Reviews

The Art of Thai Comics: A Century of Strips and Stripes by Nicholas Verstappen (Bangkok: River Books, 2021). ISBN: 9786164510364 (paperback). £32.50, US$45, 1,495 Baht.

Decades before today's era of people burying their faces in handphone screens, many Thais passed time by burying their faces in comic books. Palm-sized comic books of pulp fiction on pulpy paper were a default leisure haven for Thai children, teens and many adults. Comics were an ubiquitous sight, whether on buses, at market stalls, behind cashier counters, in waiting rooms, in food courts, everywhere. As with people browsing phones while walking, it wasn't unusual to find urban youth dawdling through Siam Square while thumbing through the frames of a Vibulkit *manga* yarn or a MahaSanuk slapstick lark.

During their 1980s-2000s peak, comic books were often the only kind of book, aside from manuals, that were found in a home, workplace or knapsack. The biggest single section of any bookshop was commandeered by comic book series. Comic stalls formed the busiest section of Thai book fairs, from which fans still fill wheeled suitcases with whole comic book series.

Specialist comic shops sprang up, most famously in Siam Square, Chatuchak Weekend Market and the corner of Samyan, where students waiting for their bus would browse the shelves. As comics were produced in series and in standard sizes, they were often sold in batches tied with string. The spectacle of hefty blocks of comics being sold in bulk and stacked like bricks reinforced the impression of comic books as a disposable mass product of dubious quality – and even of moral risk.

As the era of mass-produced comics dissipates from print into digital, a re-evaluation of their cultural value is long overdue. The revelatory heritage of Thai cartoons has been documented in a groundbreaking book by Nicolas Verstappen, *The Art of Thai Comics: A Century of Strips and Stripes*. Fittingly, it is published in Thai and English editions by

River Books, and it catalogues Thai cultural forms from traditional to pop. [Disclosure: River Books is also my publisher and my book, *Very Thai*, is quoted.] This landmark study stands not just as a history and encyclopaedia of comics in Thailand, but as an indisputable statement that this popular visual medium must be taken seriously, both as an art form and as a social record.

So much of premodern Thai popular history had gone unrecorded because it was not deemed worthy of immortalisation in documents and art. What scraps we have are substantially drawn from the lower panels of temple murals. Despite widespread media, little of the ephemera of modern Thai life has been preserved, too, whether film, magazines or music. As popular culture has been seen as throwaway, so much of its records were literally thrown away. It is the same with comic books. Far too little survives of important comic series. It was often up to the artists themselves to keep clippings. As with other museum-quality artworks, the best collections are in private hands, the owners understandably hesitant to let others near their irreplaceable artefacts, especially given the record of loss or mistreatment of museum artefacts by officials. Verstappen is meticulous in noting what has survived.

As he acknowledges, "the greatest challenge for Thai comics production ultimately remains the limited appreciation of comics art by the general public and the academic sphere, which both tend to perceive comics as a pastime for children and teenagers, sometimes as a popular entertainment, and rarely as an art form in its own right." One reason is that the often lurid, subversive or violent content in comics kept it confined as a lowbrow popular indulgence, beneath the rarified arts that qualified as official Thai culture, which carries connotations of moralism and manners.

This book finally proves that comics are truly an art. The best Thai cartoons are clearly accomplished in conveying deep meaning through sophisticated visual techniques that go far beyond illustration of text into a stylised medium that can be often fantastical, yet also closer to the multisensory experience of human communication.

This had to be a visual book, and its handsome layout showcases the comics and brims with deft details that evoke aspects of the comic-reading experience. Designed by Peeraphat Kittisuwat and P Library Design Studio, the book balances substantial text and a similar area of illustrations, with explanatory captions that place each snippet in context of its plot, style and era. On pages marginally wider than tall, the two-column format enables the layouts to carry strips, stripes or panels of excerpted comics, along with logos, line art and full-colour book covers.

In a delightful nod to the craft, each chapter head carries a halftone portrait of its featured star cartoonist, often with their calligraphic signature. These faces reappear as a gallery on the back endpaper. The front endpaper, meanwhile, depicts cartoon characters morphing in a long, looping parade that forms a playful narrative of its own to act as a commentary on what happened to Thai comics over the book's designated time span of 1900 to 2020. Sequences of those morphing characters reappear on the opening pages of each section, encapsulating the transformations of that particular period. The double-page contents spread strings together those portrait heads and icons from each sidebar in another swirling layout that you must follow by a line that meanders like a reader's eyes would scan a multi-panel cartoon.

This book is a full immersion into its subject, a genre known for holding its readers rapt in an immersive alternative world.

The thought and subtlety that have gone into the book's visuals are matched the author's sheer command of his research. Verstappen never fails to note the political and social forces that impacted each phase of comic history, such as the pivotal events of the 1932 revolution, 1976 massacre, or 1997 economic crash, the latter spurring DIY fanzines sold at "Indie" fairs. He brings rich context to the foreign influences that bore upon each era's styles and concerns. What's more, he is able to draw upon a thorough knowledge of other art genres to show the cross-fertilisation between cartoons and literature, film, fine art, music, fashion, TV, social media or propaganda. He does this with wit and a savvy way of addressing taboos whilst keeping the wording carefully neutral and yet unambiguously clear.

The nine main sections cover broad eras of comics that span one or more decades, such as the superheroes of Capes and Cloaks (1960-1970), the horror stories of Silent Screams (1970-1980) or the socially fractured Creative Comics (1970-90). Within a section, each chapter delves into a subgenre or trend through focusing on usually one headlined cartoonist. A typical one explains the moralistic appeal of the post-war family comics by Pimon Galassi, better known as Tookkata, since cartoonists often emulated the Thai literary trend for pen names. Some chapters contain tinted sidebars on topics like children's comics, female cartoonists or masters of the genre being discussed.

This nested structure enables the book to function in several ways: as a time-based history, as a thematic social study, as portraits of master artists, and as a guide to categories of cartoon craft. In the back are all the essential lists: sources, reference notes, picture credits and index. Each chapter is long enough to absorb the reader without getting lost or repetitive. Besides being a valuable resource for academics, writers and collectors, the book is sure to become a visual reference for artists, designers and stylists. *The Art of Thai Comics* is one of the most complete cultural packages I have ever encountered – and its red, tiger-slash cover will surely grace many a coffee table too.

Given the breadth of approaches to this book, it's worth picking out three major threads: the continuity of comics with Thai tradition; the local hybrids of imported styles; and the position of comics in Thai cultural identity.

One implication in the denigration of cartoons is that Thai culture was not very literary to Western eyes, or not literary enough to Thais seeking to present a 'siwilai' face to the world. On the contrary, Verstappen demonstrates how cartoons have been a vital bridge for traditional literature to survive in the modern world. Comics became the media format of continuity that kept aspects of the ancient tastes for oral culture and pictorial stories. Until the present day, traditional epics, folktales and ghost stories have all declined in various forms of storytelling, such as *likay*, dance-drama or puppetry, yet have been kept in the public mind chiefly through the captioned visual format of comics. The fresh retelling of the same old stories, whether in film, TV or comics, is a habit from the oral tradition of tales shifting slightly each time they are told.

The introduction outlines the prehistory of Thai arts, employing pictorial friezes in bas-reliefs and temple murals, to which one could also add the illustrated folding palm-leaf books, astrological manuals and Phra Vessandorn banners. All these combine line

drawing in panels with minimal captioning, but with Thai characteristics, as Verstappen notices:

> The environment in the background of the panels is mostly present and detailed (unlike *manga*…), probably because each natural element possesses a spiritual essence… When colours are present, they are not simply decorative but often perform a narrative function as colours have, in Thailand, highly codified connotations. The 'spicy' edge might come from the presence of risqué elements that have also been present in Siamese temple murals for centuries.

Comics capture that visuality, but cartoons are not a direct descendant of those genres and did not spring from their formats. Cartoons were an introduced literary art form. Like many imports, they were localised to appeal to Thai readers. The main conduit for their assimilation into Thai popular culture was by telling familiar traditional stories through this new medium, which found an early champion in King Rama VI. He encouraged satirical cartoons of the single or dual panel style he had seen in Britain, only to end up as their subject in Thai newspaper cartoons of the 1920s.

The very first Siamese comic strip appeared in the late 1920s. Entitled *Pong Gab Priaw*, this caper about two brothers illustrated moral tales from the *Khlong Lokanit* (Universal Truths) repertoire, but presented them through lifestyles of the time. Their creator, Chan Suvarnapunya, had studied at the bastion of traditional crafts, Poh Chang Academy of Arts, as did a decades-long succession of leading cartoonists, many of whom returned there to teach in a very Thai form of master's lineage.

In terms of drawing technique, Verstappen identifies a common Thai essence throughout the past century.

> From the works of Sawat Jutharop to Suttichart Sarapaiwanich or Puck, a local trait surfaces time and time again…. A semi-realist curved and pointy art that somehow evokes traditional *lai Thai* (visual motifs, usually reminiscent of flames and leaves), which has been an essential feature taught in most art schools; I would be tempted to define it as 'shell-like'.

After the 1932 revolution, long-form narratives became a dominant format, drawn from Thai literature, but simplified and with a lighter tone. The first was the folktale, *Sang Thong*. Long narratives suited being published in instalments, beginning with Thanya Utthakanon's rendering of Phra Maha Montri's century-old satire, *Raden Lundai*.

Another timeless epic, about the savvy trickster, Si Thanonchai, was the subject of the magnum opus by the most lauded cartoonist of all, Hem Vejakorn, who drew tens of thousands of illustrations throughout the mid-20th century, and taught many protégés at Poh Chang. His painterly, naturalistic style was initially inspired by his study of the murals by Carlo Rigoli, the Italian master at court, while his heavily inked chiaroscuro compositions drew much of their contrast and cinematic framings from silent movies. Hem's shadowy style is associated with that most popular of folktale forms, ghost stories, initiating a staple genre of comics that Verstappen sees as a cathartic outlet during social upheaval.

The first Thai animated movie, *The Adventure of Sudsakorn* (1979), was drawn from Sunthorn Phu's narrative poem *Phra Apai Manee*, and incorporated elements of *lai Thai* and shadow puppetry. It was animated by Payut Ngaokrachang, who had been employed by the UN Information Service to draw Cold War propaganda toons, once the state had wised up to the power and reach of cartoons.

Figure 1. A Popeye-like character appears in Sawas Jutharop's rendering of the folktale, *Sang Thong,* 1932.

Long-form comic tales remain a common format to this day, thanks to the global legitimising of graphic novels as a literary form and the prevalence of digital graphics. The post-1997 resurgence of Thai nationalism also stoked illustrated tales of past kings, mythology and Chinese tales like *Sam Kok* (The Romance of Three Kingdoms).

Verstappen spotlights the fascinating Thai cartoon format that is a hybrid print version of *likay* folk opera, reconfigured into comic strips. The leaping tiger on the cover comes from the only *katun likay* comic on the folktale, *Honwichai Kawi*. Each *katun likay* commences with the *ork khaek* preamble by a man in Malay *topi* cap and embroidered waistcoat, while the action takes place in the same kind of simple stage, with the "fourth wall" broken frequently by borrowing the likay stage practice of addressing the audience directly, whether in witty asides or in receiving a garland from a *mae yok*, a female fan who flirts with the leading actor.

Figure 2. The characters break through the fourth wall in the *katun likay* of *Chanthakorop* by Prayoon Chanyawongse, 1939.

Prayoon Chanyawongse, the pioneer among several artists to do *katun likay*, became lauded as the "King of Thai Cartoons", and even won the Magsaysay Award in 1971, but has fallen into obscurity to today's audience despite having a stature that Verstappen likens to Goscinny and Uderzo, authors of the Asterix books, and despite being compared to Walt Disney by King Rama IX. Venerational titles are as common as in other Thai fields. Juk Biewsakul earned the sobriquet "Prince of Thai Comics" for his adult-oriented narratives, experimental compositions and role as a mentor. Tawee Witsanukorn was lauded as the "Thai Bram Stoker" for finding a way to portray Thai ghosts that has become the default, being the first to portray Phi Kraseu by her iconic floating head trailed by spine and glowing innards. In 1960, he was also the first to bring Mae Nak Phrakhanong into cartoon form.

The resurrection of Prayoon and other masters to their deserved positions in a provisional canon of Thai cartoonists is one of the most valuable contributions of this book. Assembling such a pantheon, as Verstappen has done, also lends credibility to the genre, enabling the public and professionals to assess their accomplishments.

This imported format, being free of traditional restraints, has been ripe for further mixing of foreign styles and outright copying. Some Thais have at times wrongly assumed that translations of Japanese comics were Thai creations, as has happened with the massive recent phenomenon of "BL" (Boys Love) gay romances for female readers, one of the few comic genres not covered here.

Thailand has always appropriated the styles of the prevailing world powers, and Thai publishers soon catch onto international cartoon trends. On one level, imports were about adapting generic formats in which to develop a local version. It started here with English satirical panels, then quirky Franco-Belgian narratives instigated by a press run by priests at Assumption College, with elements of Asterix and Tintin.

American-branded toons then dominated the market from the 1930s to the 1970s, whether through Disney, Marvel or pop graphics. Verstappen relates how Thai infatuation with American iconic characters took extraordinary forms, from variants on superheroes, like Captain Marvel and Superman, to multiple characters coming to resemble Elvis Presley, and it got to the point where two protagonists in one comic both had aspects of Popeye's distorted physique. Prayoon combined Popeye and Tarzan figures in one *katun likay* story, while Wittamin combined Popeye and Mickey Mouse within the same chimeric body, Ging Lee, with Mickey's face, skin, gloves and shorts on Popeye's bulbous musculature.

The author's deep research also charts Thai borrowings from Asian neighbours. The expressively heavy inking by Raj Lersroung and Jua Biewsakul was lifted from Filipino *komiks*. In the realist tale of a poor rural childhood, *Khampeng Dek Isaan* adopted the format and style of *The Kampung Boy*, a 1979 book by the Malaysian cartoonist, Lat. During the heyday of the lurid, violent One-Baht Comics, in the early 1980s, Hong Kong's *wuxia* martial arts films influenced the magical work of Raj Lersroung and the more conservative soldier-cartoonist, Kasem Tiewsomboon.

The most pervasive Asian influence has of course been Japanese *manga*. Verstappen identifies two waves: a 1960s-1970s *manga* phase known for its Ultraman-style superheroes, like Asawin Siam; then a mass-market boom since the 1980s led

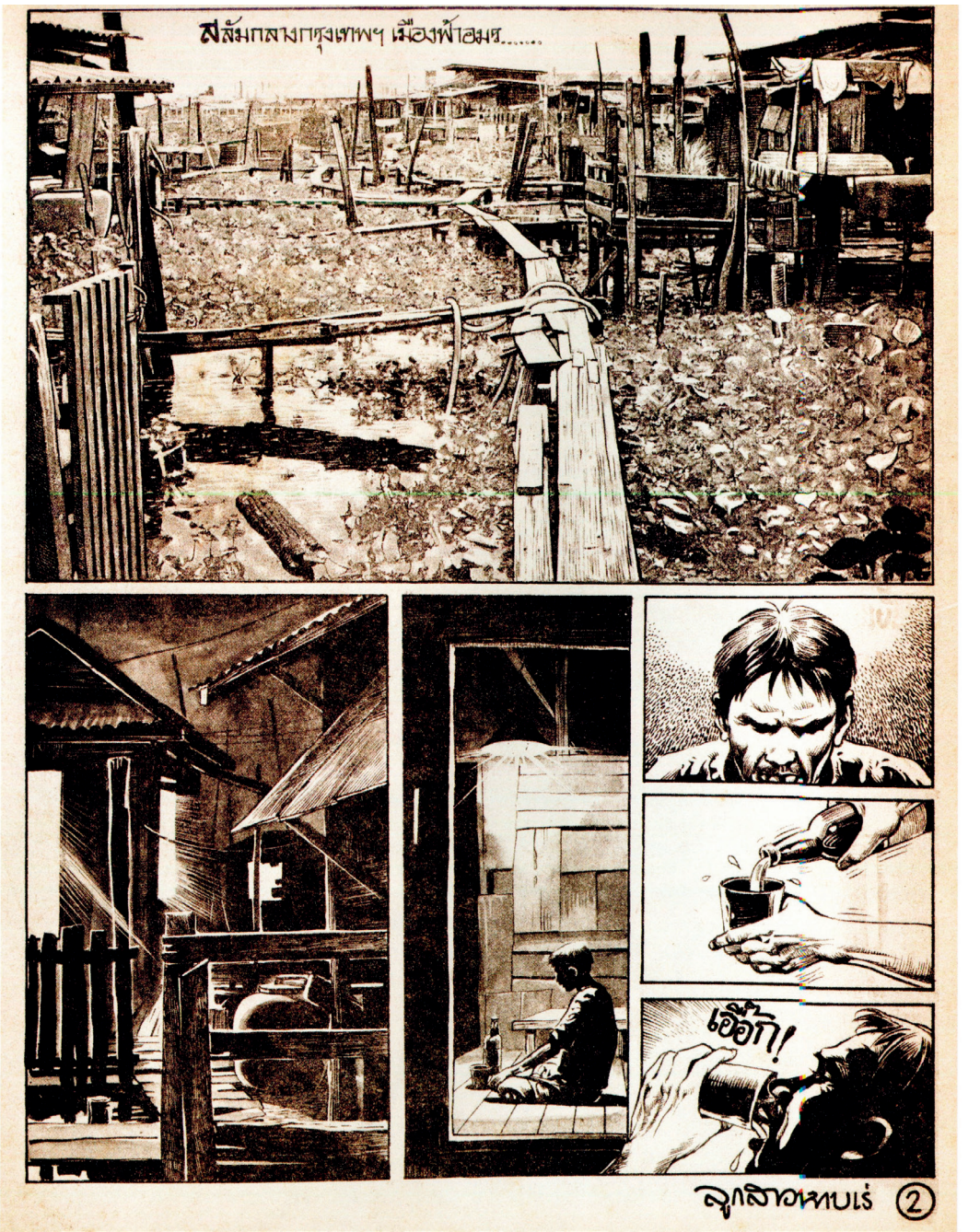


Figure 3. Comics for Life, *Lai Rot* by Banlue Utsahajit, 1981.

by Doraemon, that still dominates The Thai comic scene, especially through giant publishers, like Vibulkit and Siam Inter Comics. Having inspired the childhoods of most current cartoonists, *manga* has supplanted Thai literature as the strongest wellspring for Thai comics.

As to what makes Thai comics Thai, Verstappen offers this willingness to mix as also seen in the balancing of *lai rot* (many flavours) in Thai food. "For more than a century, Thai comics have displayed the same savours, whether it is in genre-blending stories

Figure 4. Joe the Sea-Cret Agent travels from New York to Bangkok by plane in Sutthichart Satapaiwanich's 1999 Indie story.

or though the variegated tones and styles in one-man magazines such as Tookkata's Katun Tukkata or Jua Biewsakul's Kwanchai." He notes how this enables heterogenous elements and highly composite signature styles to develop.

"Eclecticism, with an inclination for aestheticism, is a defining character of Thai art," he adds.

> The borrowing of foreign elements is a long-established process to be understood in the Siamese context; the pursuit of a civilisational aura. …The royal and

> civilisational aura fosters an elevated Thainess that reverberates through Thai art including, in my humble opinion, Thai comics. With American and later Japanese comics setting themselves as the new *axis mundi* of the field, in the 1950s and 1970s respectively, Thai comics extensively borrowed and amalgamated foreign elements in order to benefit from their perceived (cosmic) aura.

Periodically, some Thais have seen through that aura to both a more realistic impression of Thai society and to project something other than traditional "Thainess" as their outward identity. We see here how comics mirror political struggles around the attempts to instil nationalist uniformity. Following 1932, comics were both wider ranging, yet also censored. Even masters, such as Prayoon, wrestled with censorship by dictators. During the 1960s-1970s, the rebellious Art For Life movement spawned what Verstappen dubs "Comics For Life", socially conscious cartoons daring to relate tales of poverty, migration, slums and militaristic conformity at school in a printed parallel to Songs For Life and *Luuk Thung* folk music. There was a neo-traditional reaction in the 1970s-2000s, with royalist and nationalistic graphic stories. But the Indie movement of the more democratic 1990s finally propelled Thai comics beyond their former orbits around traditional themes.

Indie comics arose in a period of democracy, when people had more freedom to pursue originality and develop more varied identities, taking a frank look at the reality of Thailand rather than the fantasy of Thainess. Many alternative comics have had an introspective, diary-like quality, analysing the quotidian details of modern life in youth magazines, like *Katch* and *a day*. Wisut Ponnimit emerged from this milieu with *HeSheIt*, a scrawled strip in a "cute-brut" style that became a big hit in the home of *manga*, Japan – Thailand's first soft power cartoon export.

In another internationalisation, Suttichart Sarapaiwanich offered fresh perspectives by setting his squid-like character, *Joe the Sea-Cret Agent*, in New York and having him feel able to comment critically on a rapidly modernising Bangkok. The greater openness to the world afforded by globalisation and the internet has spawned a radically diverse range of comics, which veer from "authentic" handmade aesthetics sold at the Art Book Fair to hi-tech graphics and the innovative formats that Verstappen profiles in the book's closing "Showcase".

Idiosyncratic personalisation and a readiness to think differently have evidently revolutionised the scene and fed into the mindset of the emergent generation, that feels confident to challenge traditional ways. Verstappen gives only a passing mention to the fact that the resumption of youth politics has spawned an explosion of taboo-exploding digital cartoons, which have a vast reach through social media – and even exhibitions. The anti-junta strip, *Kai Maew,* has spawned a gallery show of artwork and figurines, while the biting digital cartoons, *Uninspired by Current Events*, which skewer the authorities almost daily, will feature in the 2022 Bangkok Art Biennale.

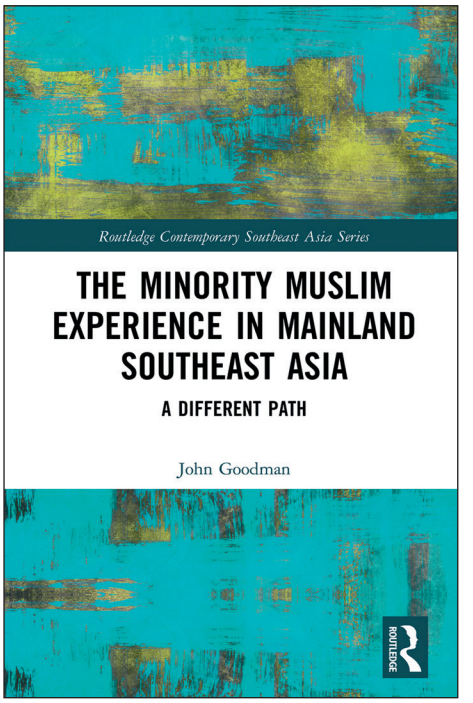
You come away from reading this magnificent book with the feeling that it is definitive, the last word on the subject, when actually it's a particularly well-informed opening statement of what should become a field of study as credible as film criticism. So many aspects of this medium deserve deeper analysis, including its diffusion into

animation, character products, stickers, digital memes and fine art. That is beyond the already crowded remit of this book, but the time is ripe for someone to do such a study on the history of Thai political cartooning, though that might be unpublishable here.

"Ultimately, Thai comics are an in-between transnational space in which Thailand's intricate scaffolding is revealed," Verstappen concludes. "Thai graphic narratives celebrate the nation's richness and diversity… Indeed the popularity and pervasiveness of a hybrid art form as highly textured as the Thai nation itself might be explained by the way comics composition makes each element one with everything." He ends by quoting the graphic novelist, Songsin Tiewsomboon, son of Kasem: "Thai cartoonists don't have a Thai style because Thai people absorb everything. By doing so, they are themselves."

Philip Cornwel-Smith

The Minority Muslim Experience in Mainland Southeast Asia: A Different Path by John Goodman (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2022). ISBN: 9781032005171. £120 (hardback), £33.29 (eBook).



John Goodman's monograph focuses on the recent history and current experience of Cham (in Vietnam and Cambodia) and Malays (in Thailand) in ways that explain how they have been both treated as, and adapted to, being religious minorities in these three nation-states. These governments are monocultural and either have a "strong (non-Muslim) religious component in their view of national identity", or "discourage religion as a part of national and local identity." Neither Vietnam, Cambodia nor Thailand is a democracy. Moreover, they are monocultural, which privilege "one religion or political system as superior to all others." Nevertheless, none of these has prevented Muslim citizens sustaining a "significant and unique lifestyle, through which they have led "fulfilling and open lives." This challenges assumptions that multiculturalism is only possible in Western environments where "democracy and political liberalism are prevalent." Goodman argues that the achievement of Muslim minorities in Mainland Southeast Asia is also significant, given that they are both ethnic and religious minorities. This leads Goodman to survey Cham and Malays from a "much broader perspective", by covering "all aspects of their societies." He seeks to answer questions about whether—as well as