

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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 Ankham 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

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