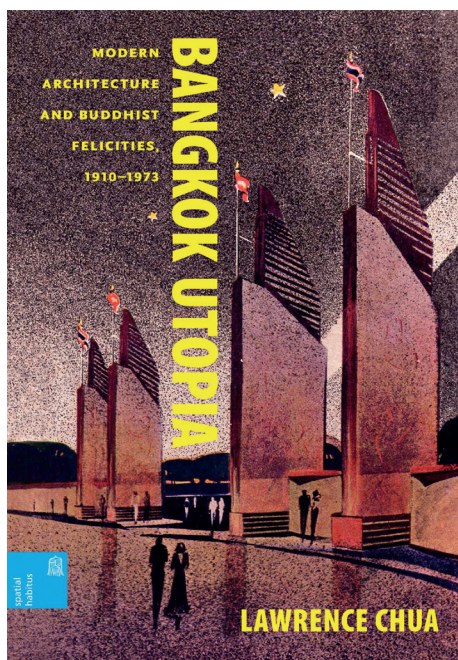


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Bangkok Utopia: Modern Architecture and Buddhist Felicities, 1910-1973 by Lawrence Chua (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021). ISBN: 9780824884604 (hardback). US\$75.00.



Bangkok Utopia is a well written and lavishly illustrated history of 20th century Bangkok, based on extensive research and tied together by an original approach and argument. Lawrence Chua, a historian of the built environment at Syracuse University in New York, has enriched our understanding of the histories of Thailand, Southeast Asia and the Global South with a fresh interpretation of how tradition and modernity mesh in a Third World metropolis.

The title of the book would seem to be a contradiction in terms. As the author notes, few people would think of Bangkok as any type of paradise or a dream notion of an ideal city. Like Asian cities across a great expanse, from Mumbai to Manila, the Thai capital is a polluted, crowded, noisy, chaotic megapolis that seems to defy any coherent logic of design or planning. But, in Chua's biography of the

city, an image of utopia—of order, calm and harmony—is central to the development of its space. Or, rather, images of utopias, since in his approach, Bangkok's growth and development show a constantly evolving expression of antinomies, that have as their poles of reference royal Buddhist myths of power and potency from the older Bangkok-based kingdom at one extreme and secular ideologies of power and progress that form a modern nation-state's political economy at the other. In this dialectic, as Chua writes, we can see an "encounter between the spatial dimensions of Buddhist felicities ... and the geometries of the world capitalist system" (p. 2) in tropical Southeast Asia. "Felicities" are idealised states, such as heavens, earthly paradises or moral commonwealths, that have long featured in Buddhist storytelling and culture and, in the author's argument,

have been consistently redeployed in changing political and economic circumstances to build Bangkok and imagine it as the centre of a modern nation-state.

Dr. Chua examines government buildings, model cities, Buddhist temples and holy sites, drawings and other cultural artefacts, like cinemas and hotels, using an approach termed “urban humanities”. Chua explains that the term, “urban humanities”, is a critical interdisciplinary research methodology melding tools from design professions with literary and historical interpretive techniques to understand the “lived experience of urban space” (p. 8). The book is organised into three parts, *Tools*, *Materials*, and *Systems*, that mirror three phases of Bangkok’s history: royal absolutism in the early 20th century (especially the period 1910-1933); the age of democracy and dictatorship from 1933 to 1957; and then in the American era, the city during a post-war development regime from 1957 to 1973. Prior to the three main sections, though, and following the introductory first chapter, Chua gives in the book’s second chapter a fluid, well-explained historical and cosmological framework for the city’s planning and construction. Much of this explanation brings light to Buddhist myths and stories that many of us have read about, but have trouble remembering in a coherent way because of the difficulty of the vocabulary and unfamiliar notions—to modern lay readers anyway—of time and space that infused ancient India’s religious views. The author is to be commended for his lucid explanations of Bangkok’s religious origins and how they made the city.

The first of the three chapters of *Tools* explains how conflict in early 20th century Bangkok between the Thai state and Chinese labour and secret societies produced new ways of conceiving urban space. On the one hand, the religious authorities represented hegemonic and sacred space through an architectural and planning manual used to explain how Buddhist monastic complexes should be designed. On the other hand, the imagination of a new utopia by the insurgent Chinese labouring poor is explained through a compendium of secret society activities and imagined places compiled by the Thai police. The second chapter examines King Vajiravudh’s Dusit Thani, a model and miniature city that, as Chua argues, was a “utopian canvas that (showed) a form of nationalism based on queer social and spatial relations” (p. 55). The third chapter explains the fascinating contrast in two idealistic uses of funeral commemorations in public space in the interwar years: the first, the rites and cremation of King Vajiravudh in 1925 and 1926, and the second, the 1934 ceremony for commoner soldiers who died fighting a royalist counter-revolution in the 1933 Bowondet rebellion. *Tools* thus begins and ends with social conflict, expressed in spatial imagining of a purer society, that accompanied the growth of the city and led the kingdom from a fragile absolutism, founded on the privilege of the royal-aristocratic elite, to an unstable constitutional order that extolled the role of ordinary citizens.

The two chapters in *Materials* describe key sites in Bangkok’s modernisation that straddle the absolutist and constitutional eras, especially cinemas and the new constitutional order’s religious sites and secular offices of administration and law. The cinema discussion details the fascinating career of Bangkok’s movie houses, from smelly, dirty places that abetted criminality and illicit relationships to the triumph of air conditioned modernity and its order in the famous Chaloem Krung cinema that opened in 1933. Central to the new cinema was concrete: a drab, banal product if ever there was

one to us in the 21st century but at the time, as the author explains, an example of new technology that, married to cooling systems and electricity, catapulted Bangkok into a new type of “sensuous citizenship formation” (p. 128) contributing to the formation of a new public and a newly imagined community. The new buildings of the People’s Party era were triumphs of concrete and cement, one of concrete’s main composites. Cement’s Thai history began under the absolutist kings, when a cement industry under royal patronage emerged as a cheap, modern building alternative to wood. In time, cement construction changed religious and secular art and architecture and, under the People’s Party, a new gendered political subject, in particular, and muscular architecture were detailed in various forms using the material.

The final section on *Systems* comprises a single chapter explaining the dramatic growth of the city and the state’s new ideological directions under American-backed Cold War dictatorships. Here, from the 1950s to 1970s, the authorities directed transportation planning and a new focus on private, commercial building for tourist and economic development that replaced older stresses on public monuments. Hence, architects became ostensibly freed from political pressures and instead responded to market forces. Nonetheless, city planning was a political affair through and through, and impulses to style public and private space as politically charged symbols of Thai tradition and modernity endured.

Bangkok Utopia will appeal to readers across a range of interests and from different scholarly backgrounds. Dr. Chua has dedicated his book to the memory of his friend and mentor, “Khru Ben”. The inspiration of Benedict Anderson and his classic text, *Imagined Communities*, is woven into the fabric of *Bangkok Utopia*. With his novel approach to understanding the history of the Thai urban imagined community, the author has indeed honoured his teacher and enriched our understanding of Southeast Asian history.

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