

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

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