state” (p. 39).

The effects of halalization are not confined “merely” to Malays’ consumption of commodities but also help constitute their very ethnic identity as Malays. If “you are what you eat” (or more broadly, “you are what you consume”), then the regulation of consumption represents a powerful means of controlling identity. Fischer argues that the new practices of consumption have “largely displaced more traditional forms of reverence tied to Islam and Malay rulers” (p. 39) that formerly provided much of the substance of Malay identity. Halalization

is a way in which the state can police the boundaries of Malay ethnicity by using religious sanction to prevent Malays from consuming what is deemed “un-Malay” or “un-Islamic” according to Malaysia’s “ethnicized” version of Islam. Malay ethnicity is thus performed through state-mediated patterns of consumption. Or as Fischer puts it, “The state aggressively engages in a re-conceptualization of consumption that envisions the amalgamation of Malay ethnicity, consumption practices and Islam”.

This book intends to make a theoretical contribution to the scholarly literature on consumption in Asia. Some readers will be distracted by the liberal use of theoretical jargon that derives from the outer reaches of cultural studies. A more readable book could indeed have been written, shorn of such theoretical excesses. Yet if the reader is willing to plough through occasional paragraphs of admittedly challenging jargon, it will be well worth the effort required to gain the many original and important insights that Fischer makes into consumption and religion in Malaysia.

Patrick Jory

Michael Hitchcock, Victor T. King, and Michael Parnwell, editors, *Tourism in Southeast Asia: Challenges and New Directions*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2009; 368 pp. Hardbound: ISBN 978-87-7694-033-1; paperbound: ISBN 978-87-7694-034-8

For more than a century, tourism was a luxury confined to the affluent few. They cruised around the world's major ports but seldom strayed into the countryside except to visit picturesque monuments. That all changed in the 1960s. Rising incomes and low-cost jetliners put foreign travel within the means of middle-income vacationers, making it possible for them to relax in foreign climes.

Soon jaded by European attractions, they ventured into Asia, Africa, and South America. Ostensibly journeying to savor the delights of the exotic, instead they relaxed, dined, and shopped. The earliest mass tourists in Southeast Asia were American soldiers on five-day "R'n'R" (rest and recreation) escapes from the hell of the Indochina wars. Word of the region's attractions and amenities soon spread and by the 1970s, couples and, later, families began jetting to regional cities and beaches. By the 1990s, they had penetrated the rural areas in search of new diversions.

For Southeast Asian nations, the boom was a godsend. It seemed ideal, a business from which anyone could profit, from nations with beautiful monuments to those with little more than arresting countryside. Bungalows morphed into high-rise hotels as jet

planes disgorged growing numbers of, first, groups of tourists, and then individual tourists. By the 2000s, the hunger for the new resulted in tourism's spreading its tentacles into the back-of-beyond, through homestays, "eco-tours", and adventure tourism. It seemed that no place was safe from foreign intrusion.

The business brought riches to burgeoning economies, especially those countries with few other earning opportunities; in many instances, it became their leading foreign revenue earner. The emphasis, however, was on increasing the visitor numbers and little thought was given to its sustainability or to its impact on traditional ways, social inequities, or the damage it wrought on the country's social fabric.

Moreover, it had a dark side. Southeast Asia witnessed the creation of sex tours (including pedophiles), the introduction of drugs and promiscuity, and the eroding of the very cultural values it was supposed to showcase and which visitors had come to see. In tandem with the increasing numbers of arrivals came a rising discontent, especially among the young who viewed the foreigners' sexy, affluent lifestyles as more appealing than the pedestrian pursuits of farm labor and the dreariness of traditional culture and lifestyles.

The boom also witnessed the growing intrusion of foreigners into formerly pristine areas, and the flow of profits, not to rural villagers but to city-based firms. Locals saw only a rising cost of living and the loss of agricultural land. At the same time, countries

which had pegged their prosperity to tourism learned to their dismay that it was subject to economic fluctuations, civil disturbances, natural disasters, pandemics, rising travel prices, and becoming a terrorist target. A string of discouraging incidents since the turn of the century has given pause for thought to the wisdom of placing all eggs in the tourism basket.

The failure of the public to foresee the direction that tourism was going may suggest, simply, that no one was looking. Also, those within the industry seeking greater profits may not have been interested in deducing that, like rampant consumerism on a finite planet, the search for new and exotic locations would eventually exhaust itself. Perhaps little else can be expected from a business that calls itself an “industry” and reduces gorgeous scenery, peoples, and lifestyles to “products”. Tourism’s role in the increasing complexity and interconnectedness of the world is the issue that this book confronts.

The book under review seeks to address some of the above concerns. A collection of 3 overviews and 13 essays, it updates a 1993 work of the same title and by the same editors. The new edition seeks to expand upon the subject and reflect the changing times and nature of the business. As such, it falls short of its goal. Tourism is such a vast and complex subject, and extends to such a wide range of nations with differing religions, social structures, development levels, and lifestyles, that reduction to concrete statements may be impossible.

The book’s primary value lies in its case studies that comprise the bulk of the text. They are vignettes of societies in transition, rather than a discussion of tourism as the title suggests, but they are perhaps the book’s most valuable contributions. These simple sociological treatises reveal elements of cultures and cultural collisions. Among the standouts are the following.

Shinji Yamashita’s “Southeast Asian Tourism from a Japanese Perspective” looks at the Japanese view of the rest of Asia, focusing, in particular, on Bali which Japanese regard as an escape from the drudgery of “salaryman” life to the “paradise” of simpler times. More of the Japanese mindset is revealed than of Bali itself, but the insights are valuable.

In “From Kebalian to Ajeg Bali: Tourism and Balinese Identity in the Aftermath of the Kuta Bombing”, Michel Picard also discusses Bali but in terms of its “Balineseness” and the history of its relations with its overlord, Indonesia. He takes a penetrating look at the Balinese desire to define itself and offers some original thoughts on the success and pitfalls of that endeavor. It makes for engaging reading.

Heidi Dahles’s “Romance and Sex Tourism” expands on the usual sex tourism discussions to ask what each of the partners in these liaisons actually seeks from his/her encounters. As such, it explores new and valuable territory and presents a picture far more nuanced than the normal treatise.

In a similar vein, Yuk Wah Chan’s “Cultural and Gender Politics in China—

Vietnam Border Tourism” veers from a straightforward study of Chinese male sex-tourists and the Vietnamese women who service them to an examination of traditional female Vietnamese values and expectations. While it does not shed a great deal of light on the trade, other than providing numbers, it nicely contrasts the attitudes of the respective parties, placing the age-old antagonism between the two nations in a new light.

Perhaps the most comprehensive study of tourism’s direction is that of Laos by David Harrison and Steven Shippani. From their chapter Laos emerges as one of Southeast Asia’s more successful nations in managing its tourism. Had the theme of the rest of the essays been founded on its excellent model, the book might better have lived up to its title.

The three overviews by the editors are the most difficult to wade through. Their approach is academic and their writing is freighted with meaningless verbiage that contributes little to unraveling and addressing a problem, serving only to trephine the reader’s skull through repeated blows. For example (from p. 29):

“Debates about the industry’s impact and sustainability, and actions that follow on from these debates, are constrained by a silo-like [sic] separation of strands and components, disciplines and discourses; the analytical fragmentation, particularization and reductionism of complex, dynamic, interdependent systems, and processes.”

At best, their opinions seem to have been formed from a great distance rather than to display the same level of intimacy with a culture that is evident in the case studies. Perhaps the difficulty lies in the attempt to corral widely divergent information into an ordered whole. Complicating the matter at times, the writing borders on turgid—the reader struggles not to page-turn in exasperation when encountering a particularly obvious observation; although, to be fair, many statements may be obvious only to those who live in the region. The following (from p. 51) is but one of dozens of examples:

“Overall then there are different kinds of tourism and tourists with different priorities, and shifting perceptions of tourist sites; the character of destinations and host cultures also vary as do the power relationships between the different actors contesting a tourist space.”

The tediousness is also compounded by a tendency to use 10 nouns or adjectives in place of 1. Another of many examples follows here (from p. 28):

“Our literature survey has highlighted a number of recurring themes and perspectives that have tended to map out the field of tourism studies on Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, during this period. These include globalization, identity, image-making, representation, tradition, commodification, massification [sic], promotion and policy-making.”

In short, the reader may want to treat the book as a collection of anthropological and sociological essays,

skipping past the first two and the final chapters to concentrate on the meat of the text, which is enlightening and presents in a capsule account some of the problems—without solutions—to the tourism conundrum as a whole.

Steve Van Beek

Maryvelma O'Neil, *Bangkok: A Cultural and Literary History*. Oxford: Signal Books, 2008. 248 pp. Paperbound: ISBN 978-1-904955-39-9

Yet another book, some might say, on Bangkok, but this has certainly made an effort to be different, with copious extracts from examples of contemporary Thai literature, and therefore lives up to its subtitle.

It starts off with a glowing foreword by Sumet Jumsai, who claims that some considered Molière's "principal Oriental character in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* was actually based on Kosa Pan"—too bad that the play was written and performed in 1670, sixteen years before anyone in Europe heard about or saw Kosa Pan. (One might also point out that the cargo of the 1680 mission to France did not include rhinoceros—none could be found when the mission was about to leave—but baby elephants.)

He rightly stresses that "this is not an academic history book", meaning, presumably, that facts can be approximate, and in practice the author does not have to give references. This reviewer found the lack of clearly indicated sources the most exasperating thing about the book: "A British traveller reaching Bangkok in 1865 thought he saw a mirage city..." Who? Source? We are not told. "An English writer confirmed..."; "in 1835 a steamer carrying an American writer..." Who? Where to? "'We mould [cities] in our image' Jonathan Rabin writes"; who is he, and if he is important enough to quote, where did he write this? Silence. Pages 19–20 have a fascinating account

of King Mongkut's daily routine but again no source; such a pity.

As for facts, well... Several times we are told that La Loubère was an Abbé, and in one instance the error is compounded by calling him the Jesuit Abbé de La Loubère—a terminological contradiction of the first water, since a Jesuit by definition is not an Abbé. (Mrs O'Neil, with her manifestly close Piedmontese connections, should know that.) La Loubère sported no title, and was just Monsieur de ..., gentleman.

One might well question why we have Part One, Chapter 1 devoted to Sukhothai and Ayutthaya; they are both irrelevant and inaccurate. The French embassy led by Chaumont did not present Louis XIV's letter to Phra Narai in Lopburi but on 18 October 1685 in the palace in the capital Ayutthaya. There is no genuine "fragmentary account" by Kosa Pan describing his reception at Versailles, though there is one of his arrival in Brest. Taksin is said to be "the only member of his dynasty"; an example of sloppy English—by definition a dynasty is a line of hereditary rulers.

On page 77 (not 79–80 as the index has it) we learn "An Englishman named Frederick A. Neale, who was a [freelance] British naval officer, first came upon Bangkok in 1852". Not so. His book about his stay in Siam was published in London in 1852, but he first arrived in Bangkok in 1840, as he tells us in his book. By page 210 he has been transmogrified into "the American writer F. A. Neale... [who] entitled his memoirs *Consul in Paradise* (1852)". O'Neil is muddling Neale's work with

W. A. R. Wood's memoirs, published in 1965, and has also succeeded in changing the nationality of both authors. Yet her bibliography, here given the less academic heading "Further Reading", get both texts right. This confusion is careless to a degree.

Throughout there is a tiresome journalistic need to put labels on people; so we have, among more recent souls, "writer William Warren" and "art critic Michael Wright".

One general point correctly discussed early on is the fact that Bangkok was essentially a Chinese city. Almost every visitor or resident has commented on this. Sit (or more likely stand) in the Skytrain today and observe the faces; few are pure Thai. But one thing that has changed is the status of the Chinese; when this reviewer first came to Bangkok in 1960, most servants were Chinese; now the Sino-Thai, if rich enough, have Thai, or, if failing such means, Lao or Burmese servants. The Chinese indeed "are everything and everywhere", or at least were. That said, there is an awful lot here about Chinatown and New Road, which are almost irrelevant ghettos in the modern capital.

Another striking feature about the capital is "the constant din". This is not specific to the capital but worse in it. Go into any supermarket, in the capital or out of it, and you will have four, five or more different sources of competing electronic sound, nearly all with thumping bass, presumably with no one listening to any one of them. In other words, noise is a national trait, not

specific to the capital; even in remote villages one is woken at 5.30 AM by blaring canned music preceding the *pu yai ban*'s announcements and/or canned sermons from the village temple.

There is no mention of the Bangkok electricity service in the good old days of the early 1960s, when brownouts were constant. This improved greatly during the decade. But even then the traffic was awful, and getting a telephone a major hurdle.

O'Neil rightly stresses the explosive growth of the capital. Fifty years ago, the capital was estimated to have a population of 3 million. In 2010 it is expected to top 15 million—the "primate city" indeed, perhaps doing little more than reflecting the high degree of administrative centralisation. But with the capital sinking, as one Alistair Shearer (who, for once, is not labelled a writer, art critic or whatever) has it, in "the ancient swamp of Asia", and sea levels rising, one wonders how long this primacy can endure and what plans, if any, have been made to counter those problems.

Go to the Bang Na end of the Skytrain line at the end of a working day and see the struggling masses trying to reach their homes; Bangkok then appears a miracle of individual organisation.

This review has rather emphasised the inadequacies of the book up to now. To be fair, one should point out that the description of the Thonburi temples is excellent and makes one want to return to visit them. But this reviewer would love to know the source of the statement that Wat Arun is built on a

floating foundation. This seems a very advanced technique for its early date. It was certainly built on piles, but that hardly makes the foundation floating.

Inevitably most of the textual sources are from *farang*. O'Neil tries to break the mould by quoting from Mishima. Surely Chinese visitors must have recorded their impressions, or were they all coolie class immigrants about to climb the socio-economic ladder? She also digs out a Russian diplomat, Kalymkow, at the end of the 19th century and his fears of having to work in the "theatrical scenery" around him; full marks for research here. But he does not make the "Further Reading" section, alas...

To vary the diet, O'Neil includes several, sometimes extensive quotes from Thai sources. This represents a departure from prevailing volumes that attempt to describe the city, but again the lack of sources means that one cannot follow up those often well-chosen snippets. Presumably Ankharn Kalayanapongs should be Angkarn.

Three temples on the Bangkok side are selected for close description, and the "Erewan [sic] shrine" is thrown in to complement them. Wat Borworniwes is only mentioned for its *farang* seen in murals. Wat Benjamabophit is mentioned only in relation to Kukrit's funeral. The pretty Wat Ratchbopitir does not make it.

Sex in the city is dealt with sensibly, in a matter-of-fact way, neither ignored nor hyped. The joys of water travel are there; but it is not true that monks are in a special section of the express boat

"to protect them from being jostled by women". This is another example of inaccurate language use. The women do all they can to avoid touching the monks; to say they "jostle" implies actively rough-handling.

Silpa Bhirasri gets good coverage, but surprisingly the gallery in Soi Attakarn Prasit, which was the precursor of the new art centre at Mabunkhrong, is not mentioned at all, though his spirit was there. Of course, we get the Jim Thompson treatment. The Siam Society does not make it, apart from expecting to be at the receiving end of a bequest. Nor does Suan Pakkard Palace. Vimanmek gets a five-word aside. But the Oriental gets a full fourteen-page coverage, though half a century ago it was not the "in" place, which was the newly constructed and government-owned Erawan, appreciated then more for the cream cakes in its tearoom than its shrine.

But the carelessness over facts is worrying: if one thing is wrong, then perhaps the whole lot is wrong? Here is one further example requiring no specialist knowledge of Bangkok or anything in it: Rama VII, we are told, "was the last man on earth to exercise royal absolutism". This is nonsense; what about until recently the rulers of Nepal and Bhutan, and even now Lesotho?

The book comes with a map that claims to show greater Bangkok but in fact only has the city core. The photos are all very dark, as though Bangkok were in a permanent pre-monsoon

penumbra; they have no captions, but are placed near the object they are meant to illustrate.

In short, this offering, excellent in intent, fails to make the grade for accuracy, or in its referencing. Readers of books like this are justified in expecting reference details, and there is nothing wrong with throwing in a few footnotes. (Here, though, the author may have been hamstrung by the requirements of the series in which the book appears.)

There is, though, too much good material here to dismiss it out of hand; a second radically revised and corrected edition is needed. But when dealing with a city of such enormous variety and coping with its recent phenomenal growth, it is never going to be easy to satisfy all tastes or expectations.

Michael Smithies

Chang Noi, *Jungle Book: Thailand's Politics, Moral Panic, and Plunder, 1996–2008*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009. 256 pp. Paperbound: ISBN 978-974-9511-63-3

This book consists of a selection of more than five dozen columns published in *The Nation* from 1996, the beginning of the end of the economic boom, until mid-2008. A new constitution came into force in 1997 that created a strong, elected executive, a space that was soon occupied by Thaksin Shinawatra who led his Thai Rak Thai party to two successful national elections. Thaksin's government became destabilized by street protests instigated by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) in 2005 and continued in 2006. In a move that took the country by surprise, the military launched a coup in September 2006, dissolved the parliament, and commenced writing yet another constitution that came into force in 2007. The fiery populist politics conducted by the PAD, the toppling of two governments, the occupation of Government House in late 2008, and the closure of Bangkok's two airports in December of that year fall outside the book's purview.

This background is helpful, because the pseudonymous Chang Noi does not intend to explain these larger events that made Thailand headline news around the world. Instead, the columns delve into what was happening behind the news. While readers may recognise Kipling overtones in the book's title, in fact as they turn the pages they will find

themselves facing frank comment about Thai public life, especially its seamier and more manipulative aspects. Late in the book, outraged at the extrajudicial killings of supposed drug dealers, Chang Noi opines that it is not the rule of law but the law of the jungle that has allowed the murderers to escape prosecution. Indeed, the cover of the book displays 'Tiger in Tropical Storm (Surprise!)', a painting by Henri Rousseau. The striped predator is shown creeping through the lush green foliage with its fangs bared and a paw on the back of Little Elephant (Chang Noi). Possibly Little Elephant is charmed and will escape the lawsuits pursuing it. We learn in the book that as the financial crisis unfolded in 1997 and Chavalit Yongchaiyudh's political fortunes deteriorated, his wife was advised by a fortune teller to avert disaster by carrying a toy elephant.

The columns are arranged by topic around the jungle theme. 'Fauna' offers thumbnails of the shift from the godfathers of old to the rich plutocrats who dominate politics today. 'Monks and Gangsters in Thai Politics' (1997) in this section is arguably the most concise and profound four pages ever written about Thai leadership. 'Feeding Habits', featuring Chang Noi's corruption curve, is about scandals and money politics. 'Water and Trees' follows the campaigns against the construction of dams and laments the degradation to the environment resulting from the failure to assess the social and economic value of forests. 'Culture and Custom' is a mixed bag of smart analyses of nationalism provoked by

external controls in response to the 1997 financial crisis, censorship of the royal biography and the use of English in public discourse. 'Birds, Bees, and Beasts' exposes the hypocrisy and moral panic that has accompanied the rise of sexual explicitness in public culture. 'Tooth and Claw' relates some of the more spectacular political murders in Thailand's modern history. 'Lords of the Jungle', the last section, registers Chang Noi's despair at the depths to which Thai politics have fallen. Authoritarianism, suppression and exclusion are the distinctive features of politics in the 2000s. Some of the book's most polemical discussions are to be found in the final pages.

Chang Noi declares that rather than deal with the big topics directly, the columns will identify significant but scarcely noticed changes in Thai society and its view of itself. So-called sensitive topics are deftly handled by the techniques of a ventriloquist. Critical perspectives are put into the mouths of others such as the social critic Sulak Sivaraksa, the sometimes banned *Fa Dieo Kan* magazine, and characters in mock dialogues. But what is Chang Noi's own view of Thai politics and society? For one thing, specific ministries, departments, and offices rather than an abstract 'state' or 'bureaucracy' are held accountable for mismanaged or failed policies. For another, there is surprisingly little about political parties, because they do not explain the dynamics of Thai politics. In contrast to many *farang* and Thai political scientists, it would seem that

Chang Noi does not have much faith that Thai parties express the popular will in any effective way.

The Democrats had a chance to remake Thai politics when they came to power in 1997, but they failed to recognize that the boom in the 1980s and early 1990s had created new social groups that had irrevocably changed the Thai social order. The huge rural population had become more politically savvy, and the middle class began to clamour for more say in the political process. The unmet demand for a new politics laid the foundations for the rise of populism and the demagoguery of the PAD, which is not a party but a movement. The most successful party of recent times, Thai Rak Thai headed by Thaksin Shinawatra with his powerful media businesses, operated like a political cartel by brooking no opposition, pushing rivals to the sidelines, and redistributing resources and profits among its members. Not to be missed are 'How to Buy a Country' (2000) and 'How to Sell a Country' (2006). 'Bulldog on a Leash, or Another Nail in Democracy's Coffin' (2008) highlights the PAD's visceral nationalism, middle-class membership, and contempt for rural people.

Does Chang Noi have good peripheral vision? Does it miss anything as it stomps around in the jungle or up a hill for a broader view of the landscape? The landscape is mostly the cityscape, although from time to time Chang Noi does venture out of the capital into the provinces. In 'Drinking with Mr. Progress' (2001) Chang Noi is in the

countryside sampling illicit moonshine, but the discussion quickly swings back to the centre, and we are again in the world of cartels and monopoly capitalism as Mr. Progress squeezes out the competition, minimises tax, and streamlines production to reduce costs. Except in a few instances, the book views the countryside as a side trip on the way to the largest primate city in the world where all the action takes place.

'Politics and the Stars' (2007) reports that two generals and the wife of a third visited a shrine in the northern city of Chiang Mai after the September 2006 coup in search of an assessment of the coup group's political fortunes. There is not that much about formal religion in the columns, but spiritism and animism catch Chang Noi's sharp eye as does the influential astrologer and spirit medium, Varin Buaviratler. Most politicians are gamblers who need to hedge their bets, so astrology and other forms of divination are essential in a book about Thai politics.

The partisan and violent politics that beset Thailand today have their roots in earlier periods. Chang Noi traces those roots back to 1932 and the end of the absolute monarchy. The crude pragmatism and egotism that characterise Thai society are explained in part by 'the heavy legacy of absolutism and dictatorship in the society's history' (p. 196). Readers puzzled as to why the policies and actions of government during the prime ministership of Thaksin Shinawatra caused such resentment, or why fear of the countryside and the peasantry preached by the PAD's Sondhi

Limthongkul attracts such widespread support need look no further than the wry, astute and passionate columns reproduced in this book.

Craig J. Reynolds

Ann Danaiya Usher, *Thai Forestry: A Critical History*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009. 248 pp. Paperbound: ISBN 978-974-9511-73-2

During a recent field trip to the Khao Phaeng Ma Community Forest, Nakorn Ratchasima Province, I came across a uniformed person in camouflaged fatigues in the visitor and information center. I asked our guide why soldiers were stationed in their forest. With a slight smile in his face, he replied that the fellow was a forest ranger and not a soldier.

I guess I should have known better. Wasn't it in Central Europe where scientific forestry originated and foresters in a number of countries were called "forest police"? While today they are not called forest police anymore, they still wield substantial powers. But it is an interesting historical development that explains why state forestry in many countries, including Thailand, is what it is today—forest management that has timber production as its overriding objective and is at odds, to put it mildly, with local people living in and around forests.

In *Thai Forestry: A Critical History*, Ann Danaiya Usher provides a thorough analysis and fascinating account of more than 100 years of state forestry. She digs deep when she catapults the reader back in time to the origin of scientific forestry to explain contemporary issues, failings and conflicts in Thailand's forests and among its stakeholders. She leaves few stones unturned to illustrate the scientific basis and historical beginnings

of teak exploitation, industrial plantation development and forest conservation in Thailand. She even takes me back to my alma mater, the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität in Freiburg, Germany, where the first forestry faculty was founded in 1787.

Scientific forestry puts foresters and timber production at the center of forest management. For almost two centuries, little consideration was given to environmental "services" that natural forests provide, such as biodiversity, and the role of local people who often depend on forests for timber, food and medicine. As taught in Freiburg and other central European universities, it had a tremendous influence on forest management across the globe. It reached Thailand even before the Royal Forest Department was established in 1896. Through some historical peculiarities, Denmark also put its mark on state forestry in Thailand, while the American vision of "conservation without people" deeply marked the country's strategies and actions to conserve whatever is left of its once mighty forests. While it led to a thriving forest industry until the logging ban was imposed in Thailand in 1989, it deprived people of the resources they need for their daily survival.

We learn all of this in 188 pages of text written in very accessible language, which makes it at times difficult to put the book down. If you really want to understand the current dilemma in Thailand's forests, you need to understand the underlying causes of different perspectives on forest management and how it all began,

which Ms. Usher provides very well in her engaging writing. Without this background knowledge on the origin of forestry and focus on producing timber, you can easily draw the wrong conclusions, such as that there is no basis for the way Thai foresters and protected-area managers go about their work.

The title announces the critical nature of Ms. Usher's account. Without doubt, not everyone will agree with her. She counters potential dissent with a very thorough analysis that is dotted also with critical voices from within the forestry administration. There is no doubt that many well-intentioned individuals work in the various government departments dealing with forestry in Thailand. But bureaucracies are extremely hard to change and it takes a crisis or the death of an honest forester such as Sueb Nakhasathien to provide the impetus for rethinking or a change in policy.

In 1994, Nancy Peluso provided a historical account of forestry on the island of Java in Indonesia. I always thought that this was a must-read. Ms. Usher's book falls into the same category, so I can recommend it very strongly as a must-read for those working in forestry in Thailand and beyond. In fact, it makes an excellent read even for those who do not work in forestry.

Those who know me are expecting some critical thoughts. I have two, with the first one being of a minor nature. In a few instances, Ms. Usher gets things slightly incorrect. For example, the German term *Waldsterben*, or forest death, does not refer to forest growth underperforming in second, third or

fourth rotations, but to damage to forest ecosystems due to acid rain. But if you dig deep then there is always the risk of getting some facts not exactly right. This should not distract from the value of the contribution that Ms. Usher has made to the discourse on Thai forestry.

Is the book actually on "Thai forestry" as the title proclaims? In my opinion, it is on Thai **state** forestry. While we read much about the struggles of forest-dependent people, community forestry or the management of forests by local people receives little attention. It is only discussed in the forward-looking section of the last six pages of the book.

Thai forests are exclusively under the jurisdiction of the Royal Forest Department; the National Park, Wildlife and Plant Conservation Department; and the Department for Marine and Coastal Resources. However, local communities have been using and managing forests near their homes for centuries. Around 20 million people are considered to be forest-dependent in Thailand. They are estimated to harvest approximately THB 1–4 million worth of forest products per village per year. Almost 11,000 villages are managing community forests and more than 5,000 villages have registered their community forestry programs, covering an area of 1.2 million rai (or 196,667 hectares).

While such local forest management provides benefits to rural communities and indigenous peoples, it also helps to conserve biodiversity and enhances carbon stocks, important in the global fight against climate change. Tens of millions of rural people throughout

Asia are managing forests—their role could have received more attention by Ms. Usher. I am sure I am not alone with this request. For example, Elinor Ostrom, who last year won the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, also spoke out against the dangers of a top-down approach to REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) during the Conference of Parties 15 in Copenhagen, Denmark, in December of last year. “Far more effective are approaches that gain the trust of forest communities, respect their rights, and involve them in forest use and monitoring, practices that are positively associated with maintenance of forest density.”

Many others, including my former colleagues at the Center for People and Forests (RECOFTC), have echoed her sentiments. However, if you want to know why this is not the case in Thailand—yet—you need to indulge in reading *Thai Forestry: A Critical History*.

Thomas Enters

Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker, *Thaksin*. 2nd ed. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009. x+422 pp. Paperbound: ISBN 978-974-9511-79-4

No personality has so transfixed the attention of the Thai public over the course of the past decade as Thaksin Shinawatra, a self-made billionaire who entered the political arena in the mid-1990s ultimately to attain and then lose the premiership amidst a rising tide of political polarization and public scandal. Despite his ouster from office in September 2006 followed by his flight into exile as a fugitive from justice in October 2008, Thaksin continues to cast a long shadow over the Thai political scene. His gripping story continues to dominate the Thai news media and popular imagination with nearly daily accounts of new twists and turns in the ongoing contest for control of Thailand's political soul. More than perhaps any biography in Thai history, the saga of Thaksin's precipitous rise and fall resonates as a morality tale comparing Thai norms of political behavior with global standards of ethical conduct in public office.

As an accomplished duo of close observers of the Thai political and economic scene, Pasuk Phongpaichit and Chris Baker have in this eponymous volume performed a valuable service in distilling the convoluted tale of Thaksin's rise and fall for an international audience. More than that, they have provided an authoritative account of Thailand's current political crisis, the mounting sectarian conflict in which Thaksin

continues to play a role from afar. Their absorbing narrative is necessarily a courageous undertaking, as the object of the authors' critique is still very much alive and kicking. It deserves to be read by all those who have an interest in the enigmatic personality who, more than any other over the course of the past decade, has shaped Thailand's ongoing struggle towards participatory democracy.

Throughout the volume, Pasuk and Baker pursue two themes. One summarizes the course of Thaksin's rise to power and the backlash that culminated in his downfall. The other examines the broader political and economic context that shaped the course of his venture to reshape the Thai body politic. As the book is titled "Thaksin" and not "Thailand's Recent Political History," I shall here focus on the thread of Thaksin's biography. That is a bit of a problem because Thaksin the person, as distinct from Thaksin the politician, tends to get submerged in the book's torrent of information on recent Thai political currents.

Stylistically, the book is evocative of Bob Woodward's acclaimed "instant histories" of recent US presidencies. Like Woodward, Pasuk and Baker present the flow of recent Thai political developments centering on Thaksin as a seamless narrative compressed into a fact-filled exposition that races along at an unrelenting pace. Unlike Woodward, however, their presentation is not replete with first-hand interviews, human-interest anecdotes, and presumptions of "decent intentions". Instead, their

account consists in large measure of a distillation of news reports appearing in the Thai press supplemented by an assortment of recent academic studies. As a result, the book occupies a place somewhere between journalism and scholarship.

The volume under review is a considerably extended version—a so-called second edition—of a book of the same title published in 2004. Review of a second edition would ordinarily demand comparison with the first. In the present case that is not an issue. Called a new edition, the book actually reproduces in Part One the original text essentially unchanged and then carries the narrative forward with an entirely new Part Two. That division, split at 2004—the high point in Thaksin’s political career—quite appropriately traces first Thaksin’s rise, and then his fall. With the continuing flow of reportage featuring Thaksin since the publication of the second edition—his unremitting instigation of the Thai political opposition, his disruptive intervention in Thai-Cambodian relations, his losses from the Dubai financial collapse, the impending Thai court judgment concerning his frozen assets—can a third edition of the *Thaksin* saga be far distant? Or perhaps it can be argued that this second edition was issued prematurely, that it should have been delayed at least until the watershed court decision on Thaksin’s assets.

The essentials of Thaksin’s career can be extracted from the densely packed text as follows. Part One recounts Thaksin’s origins and his

ascent to business success and political power. Born in 1949 into a prosperous Chiangmai family with Hakka Chinese roots, he was a canny striver from the start, graduating at the top of his class at the Police Academy, gaining a PhD in criminal law at a US university, marrying into a notable police-connected family, serving in the police while dabbling in a computer leasing business, and in 1987 resigning from the police to devote his energies fully to building his fortune through the cultivation of political connections and acquisition of government concessions (i. e., monopoly stakes) in the telecommunications industry. The politics of the concessions-granting racket inevitably lured him into the Thai political arena. In 1994 he gained the post of foreign minister, and then he rose to heightened prominence as a deputy prime minister shortly before the financial panic of 1997. Somehow, he weathered the crisis well, possibly through judicious hedging based on inside information, and so his wealth continued to grow while many others fell by the wayside.

In mid-1998 Thaksin founded the Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT). Initially welcomed as a departure from factional politics, TRT’s diverse constituency soon came to be dominated by big business. To counter that negative perception Thaksin courted the rural vote with a dramatic platform of spending programs addressing issues of particular concern to the rural masses. Though that electioneering gambit threatened to drain the government’s budgetary reserves, Thaksin’s charismatic

leadership, campaign promises, and old-style machine politics allowed TRT to win the election handsomely, and he was installed as prime minister in 2001. His first term in office focused on basic economic, social, and political reforms, with corporate-style management serving as a talismanic means to achieving his objectives. Accompanying those reforms was a rapid slide to one-party dominance, growing nepotism, and the mutation of the old-style money politics into a new big-money politics, accompanied by a massive flow of benefits to the increasingly diversified Shinawatra family commercial empire.

Part Two provides an equally fact-packed narrative detailing Thaksin's precipitous descent over the five years since 2004. The process started with the estrangement of many of Thaksin's allies in the face of his increasingly authoritarian responses while his search for a reliable constituency lured him towards an equally strident populism. The tactic worked, and he was re-elected to office in early 2005 with a resounding majority, but at the cost of rising sectional and sectoral animosities. That victory mobilized a conservative backlash that eventually crystallized into a formal government inquiry. After preliminary corruption investigations concerning the setting up of Bangkok's new international airport, share ramping on the Bangkok stock exchange, the distribution of rubber seedlings to smallholders, the purchase of computers for government agencies, the building of tenements for slum dwellers, and the

disappearance of lottery revenues, the corruption charges against Thaksin and his regime climaxed in January 2006 following the sale of Thaksin's flagship company, Shin Corp, under exceedingly dubious circumstances. In the ensuing chaos, Thaksin dissolved Parliament and called new elections, which were duly invalidated by the courts on technical grounds.

The government's increasingly tenuous authority culminated in September 2006 in a military coup while Thaksin was overseas. Rather than return to Thailand, he and his family remained overseas, where he orchestrated a campaign of harassment against the coup group and its confederates. In the following months various court cases against Thaksin, family members, and close associates were pursued with a vengeance. In early 2008 Thaksin and his wife finally returned to Thailand, but then in the midst of accelerated court proceedings on various corruption charges they fled the country a second time. Later that year, Thaksin was found guilty in absentia of abuse of power and sentenced to two years in jail, making him a fugitive from Thai justice. In exile, he suffered the further indignities of revocation of several visas, withdrawal of his diplomatic passport, significant shrinkage of his financial worth, and divorce from his wife of 36 years. Subsequent events in Thailand, centering on a dangerous escalation of civil disorder, saw him play the spoiler's role of distant agitator. And there, as of early 2009, the narrative ends.

Missing from Pasuk and Baker's otherwise excellent exposition of Thaksin's rise and fall is the human-interest dimension of investigative journalism, the personal anecdotes and psychological insights that, as in Woodward's "instant histories," serve to vitalize the protagonist's life struggle and ultimately help explain his behavior. In tracing the course of Thaksin's actions and the events that they precipitated, the book reveals much about his career in public affairs, but it never really gets inside his skin to analyze the compulsions and impulses that make him tick—his moral grounding (or lack thereof), his considerable personal charm, his Machiavellian craftiness, his overweening self-esteem, his bewildering choices of allies and adversaries, his equally raveled relations with the Crown, his seemingly unquenchable thirst for wealth and power (and for vengeance when thwarted), and so forth.

The book concludes with a summary interpretation of the contemporary Thai political crisis, in which Thaksin is portrayed in the incongruous role of self-proclaimed champion of the oppressed—"a super-rich tycoon calling for revolution" (p. 362). Here finally the authors reveal something of their personal opinions, referring to Thaksin as "a man of no real principle, ethical or political" (p. 354), stating that "Thaksin's project was built around a fatal confusion. . . Throughout his career, politics and profit-making were entwined around one another like a pair of copulating snakes. . . It

was impossible to separate his quest for greater power to effect social and economic change from his quest for greater power to make money" (p. 356). With that characterization, Thaksin's personal drama takes on the trappings of a Faustian parable, pursuing an ageless, universal theme:

MEPHISTOPHELES—

Two functions would he pleasantly
combine,
In fact he thought his notion very fine:
To govern, and indulge his appetite.

FAUST—

A woeful error. He who has to hold
Command of men must have a leader's
mind,
Joy in authority, lofty will and bold,
A will not by the common herd
divined,
To trusted ears he tells his quiet intent,
And this is done — to nations' wonderment.
So stands he high, supreme, and so
obeyed,
The noblest still. Indulgence must
degrade.

— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe [1832],
Faust, Part II, Act IV.

Edward Van Roy

Alexandra Kent and David Chandler, editors, *People of Virtue: Reconfiguring Religion, Power and Moral Order in Cambodia Today*. NIAS Studies in Asian Topics 43, Nordic Institute of Asian Studies. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2009. xvii+323 pp. Hardbound: ISBN 978-87-7694-036-2; paperbound: ISBN 978-87-7694-037-9

A number of distinguished Cambodia scholars met in a conference at Varberg, Sweden in October 2005. They included the historians Alain Forest, David Chandler and Penny Edwards, the religious specialist Anne Hansen, and the anthropologists Judy Ledgerwood, Eve Zucker, John Marston and Alexandra Kent. The Venerable Khy Sovanratana of the Sangha Council of Cambodia spoke at the gathering, along with Heng Monychena of the non-governmental organization (NGO) Buddhism for Development and the Cambodian academic and education specialist Heng Sreang. The participants' concerns included, as Kent and Chandler state in their introduction to this volume of essays that grew out of the conference, questions of 'how community may be repaired after violent conflict, how religion and politics are interwoven and how moral order and historical change impact upon one another' (p. 1). Given the melancholy fact that so many other countries today are victims of war, instability and violence, these questions have broader, global significance.

How much changed irrevocably in Cambodia as a result of the violence and upheaval of the Pol Pot years between

1975 and 1979? As Judy Ledgerwood argues in her essay in this volume, 'If you ask a rural Khmer about Buddhism today you are likely to get the reply that Buddhism is much the same as it was before war and revolution devastated their country. What is different today, they will say, is the morality of the people, their inability to live according to the tenets of Buddhism' (p. 147). This view fits with the cyclical view of history of past Khmer society as alternating light and dark, of periods of prosperity and harmony interrupted by periods of destruction. Thus, for example, Cambodia slipped into a dark age in the late 1770s from which it did not emerge until after the coronation of Ang Duong in 1848. Eve Zucker's contribution draws attention to a 19th century Khmer poem analyzed in David Chandler's 'Songs at the Edge of the Forest' which deals with the problems of the 'rescuing of civilization from the clutches of chaos, the restoration of moral order, and the attempt to smooth over the rupture with that order's past' (p. 195). Whether such earlier upheavals were on the scale of the cataclysm that hit Cambodia in the 1970s is a moot point, but the Buddhist religion was able to act as a cement for moral order and reconstruction, and provide an ethical compass for the people's lives in times of turmoil. Today, as this volume suggests, the institutions of Buddhism themselves have been dented; the *sangha* 'has yet to recover both morally and intellectually after the years of repression' (p. 11), and many village elders have lost either their authority or their virtue (pp. 195–212).

As the contributors note, the period of 'Democratic Kampuchea' has been closely scrutinized by scholars. The 'killing fields' are the subject of countless books and documentary films. In 1970, the country was sucked into the Viet Nam War and subjected to destructive forces much deadlier than the Thai and Vietnamese armies which had ravaged the land in preceding centuries. The civil war that broke out after the National Assembly deposed Prince Sihanouk was fought with pitiless savagery on all sides. Between the coup and early 1973, the United States dropped almost 540,000 tons of bombs on the countryside with catastrophic effects. If the war-weary Cambodian people thought the victory of the Khmers Rouges in April 1975 would bring peace and national reconciliation, their hopes were dashed as Pol Pot's shadowy *Angkar* turned the country into one huge prison farm. The removal of the Pol Pot regime by the Vietnamese with the invasion of Christmas Day 1978 was a liberation from a regime perhaps best described as a 'thanatocracy'. Yet the incoming People's Republic of Kampuchea found that the destruction of the Pol Pot regime did not automatically lend it legitimacy in the eyes of the Cambodian people; indeed the discredited Khmers Rouges were able to capitalize on the government's ties with Viet Nam in order to give themselves some legitimacy. Sadly, too, in what amounted to a tragic coda to the Cold War, many Western and ASEAN nations refused to recognize the new regime, subjected Cambodia to a diplomatic, aid and trade

embargo, and even helped resuscitate the Khmers Rouges.

Cambodia thus emerged from the chaos of the 1970s and 1980s as a shattered society. That is the point of departure of this intriguing book. How, ask the authors, can such a traumatized society heal itself? How can it come to terms with and cope with such a bloody interlude? Moreover, life for most Cambodians today remains harsh, even as the threat of war recedes into the past. Most Khmers are powerless before new forces that threaten to turn their world upside down, buffeted between the waves of modernity and tradition, seeking a solid bottom on which to place their feet. Market liberalism and globalization might promise to be 'a rising tide that lifts all boats' towards prosperity, but most Cambodians remain poor in what remains one of the world's poorest countries, and such materialist dogmas cannot provide a moral bedrock for a society. The poor are also the victims of widespread corruption and abuse of power, social evils which are both the product and the cause of a widespread moral vacuum. With secular remedies discredited, many Khmers look to religion as the only force capable of regenerating their society. However, there is a problem here. As Kent and Chandler put it, the Buddhist *sangha* 'has yet to recover both morally and intellectually from years of repression' (p.11).

Yet the tenor of this book is cautiously optimistic. As Heng Sreang points out, modernist monks now play an active part in reformist politics: a role that has

often brought them into sharp conflict with the government as most notably in 1998 when monks were assaulted, fired on and shocked with electric batons for their part in peaceful demonstrations. Such actions have also brought them into conflict with the Cambodian Buddhist Supreme Patriarch. Mindful of the past political role of the *sangha*, Heng Sreang reminds us of the actions of Hem Chieu and other leading monks who triggered the country's movement for national independence from the French back in 1942. In 2006, too, 50 monks joined a 50-kilometre march for freedom of expression and non-violence which was organized by the Alliance for Freedom of Expression in Cambodia, a coalition of 28 NGOs. As Heng argues, 'the *sangha* is inevitably drawn into the Cambodian political arena'. While there is a danger of politicians attempting to co-opt them for their own sometimes questionable ends, monks 'could be a constructive force for the improvement and reconstruction of the social well-being and political life of the country' (pp. 249, 251). As Khy Sovanratana notes, however, that would require improvements in the religious and secular education of monks so that they would be better able to advise and guide.

While the effects of the bloody and disruptive past still weigh heavily, as Christine Nissen argues in the concluding essay, 'it may be inappropriate to speak of a moral breakdown' in Cambodian society (p. 287). The ubiquitous corruption in Cambodian public life is not socially accepted by the majority

of Cambodians. In the past, as Alain Forest puts it: 'It is no exaggeration to say that Khmer Buddhism has survived because of popular consent and popular initiatives (and the strong interdependence between the faithful and the monks)...' As a result, he continues, 'Buddhism was the only real, ensuring, unifying factor in this divided and desolate country' (p. 24). Religion is still deeply rooted in Cambodian culture and Buddhism, as Alex Hinton notes, has 'provided a way of coping with the past through meditation and concepts of forgiveness and letting go of anger' (p. 76). Thus, there are grounds to hope that the old Cambodian adage will continue to hold true: (loosely translated) 'the country of the Khmers will never die'.

John Tully

Caroline Hughes, *Dependent Communities: Aid and Politics in Cambodia and East Timor*. Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009. 265 pp. Hardbound: ISBN 978-0-87727-778-1; paperbound: ISBN 978-0-87727-748-4.

Caroline Hughes, professor of governance at Murdoch University, is a well-established Cambodia specialist and has written, apart from the present volume under review and other titles, *The Political Economy of Cambodia's Transition, 1991–2001*. This book, *Dependent Communities: Aid and Politics in Cambodia and East Timor*, makes an important contribution to the little-researched area of linkages between the politics of massive international intervention in national and local political arenas, and the subsequent politics of aid-dependent development.

The comparison between Cambodia and Timor Leste is particularly appropriate as both those countries experienced massive international interventions in the wake of disastrous Cold-War-induced civil war. Subsequently, both of them received massive inflows of aid. For Cambodia, that aid equaled 112.6 percent of its national budget, a level exceeded only in Afghanistan. The level of aid to Cambodia continues unabated today. Timor Leste similarly became heavily aid-dependent after its 1999 turmoil.

Chapter II compares the decades of disastrous civil wars in Cambodia with

the one of Timor Leste in the context of the Cold War. In this context it is crucial for analysis of aid and dependence to identify in either case which side was favored by the powers that be; i. e., the West (in political matters) or the North (in economic matters) which control the United Nations, the Bretton Woods institutions and the spigot of aid.

In Cambodia, the West clearly favored the resistance forces, even if they included the Khmer Rouge, over the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) that was established after the Vietnamese intervention in 1979. Lavish aid was bestowed on the former in their refugee camps, while Cambodia under the PRK was isolated politically and economically.

In Timor Leste, the case was not so clear. When the Suharto regime in Indonesia, a staunch ally of the West, invaded the country using the obviously leftist Frente Revolucionaria de Timor Leste Independente (FRETILIN) with the excuse of fighting communism, the United States tacitly approved that invasion even though the United Nations had never recognized Indonesian sovereignty over Timor Leste. However, subsequent large-scale human rights abuses by the Suharto regime in Timor Leste, including the killing of an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 people during the subsequent two decades, tilted the support of the West in favor of the resistance forces.

Hughes compares the experiences of the large-scale peacekeeping operations deployed by the United Nations in both Cambodia and Timor Leste. Those

interventions shared the common characteristic of some form of executive power not usually present in United Nations peacekeeping operations. In the case of Cambodia, those powers were quite limited; in Timor Leste, they were much more intrusive.

The United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) immediately left Cambodia after the successful elections and a new royal government had been established in 1993. Thereupon a totally new aid picture emerged, dominated by bilateral donors and the UN family of agencies plus the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

UNTAC accorded legitimate status to all four warring factions, including the Khmer Rouge. All of them, including the de facto government of PRK (later renamed State of Cambodia [SOC]), were reduced to being “existing administrative structures” which UNTAC was supposed to control—an impossible job. How could a handful of international officers control a bureaucracy that had been in power for 11 years? The present reviewer, as the UNTAC-appointed “shadow governor” of Siemreap, observed this anomaly firsthand in attempting to administer the SOC, with its well-established bureaucracy, with the help of a few others who didn’t speak Cambodian.

Unlike UNTAC, the United Nations Transitional Authority in East Timor (UNTAET) had real executive powers. Because Timor Leste had never been a country and because the Indonesian

provincial authorities were evacuated along with 300,000 Timorese, UNTAET actually became the government and had cabinet ministers along with Timorese. After independence had been achieved in 2002, it was replaced by the United Nations Mission of Support to East Timor (UNMISSET), which continued to provide executive support until its mandate ended in 2005. However, in the following year of 2006, when the political situation once more became volatile, the new and larger United Nations Integrated Mission of Timor Leste (UNMIT) was established with a mandate until 2010.

Most of the book under review is devoted to a comparative analysis of two issues: (a) the international policies that focused on rebuilding state institutions to accommodate the global market; and (b) the dilemmas of politicians in Cambodia and Timor Leste who struggled to satisfy both wealthy foreign benefactors and constituents at home. Hughes’s critical attitude towards international polices generally known as the “Washington Consensus” was applied to the political rather than economic effects of independence.

Timor Leste became heavily aid-dependent following 1999, due not only to the destruction wrought by departing Indonesian armed forces, but as well due to the effects on the Timorese economy after being suddenly wrenched from the Indonesian economy. Sadly, however, after the external threat of human rights abuses had disappeared, donors simply lost interest in the plight of the country. Thus the first Timorese government had

to focus on Timorese vulnerability to compassion fatigue. The elites focused on “branding” Timor Leste as a nation for “prudence”; In other words, East Timor had to advertise for and solicit aid. Hence, the author asserts, in Timor Leste, the political leaders discretion of action was minimal. The finances of the government were transparent for all to see and the bureaucracy was organized to prevent misappropriation of funds entrusted to a generally clean administration.

Cambodia, on the other hand, never had to beg for aid. Throughout the post-conflict period, until today, donors have continued to provide massive aid to the country. Hughes describes the feeling of mutual distrust that developed between the donors and Hun Sen, who reemerged as the only strongman after 1998. In this context, the donors channeled the bulk of their aid through the growing numbers and power of Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and to the Cambodian government through project aid, rather than program aid, leaving the government with little leverage or control over such aid. Often project aid goes to pay fat-cat foreign “experts” fantastic salaries so that the money mostly goes right back to the host country.

At the receiving end, the ability of Hun Sen and the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) to flout donor demands for “conditionality” was a fascinating story which Hughes attributes to three factors: firstly, Cambodian politicians simply removed a large proportion of the de facto government budget from the books

and therefore beyond the purview of donors, distributing it through a shadow state of patronage networks that linked the party, the bureaucracy, and the military ever more tightly as time went by. Their leeway has expanded recently with two new sources of funds: the People’s Republic of China as a source of aid and investment, and oil reserves from the Gulf of Thailand.

Secondly, the government retains its maneuverability in an aid-dependent context because Hun Sen, after having consolidated power in 1998 and beyond, has achieved a degree of moral authority in the eyes of the donors because what he is doing appears to them to be working. Hughes does not commit the folly of other Western writers on Cambodia, of engaging in Hun Sen bashing. For instance, unlike the conventional wisdom of such writers, she did not label the clashes of 5–6 July 1997 as a coup d’état by Hun Sen, rather calling it the outbreak of hostilities. She argues that Prince Norodom Ranariddh, co-premier with Hun Sen and his adversary, decried his own lack of power and was attempting to build up his party’s military forces. Ironically, the donors were relieved that the destabilizing era of having two premiers ended in 1998, even if the winner Hun Sen was not their favorite.

Thirdly, the Cambodian government’s ability to resist pressure for reform has resulted from the demobilizing tactics of donors themselves with respect to Cambodian civil society. The donors supported the establishment of civil society including labor unions,

among other groups, but have left these organizations weakly defended against government tactics that include violence and the prohibition of protest marches.

Chapter VIII, the last, analyses the key question of whether a dependent community which emerges from an act of international intervention to end a war can offer ordinary people a meaningful framework within which to imagine their own citizenship and organize participation. Based on Hughes's personal fieldwork in Cambodia from 1996 to 2003 and in Timor Leste in 2005, the analysis provides new insights into the problem.

In Cambodia at the end of the 1990s, the CPP succeeded in maintaining the loyalty of the people, particularly in rural areas. Two factors that helped the CPP contributed to the success of the decentralization process. The first was the election of commune councils in 2002, which resulted in an overwhelming CPP victory. The CPP retained control of the councils which they had held since 1980. Second was the expansion of a village-based participatory development program called SEILA ("Foundation Stone"), that had been operating successfully in the northwestern provinces, to the whole country. The UNDP executed the Cambodia Area Rehabilitation and Regeneration Project (CARERE), which was the forerunner of SEILA, in the whole country. SEILA involves provincial development committees to support capital investment projects proposed by communities. Finally Hun Sen himself is forever present

in the rural areas giving speeches at inauguration ceremonies of projects associated with himself, including many schools bearing his name.

The story of Timor Leste reveals an entirely different picture. Hughes's analysis is helped by detailed interviews in two villages, Laleila and Tibar. The village interviewees drew comparisons between the post-independence era and the Indonesian era, remarking the sense of isolation that had come with independence. Government intended to promote local control, as opposed to facilitating broader national or regional control; that in fact encouraged political fragmentation, particularly since local persons had no opportunity to provide input in planning and thereby assert some control over the selection and designs of the projects to be funded.

Hughes observes that the FRETILIN government of 2002–2007 in Timor Leste more closely resembled that of the Cambodian resistance, the FUNCINPEC and its allies, rather than the CPP; although they did not receive lavish aid like the resistance in Cambodia. Most of the FRETILIN central committee members who survived Indonesia's 25-year occupation had spent the war in exile. When FRETILIN exiles returned they found that their views on the question of nationhood were significantly out of step with those of resistance forces at home. Hughes emphasizes that the return of FRETILIN exiles to Timor Leste and their accession to power put two contrasting forms of nationalism on a collision course. For those of the 1970s resistance movement,

the “Indonesianization” of Timor Leste was to be resisted, as it represented oppression and “de-culturization”. They demanded that aspects of Portuguese culture including the Portuguese language be adopted. The Timorese who had stayed in country, on the other hand, insisted that independence also meant rejecting Portuguese colonialism and language in favor of Tetum, which everybody spoke.

Hughes’s book is highly recommended for general readers and a must for those interested in post-conflict countries.

Benny Widyono

Grant Evans, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty: A Documentary History*. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2009. 443 pp. 523 photos. Hardbound: ISBN 978-974-9511-66-4

This large, beautifully produced and lavishly illustrated book brings to life the all-but-forgotten Lao monarchy through more than 500 photographs and dozens of descriptions, reports, letters and interviews with surviving members of the former royal family. The photographs have been assiduously collected over several years, and many of the documents have been translated from French and Lao by their compiler. To set the context for the photographs and documents, Grant Evans provides a longish introduction. Apart from its value to historians and anyone interested in the history of Laos, the book should appeal immensely to the worldwide Lao diaspora, nostalgic for the kingdom they once knew.

An anthropologist turned historian, Evans is one of the finest scholars working on Laos today, with several books to his name. He is particularly interested in how cultural and religious symbols and rituals are constructed and used for political ends; on the face of it, this book reflects those interests. His presentation, however, invites a number of questions. This brief review concentrates on just two. The first is: what sort of message does this book have for a reader? The second is: how is a reader to understand the historical role of the monarchy in Laos?

So, first to the book. To begin with, there is an intriguing ambiguity in the title that is carried through into the content. The ‘last century’ of Lao royalty has at least three possible meanings. Since the Lao monarchy came to an end in 1975 when King Sisavang Vatthana abdicated, and this volume purports to be ‘a documentary history’, the most obvious reading would be that the ‘last century’ refers to the period from 1875 to 1975. Since the book begins with the return in 1888 of King Ounkham to Luang Phrabang after it had been sacked the previous year by Tai and Chinese bandits, the ‘last’ century would actually cover just a ‘short’ century from 1888 to 1975. Or the last century could refer to Lao royalty during the twentieth century, which is what it is mostly about. Or the last century could date from the book’s publication, extended to cover the ‘long’ century from 1888 to the present. This last alternative is not as unlikely as would at first appear, since Evans includes a recent interview with the pretender to the Lao throne, whom he describes as being ‘in waiting’, and ends with an account of how commemorative rituals are performed for the royal family to this day.

The book is divided into 16 sections, arranged in part chronologically and in part thematically. They begin with the transfer of sovereignty over Lao territories east of the Mekong from Siam to France, as seen through colonialist French eyes, followed by two sections covering the ‘Main Palace’ during the reign of King Sisavang Vong (1885–1959; reigned 1904–1959),

and the 'Front Palace' personified by Prince Phetsarath (1890–1959). These two institutions refer to the king and the *ouparat* or viceroy, a position that King Chulalongkorn abolished in Siam, but which lived on in Luang Phrabang in an hereditary form until 1920, when Phetsarath's father died. It then lapsed, only to be resuscitated in 1941 when Phetsarath was appointed to the position.

The political *pas de deux* of Sisavang Vong and Phetsarath was critical in shaping the future of Laos during the turbulent years from the Japanese *coup de force* of March 1945 until the country obtained full independence from France in October 1953. Evans devotes a section to this period when the monarchy was challenged by the nationalist Lao Issara, led by Phetsarath. The relationship between the two men is discussed later in this review. Suffice it here to note that while Phetsarath declared the unification of Laos as an independent state, the king favoured the return of the French.

The next section, subtitled 'The Making of a National Monarchy', is devoted to royal travels, both internally and internationally, which Evans interprets as having established the legitimacy of the king as head of state in the eyes of all Lao. The following section covers the rule of King Sisavang Vatthana (subtitled 'Ruling through Righteousness'). This subtitle, like that of the previous section, is indicative of the sympathetic treatment Evans accords the monarchy throughout the book. Subsequent sections are devoted to the royal families of Champasak (focusing

on Prince Boun Oum) and Xiang Khuang, and to the political activities of the princely half-brothers, Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong.

Four sections follow whose rationale seems to be that they reveal the personalities and activities of kings and princes in a positive light. One section is devoted entirely to the art of embroidery in gold thread, apparently singled out because it is traditionally performed by the ladies of the extended royal family. Other arts wholly or partly dependent on royal patronage are ignored, such as Lao classical dance, puppetry, sculpture, wood carving and the decorative arts as applied in the royal monasteries and the palace.

One section is devoted to the important ritual and religious role of the monarchy, the disappearance of which Evans, the anthropologist, clearly regrets. And the reader can sympathise, in comparing the New Year ceremonies of 1953 described by Henri Deydier with what remains of them today in the Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR). Next come royal portraits presented in the form of interviews by Evans of five members of the royal family, including Prince Soulivong, grandson of King Sisavang Vatthana and pretender to the Lao throne; and royal weddings, which Evans presents as nationally unifying public spectacles. While the interviews (some of which could have been edited) reveal the homely side of the Luang Phrabang monarchy, the weddings displayed both wealth and status—as most Lao weddings do.

The two brief concluding sections tell the story of the imprisonment and death of King Sisavang Vatthana, his only queen (his father had had 11) Khamphui, and Crown Prince Vong Savang at the hands of the new communist rulers, who refused for years to admit they were dead; and the revival of commemorative rituals for King Sisavang Vong in Luang Phrabang, and their performance by members of the royal family in France. The future of the Lao monarchy is thus permitted to remain open.

The reader certainly comes away from this book with a more rounded picture of the Lao royal families, from their personal lives (no whiff of scandal noted, except that some failed to marry ethnic Lao spouses) to their ritual obligations and their political roles, which they performed with dignity. In his introduction Evans absolves the Lao monarchy of virtually all criticism (though to be fair, not all of the documents he includes are entirely laudatory). No character flaws or political misjudgements are discussed. Criticism by the Lao Issara of the political role played by Sisavang Vatthana, when he was Crown Prince, is brushed aside with the help of political theory: it is difficult to be a crown prince (as Charles Windsor would probably agree). Corruption on the part of Prince Boun Oum is mentioned to be quickly passed over. Evans emphasises rather the significant ritual role monarchy played in Lao culture and religion. The reader may be forgiven for concluding that Evans would be happy to see Laos revert to a constitutional monarchy—even though

he admits this is unlikely.

There is, however, a downside to monarchy that Evans does not examine, which has to do with how the example of hereditary privilege reinforces social status and hierarchy and so limits (or even prevents) social mobility. This was certainly the case in Laos, where the heads powerful aristocratic families monopolised political power, mostly for their own benefit and at the expense of the nation. King Sisavang Vatthana might admonish them for corruption and be frugal in his own habits, but he also endorsed their activities by presenting them with noble titles. The very existence of monarchy underwrote their hereditary position in a firmly entrenched social hierarchy, which the unscrupulous and greedy were able to exploit. Furthermore, in a hierarchical society the relationship between monarchy and democracy is often problematic. Recall that to relegate monarchy to a purely constitutional role took centuries in England.

There is, by the way, a justification for having a king as head of state in a Theravada Buddhist country, which Evans does not make explicitly, but which is implied by his focus on ritual and religion. Through the concept of karma, Buddhism accepts that human beings are not born equal: some have more advantages than others because they are more advanced along the universal path towards Enlightenment. The social circumstances of rebirth reflect this, as does social status, which is accorded to monks and families wealthy enough to make considerable

merit through donations to the Sangha. Kings stand at the apex of this merit-making social hierarchy, revered, as is the King of Thailand, for the merit made in previous lifetimes in order to be reborn into the royal family and become king, as well as for the additional merit made this time around.

All five Theravada Buddhist countries were once monarchies. Only Thailand and Cambodia remain so, and the monarchy in Cambodia hardly inspires confidence in its longevity. Every reader, Lao or foreign, might have his or her own view on whether the Lao monarchy should be restored (as the Cambodian monarchy has been). While Evans's own views can only be guessed at, he presents such a favourable view of constitutional monarchy in Laos prior to formation of the Lao PDR that to the reader might reasonably detect a subtext favouring its restoration.

In reviewing the performance of the Lao monarchy prior to 1975, *The Last Century of Lao Royalty* presents history in two forms. There are the documents, carefully selected, and there is Evans's 40-page introduction, which presents his own interpretation of the political and cultural/religious activities of the Lao monarchy. Of those two areas of activity, this review focuses on Evans's interpretation of the former, as it was the political decisions of Lao royalty (not just the king, but other royal players too) that shaped the independent Kingdom of Laos at key moments in its brief history.

Under the French, the kings of Luang Phrabang had limited jurisdiction and

were not constitutional monarchs. Evans dates the constitutional monarchy in Laos from 23 April 1946, when King Sisavang Vong was re-enthroned as king at the behest of the Lao Issara, which had deposed him the previous October. This event climaxed a tumultuous year during which Lao nationalism came of age. It was, of course, encouraged by the French as a riposte to the 'pan-Thai-ism' emanating from Bangkok. Nationalist activities took place mainly in Viang Chan, which by then had come to be included in the protectorate of Luang Phrabang. The court, however, was largely insulated from these developments—until the protectorate was brought to a sudden end by the Japanese *coup de force* of March 1945. The king was forced to declare independence, but he did so not for Laos as a whole—only for the Kingdom of Luang Phrabang. The rest was administered by the Japanese by right of conquest over the French administration.

From his coronation in 1904, Sisavang Vong had had minimal contact with central and southern Laos, whose inhabitants overwhelmingly did not recognise him as their king. Personally conservative, in 1945 he was already 60 years old and set in his ways. Prince Phetsarath, then *ouparat*, was only five years younger, but far more widely travelled within the country and much more forward-looking and abreast of events. It was Phetsarath who led the Lao Issara to seize power after the Japanese surrender, and who proclaimed the independence and unification of

Laos. The king, already in contact with the French in the form of Major (later Colonel) Hans Imfeld (not Emfeld), and clearly acting on French advice, thereupon dismissed Phetsarath as both prime minister of the government of Luang Phrabang and *ouparat*.

Evans explains this clash between the king, strongly supported by Crown Prince Sisavang Vatthana, and Prince Phetsarath as an ‘unintended outcome of the half-way house political structure put in place in 1941’ when the Luang Phrabang kingdom was extended to include the provinces of Haut Mékong, Xiang Khuang, and most notably Viang Chan in compensation for the loss (temporary, as it turned out) of Sayaboury to Thailand. He portrays the king as doing what he thought best for all Laos, given its weakness in the face of powerful expansionist neighbours. And he plays down differences between Sisavang Vong and Phetsarath on the grounds that the latter always wanted Laos to be a constitutional monarchy, and so was never really opposed to the king.

What this explanation glosses over is the failure of both the king and the equally conservative crown prince either to understand the forces of nationalism that the Second World War and its aftermath had unleashed, not only in Laos but across the colonial world, or to grasp the opportunities it offered to assume a leading role in the movement for Lao independence—as Sihanouk did in Cambodia. Phetsarath, on the other hand, as formerly the most senior Lao civil servant under the French,

not only viewed Laos as a whole, but also understood much better both the changes that were occurring and the opportunities they offered. These differences in understanding were what motivated the two men to take the actions they did, not any personal antagonism or competitiveness between them and their families. What ill-feeling there was later resulted from the king’s response to Phetsarath’s proclamation of Lao independence as a constitutional monarchy. The king did not have to dismiss Phetsarath. He could have played a more ambiguous role. Instead he aligned himself with the French.

Evans takes to task my own argument, in my *History of Laos* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), that the king missed another opportunity to raise the leadership profile of the monarchy by making Viang Chan his principal place of residence, which would have better enabled him to serve as a symbol of national unity, reduce the regionalism of the south, and act as a restraining influence in case of political conflict. Evans rejects such criticism on the grounds of the king’s age, which made him reluctant to move, that Luang Phrabang had ‘as much claim as Vientiane to be the historical capital of the country’, and that the king had important ritual functions to perform in Luang Phrabang. But his arguments miss the point. Evans is forced to admit that maintaining Luang Phrabang as a separate royal capital did demonstrate ‘a certain failure of political imagination’, but even for this he blames the Royal Lao Government, not the monarchy. I

still maintain, however, that a significant opportunity was lost for which the monarchy was most to blame, and this was of a pattern with the failure of the king to play any leadership role in achieving Lao independence.

Evans maintains that royal travels and weddings, plus fulfilling the crown's constitutional and religious obligations, were enough to change the Luang Phrabang monarchy into widely loved kings of Laos. I am not so sure. Sisavang Vong suffered from arthritis and did not like to travel around the country. His son travelled more, both as crown prince and king, but like his father preferred to remain in Luang Phrabang. I remember watching him as king in the 1960s on some choreographed occasions. He clearly lacked the common touch, which Sihanouk and Phetsarath had, and always looked severe and unbending. He was received with respect, but not with warmth or enthusiasm. In fact most rural folk had little idea who he was or what he stood for, which worried the United States embassy. In 1970, in a document included in this book, US Ambassador G. McMurtrie Godley expressed his doubts that the king or crown prince could ever 'provide the kind of national identity that Asian monarchies such as the Thai or Japanese give' (p. 212). The king, he noted, was not outgoing and had proved 'inept' in winning support in southern Laos (where most people still regarded Boun Oum as their 'king').

Despite McMurtrie's criticism, Evans presents a very positive picture of the last (and only) two kings of

the modern Kingdom of Laos—both in his introduction and through the documents he has chosen. (I wonder, did the French embassy share the positive American views that Evans includes?) His purpose in writing the book is to restore the monarchy to its proper place in Lao history—a place that has been all but erased in the political propaganda that masquerades as history in the Lao PDR. It is unlikely that a documentary history in English would have much impact in Laos (the Lao translation of Evans's *Short History of Laos* has a better chance of doing that); but the photographs are now on record and speak louder than foreign words in a country whose proclaimed ideology is discredited and whose communist rulers have had no alternative but to revert to nationalism—and have already gone so far as to raise a statue to King Fa Ngum, founder of the Lao kingdom of Lan Xang!

Evans states that another purpose in compiling this book was to bring about the 'recovery of memory'. But just what does that mean? Memory can only be recovered in those who have all but forgotten past experiences; it cannot be recovered in those who have never experienced the events described. For the next generation, the past must be constructed anew, and that is the task of historians. *The Last Century of Lao Royalty* goes some way towards filling a significant gap in Lao history. However, a definitive history of the Lao monarchy still remains to be written—not least because the Lao government refused

Evans access to the royal archives, such is its continuing sensitivity to the monarchy.

Errors are few in this comprehensive study (though former foreign minister Quinim Pholsena was assassinated in 1963, not in the '1950s'). Attentive readers will find a few annoying typographical errors, mostly among French terms, where a couple of dozen additional accents need to be sprinkled around. Lao transliterations are not always consistent (Phoui and Phouy, for example, on page 11), but the book must have been a challenging one to edit. The index of photo credits does not list all photographs not taken by Evans himself, as it claims to. Who, for instance, took the wonderful series of photographs of the That Luang festival in Luang Phrabang in 1938? And it is not always clear when 'documents' have in

fact been written by Evans himself (as is the one on Souphanouvong). But such blemishes are few.

In conclusion, this impressive book presents a sympathetic (some might say overly sympathetic) portrait of the Lao monarchy. If the suspicion remains that there is a subtext to be read into it, Evans has every right to his interpretation—as others have to differ in theirs. Constitutional monarchy may or may not be a preferable form of government for Laos, though the current Lao ruling elite would certainly not think so. Nonetheless, whatever may be the reader's view, the future of the Lao monarchy is a matter for the Lao people alone to decide.

Martin Stuart-Fox

Søren Ivarsson, *Creating Laos: The Making of a Lao Space between Indochina and Siam, 1860–1945*. NIAS Monographs 112, Nordic Institute of Asia Studies. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008. 250 pp. Hardbound: ISBN 978-87-7694-022-5; paperbound: ISBN 978-87-7694-023-2

Creating Laos is a delightful book. It will be of interest to Lao-watchers (both academics and informed readers), regional specialists and those investigating the rise and consolidation of contemporary nation states. The book deals with just a snippet of Lao history, from 1860 to 1945. Ivarsson sets out to understand the meaning of “Laos” during this time: what was Laos as a territory, a people, an idea? He explains that his interest is in “cultural nationalism” rather than state nationalism. His is not a history of treaties or policies, but an account of an emerging and shifting *cultural* sense of nationhood. Ivarsson’s use of the concept of culture here is unusual: he appears to mean it in the sense of “high culture”, although he does not use this phrase. Ivarsson proceeds from a study of the records left by elites such as “historians, lexicographers, artists and the like” (pp. 8ff.), educated and often urban people who were engaged in often explicit attempts to be opinion leaders and to shape emerging conditions. He also includes analysis of the written records left by French colonial officers and Thai authors as well as administrative maps. Over the last century, anthropologists

and more recently academics in related disciplines such as cultural studies have “relativized” culture by arguing that, far from the preserve of the so-called “civilized” few or leaders, culture is something that everyone has, and the issue for analysis is to elucidate the patterns, meanings and discourses that inform not only high culture, but also mass culture and indeed subaltern or oppositional cultural dialogues. Readers looking for an historical account of cultural nationalism in this sense, of the everyday, lived experience of Lao-ness, will not find it in this book. It is very much about how “the Lao” were known by others and by leaders, rather than what they knew about themselves in these relationships. Nonetheless, the book remains an excellent addition to the literature, not least for its attention to cultural aspects, and it will no doubt spur more attention to cultural aspects in future historical research in the region.

Creating Laos begins with an examination of the idea of “Laos” during the first phase of the colonial encounter. This topic is approached through an examination of French colonial discourse, attempts by European scientists to define a Lao race, and the use of history to argue that French colonialism had recuperated a people and place fallen from a previous golden age. This chapter illustrates decisively that knowing Laos was not a matter of simple observation, but of creating an object to then know. The second chapter provides a very interesting account of Laos through Thai eyes, particularly the

evolution of writings about the so-called “lost territories” among scholars and in school texts. Ivarsson puts forward the argument that Laos was a “non-country” from the Thai perspective at this time (pp. 65ff.). The third chapter is the longest and also one of the most interesting. It provides an account of how Lao nationalism was cultivated by the French (particularly in the period 1893–1940) through interventions such as road links between the major Mekong Valley towns, national histories and a national language. Ivarsson dwells on urban elite perspectives, remaining silent on the experiences of rural people, uplanders and minority groups. Nevertheless, the chapter sparkles with an entertaining and insightful use of fresh sources, such as the French civil servant who is quoted as describing Laos as “a blister on the foot of the peasants from Annam” (Marquet in Ivarsson, p. 106). Such arresting quotations are effective in persuading the reader of Ivarsson’s main argument: that Laos, in the form in which we encounter it today, was not a foregone conclusion. Rather, it was “created” — in sometimes unintended ways — through the tension between competing images and projects of what Laos was and what it could or should be. What remains to examine now is if and how these competing elite projects and images translated into everyday lives and experiences. Then, as now, most Lao lived in rural areas and were diverse in language, education and interest in urban politicking. Was there a “trickle-down” effect from the

elites that Ivarsson discusses to such people? Were their ideas opposed, adopted or transformed in such local interactions? Ivarsson’s innovative and highly readable book provides a valuable step towards considering these and other questions about the Lao past.

Holly High

Shigeharu Tanabe, editor, *Imagining Communities in Thailand: Ethnographic Approaches*. Chiang Mai: Mekong Press, 2008. viii+221 pp. Paperbound: ISBN 978-974-133964-8

Four of the six papers collected together for this volume come from a symposium attended by Japanese and Thai scholars and one Western observer—Roger Goodman, Oxford University’s Nissan Professor of Modern Japanese Studies. The meetings were sponsored by the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka in late 2003. Professor Tanabe—esteemed, long-time scholar of Thai society and culture and then working for the museum—convened the symposium. With the backing of Otani University in Kyoto, where he now teaches, Tanabe was able to bring the symposium papers (with two additions) into the public domain.

This book is no easy read and is most unlikely to generate much passion beyond the ranks of academic social scientists. Nonetheless it is a significant work for two principal reasons: first, because the four chapters by Thai scholars provide an important insight into the direction that some indigenous ethnographic research in Thailand is now taking; and second, because the book presents such a very different image of the ethnographic enterprise than that of yesteryear. (This reviewer intentionally avoids judgmental characterizations such as “better”, “more important” or “more interesting”.)

Its six chapters consist of: “Family and Children in Thailand” (not

family and children in X location or among Y people but *in Thailand*), by Thanet Wongyannava; “The Sisa Asoke Community [of the Santi Asoke Buddhist reform sect] in Si Sa Ket Province”, by Kanoksak Kaewthep; “The Ta-la-ku [Karen] Community along the Thai Myanmar Border”, by Kwanchewan Buadaeng; “Vendors and Small Entrepreneurs in the Chiang Mai Night Bazaar”, by Apinya Fuengfusakul; “Northern Thai Factory Women”, by Kyonosuke Hirai; and, “HIV/AIDS Self-Help Groups in Northern Thailand”, by the editor himself. Only Dr. Kwanchewan’s contribution seems to represent an unbroken continuity from the research of decades past.

Gone, for the most part, are the old, finely wrought descriptions of traditional social institutions, most commonly based on long-time residence in a single, more-often-than-not rural community. For Roger Goodman (p. 190), such studies offered “a very static ... view of ... [society]”; their approach was “relatively ahistorical and they tended to treat societies as isolated units.” But is not Goodman here simply repeating, *mantra* fashion, worn-out charges against mid-twentieth century structural functionalism, rather than offering a valid critique of ethnographic research in Thailand over the past 60 years?—before that, there wasn’t much anyway. To refute Goodman’s observation, so many anthropologists of the senior generation who have worked in Thailand—scholars like Barend Terwiel, S. J. Tambiah, Jeremy Kemp, William Skinner (and there are a

host more)—have so readily and easily moved between ethnography and history in their publications.

Most of the earlier ethnographic-based works did indeed tend to focus—initially at least—on traditional socio-cultural institutions and how they constrained individual social behaviour and thought (again see Goodman on p. 191 of the work under review). Therefore, in so far as the majority of the authors in this book seek to demonstrate, in Goodman’s words, “how the individual constructs, changes, and legitimates the idea of society”, *Imagining Communities in Thailand* is welcome as an alternative perspective.

The theoretical position that holds the chapters of this book together (and provides also its title) represents an adaptation of the ideas of American political scientist Benedict Anderson, whose principal case study is Indonesia, to sub-national communities: the family (chapter 1), the religious sect (chapters 2 & 3), persons sharing a common occupation (chapters 4 & 5)—even a common ailment (chapter 6).

Anderson defines a nation as a political community whose citizens “imagine” their common membership of a sovereign and limited entity, without the necessity (or even possibility) of interacting with one another on a day-to-day, face-to-face basis, as is (or, better, was) the situation in so many of the traditional communities that have been studied by social anthropologists—and, of course, it is the individual, not the collectivity (*pace* Durkheim) that does the imagining.

To return to Roger Goodman (p. 190): “While the state and/or its agents (big business, newspapers, the bureaucracy) can try to control the key cultural symbols and legitimize their meanings, these will always be susceptible to change. *It is this concept of change and challenge that is meant by invoking the active form* imagining ... *in the title of this volume* [emphasis added]”, in contrast to Anderson’s use of the “passive form, *imagined*” for his own book.

The volume, as noted earlier, is a hard read; but it has been admirably edited and published by Mekong Press (a subsidiary of Silkworm Books) of Chiang Mai, to whom, along with the editor Professor Tanabe, we owe gratitude for making this collection available in the public domain.

Anthony R. Walker

Christophe Munier and Myint Aung, *Burmese Buddhist Murals, Volume 1: Epigraphic Corpus of the Powin Taung Caves*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2007. 524 pp. Paperbound: ISBN 978-974-480-127-2

The Powin Taung caves are a series of Buddhist rock-hewn excavations near Mandalay, west of the Chindwin River and about 30 kilometres from the city of Monywa in Upper Burma. There are roughly 500 caves, only 29 of which retain their mural paintings, with their original Burmese captions. They are amply illustrated in this tome by Christophe Munier and Myint Aung with nearly 400 black-and-white and 90 colour photographs. According to the authors, only a handful of dated, painted inscriptions have been found, all belonging to the second half of the 18th century—the early Konbaung Period (1752–1885). The authors note that the style of much of the painting suggests, however, that many of the caves were completed in the first half of the 18th century.

Powin Taung has enjoyed a long history in the secondary literature, noted perhaps first by Taw Sein Ko (1901) and later more systematically by Charles Duroiselle (1920) in an *Annual Report, Archaeological Survey of India*. The latter publication put the caves on the map of significant sites, although Powin Taung remained fairly inaccessible until the early 1990s, largely because the area was off-limits to foreigners until then. Lately, however, package-tour groups from abroad have come to share Powin

Taung with a colony of aggressive monkeys that have reproduced there for generations. Added to this mix is an ever increasing number of devotees from Monywa and Mandalay, a journey facilitated by a bridge spanning the Chindwin above Monywa. As donations have grown, so too have the number of local shops and monasteries.

Munier and Myint Aung have collaborated to produce this splendid new monograph on Powin Taung, a study that focuses on the hundreds of Burmese explanatory captions placed beneath the horizontal registers of mural painting. Munier is a long-time student of Burmese who has researched the caves for many years, while Myint Aung belongs to a select group of dedicated senior government officers who witnessed the decline of the Department of Archaeology during the Ne Win era. Now semi-retired, Myint Aung has devoted himself to scholarly projects.

The disposition of the caves is indicated on a handy site plan, with each excavation assigned a number. While the principal caves are known locally by popular names, the new numbering system formulated here is likely to become the standard.

This volume follows upon the heels of another book on Powin Taung, by Anne-May Chew, issued by White Lotus in 2005: *The Cave-temples of Po Win Taung, Central Burma: Architecture, Sculpture and Murals*. While the primary focus of Munier and Myint Aung is the murals and the captions, the authors perhaps should have explained in their

introduction how their study is dissimilar from the earlier one and whether their basic conclusions differ from Chew's, if at all. Chew, for example, refers to a number of dated 18th-century stone and painted inscriptions that are omitted in the volume under review (Chew, pp. 14–17). Also, it is difficult to cross-reference the two books, since Chew adopted only the popular names of the caves, while Munier and Myint Aung fashioned a new numbering system that makes no reference to the popular names. (Pierre Pichard's celebrated *Inventory of Monuments at Pagan* has, for example, a list of the old names used in Pe Maung Tin and Gordon H. Luce's translation of the *Glass Palace Chronicle of the Kings of Burma* [of 1923] which are cross-referenced with the numbering system used in the *Inventory*).

Perhaps the most useful section of the book is chapter 11 ('Epigraphic corpus: Complete texts of the captioned murals and their translations'), which takes up more than one third of the entire volume (pp. 138–374). A ground plan of each cave is presented, complete with invaluable diagrams of the inner walls and the exact positions of the various subjects depicted in the murals. All of the captions are presented in Burmese characters, together with English translations. Such raw data are certainly the most valuable part of this volume.

The subjects of the paintings were rather constant and included the 28 Buddhas, key episodes from the life of the Buddha, the Seven Weeks, and the last 10 *jataka* tales (all but the *Sama*

Jataka) and the Eight Great Victories. The list of last 10 *jataka* (pp. 93–94) was taken from the Sri Lankan Pali canon, while the order depicted in the caves follows the Burmese sequencing, which is slightly different. (The same Burmese system is found at Pagan and Thaton.) For example, the *Vidhura Jataka* is No. 9 in the Burmese sequence but is No. 8 in the Sinhalese Pali version. There is no discussion of the Burmese ordering which may confuse some readers who are comparing the list of *jataka* to the sequencing found in the caves.

Artists probably completed the murals before the captions were painted beneath the scenes on long, narrow, horizontal registers. The present reviewer has come to this conclusion because the wording of a number of inscriptions includes small and unusual details featured in the paintings. For example, the caption beneath a depiction of Dipankara in cave No. 281 reads: 'The Bodhisatta Dipankara lives in Rammavati kingdom, in the queen's palace. The Indian gatekeeper is smoking. The Bodhisatta Dipankara leaves for the forest on an elephant' (p. 39). Since the episode of the Indian gatekeeper was not likely part of the Burmese religious text from which the information was drawn, the artists must have included extra elements that were later spotted by those applying the captions. This reviewer's tentative conclusion hints at the flexibility that artists enjoyed—and is testimony to the need for recording such additional descriptions in the captions. Perhaps future comparisons with other 18th-century painting can determine precisely

the ways in which the artists executed their work.

Readers interested in Buddhist life in the 18th century will find in the captions and paintings a treasure trove. For instance, depicted on the ceiling of cave No. 284 are the four legendary stupas that enshrine the Buddha's tooth relics, each identified by an inscription. That their locations differ somewhat from those of the relics in the *Glass Palace Chronicle* is noteworthy. Another example is a reference to the Eight Great Victories in one inscription, dated 1761, from another painting site in Upper Burma. These eight episodes are ubiquitously represented together in 20th-century Burmese pagodas and the inscription is probably among the earliest dated records of this theme; this set of eight was likely borrowed from Sri Lanka at probably about this same time. Such examples are just some of the gems of information revealed by the texts beneath the paintings.

While the captions are the focus of the book, the volume contains a number of references to comparable murals in Upper Burma in terms of style and iconography. Those observations, sprinkled throughout the book, might have profitably been compiled in a single section where the broad topics of chronology and styles in Upper Burma could be viewed in a systematic fashion. Comparisons between the Powin Taung caves and securely dated murals in Upper Burma would help place the cave murals in a tighter context. Many questions remain, such as the extent to which the Powin Taung murals represent

provincial work in the lower Chindwin area or reflect styles or variants that flourished in the Ava-Amarapura area or the Pagan region. Powin Taung straddles numerous contemporaneous painting sites in proximity to the lower Chindwin, such as Aneint, Mau, Yesago and Pakhangyi, many of which Alexandra Green has done much to uncover. The authors state that much of the painting is pre-Konbaung, which is almost certain, but a closer probe of the issue would have contributed to a better sense of how the site evolved throughout the 18th century.

The authors conclude by promising that three future volumes will be devoted to 'different styles, comparative iconography, religious themes and daily life as portrayed in the murals from the late 17th to the mid-19th century' (p. 378). Many unresolved art-historical questions will surely be explored in the forthcoming works. The present volume with its meticulous recording of the paintings and inscriptions at one important site should serve as a model for future projects. Indeed, this volume is indispensable for those interested in later Burmese painting. Art historians of Burma owe a substantial debt of gratitude to Munier and Myint Aung for their contribution and to White Lotus for publishing such a significant and pioneering study.

Donald A. Stadtner
