

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 Kitarsa. 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 Thanes 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