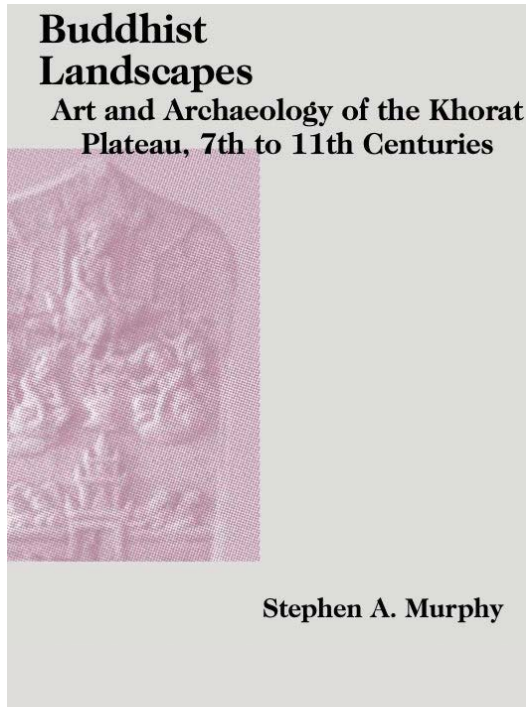


Stephen A. Murphy, *Buddhist Landscapes: Art and Archaeology of the Khorat Plateau, 7th to 11th Centuries*, Singapore: National University of Singapore/SOAS University of London, 2024, 288 pages, SGD\$78, ISBN 978-9813252134 (Hardback)



Religion, once viewed as an unattainable rung on Christopher Hawkes' (1954) famous ladder of interpretive inference, has become an increasingly important focus in global archeological discourse. In contrast with prehistoric belief systems, the recognizable imagery and monumentality associated with the world's "great" religions made it appear easier to study, but early efforts were typically limited to reification of events described in canonical literature. More recent efforts transitioned beyond the historical origins toward investigating how the core values of a religion manifest differently within the

material record. The archeology of Buddhism, spearheaded by studies from its South Asian homeland, has witnessed a dynamic range of approaches over the past twenty years from excavation of sites associated with the historical Buddha to exploring colonial intervention and worship and regional surveys of monastic and lay evidence around Buddhist monuments. These latter studies set the stage for a new Buddhist archeology emphasizing the interconnection between different scales of data (from object to environment) and a specific interest in how the religion was practiced and evolved within its local cultural milieu. Stephen Murphy's book, an enhanced version of his 2010 dissertation, fits broadly within this discourse and represents an important milestone for Buddhist archeological investigation in mainland Southeast Asia. Through the 200-plus pages of this nicely illustrated text, the author provides a thorough review of the Buddhist remains in early historic northeast Thailand and central Laos. He is particularly commended for highlighting the unique ways the religion appeared in the Khorat Plateau, differentiating the region from the better-known contemporary polities of Dvāravatī in the central Thai plain and Zhenla/Angkor in Cambodia. Furthermore, his study is a welcome temporal shift away from the prehistoric narratives that dominate academic literature about the Khorat Plateau.

The six chapters of Murphy's treatise provides a comprehensive discussion of Buddhist materiality—sites, *sema* (boundary marker stones), statuary, and inscriptions—found within the

museums and landscape of the Khorat Plateau and middle Mekong. The text provides a detailed typological and scalar perspective on Buddhist religious media, particularly the decoration and content of the *sema* stones, linking their distribution to different patterns of Buddhist practice across the region. Unlike the surveys by Lars Fogelin (2006) and Julia Shaw (2007) for early Indian Buddhism, evidence of daily life such as ceramics and the plans and organizations of sites are not included as part of the discussion. This point is raised in the hope that local researchers in the future will attempt to link these important parts of the cultural system to get a more holistic view of how Buddhist monks fit within the broader lifeways of the region's lay communities.

Chapter 1 (pp. 1–40) frames the theoretical lenses of the project and introduces the reader to Buddhist art and archeology across northeast Thailand and parts of southern and central Laos. Ideas of historical ecology and landscape archeology are raised to justify the spatial inventorying of Buddhist remains, largely in relation to the main rivers and tributaries. More important to the discussion of how Buddhist practitioners organized themselves within the Khorat Plateau is the discussion of mandalas, a concept first modelled by O.W. Wolters. The second half of the chapter explains the importance of the Khorat Plateau and highlights the marginalization of this region in past research. The argument that we must think of the plateau as an important cultural setting in its own right (p. 15) and not only as a cultural thoroughfare for Dvāravatī and Angkor

is incredibly salient and serves as the one of the most important takeaways in the book.

Chapter 2 (pp. 41–88) focusses on the heart of the Khorat Plateau's Buddhism in the Chi River and its relationship to the site of Mueang Fa Daet in Kalasin province. Discussions of the mandala concept and political authority here are linked to incredibly detailed narrative depictions of numerous jataka and other historical tales of the Buddha on *sema* stones. Murphy raises an important point from Peter Skilling and Robert Brown that we cannot treat jataka tales and other stories on the *sema* stones as didactic devices (p. 71), as it is uncertain whether the imagery is easily visible to monks or lay people. The significance of the images on the *semas* are generally viewed as being imbued with the presence of the Buddha. Murphy also notes that the stylistic consistency and quality of the images is the product of an atelier or workshop. This idea of groups of skilled carvers creating specific pieces for religious centers is supported by similar studies of lintels found around Greater Angkor (Polkinghorne 2007). An issue that merits further consideration is that the kinds of stories invested in stone and the frequency and distribution of such stories are indicative of familiarity or choice. While *semas* are transportable we must think that the craftspeople in the production centers identified are variably familiar with the Buddhist Canon. The depiction of a specific story is a choice that raises questions about whether it was chosen by the artist or commissioned by the donor. The critical issue becomes why were these stories

chosen over others? In Angkor, the rare depiction of jatakas on late 12th to 13th century-temples is dominated by the Vessantara or Viśvantara story (Tuy 2022). Was it selected specifically to enhance the munificence of the king or was it simply the most popular story at the time? Explaining the diversity of jatakas in this part of the Chi River offers a unique opportunity to explore and to address ideas of local education and donor demonstration.

Chapter 3 (pp. 89–122) moves us into the upper and lower Chi River Valley and focuses again on evidence of *semas*. Discussion here emphasizes the degree to which narrative imagery and iconic imagery predominate the assemblages in three different clusters. The jataka content and stylistic similarities with Mueang Fa Daet in Chapter 2 are seen as an indication of more direct connection with this important center. These areas show a smaller number of jatakas, decreased artistic skill, and the proliferation of stupa-*khumba* motifs, an iconic representation of the Buddhist burial mound. Murphy attributes these variations as indicating differences in belief structure and correlates this with their relative positions in the river valley. Numerous canonical interpretations are provided for the meaning of the stupa-*khumba*. A simpler answer not highlighted among them, yet possible, is that this image could demarcate a Buddhist sacred space to communities less versed in exact stories.

Chapter 4 (pp. 123–164) looks at the spatial nexus of Dvāravatī, Mueang Sema, and Khmer influences in the Mun River Valley and whether Mueang Sema, in today's Nakhon Ratchasima province,

is the center of the Śrī Canāśa mandala. Here the archeological and epigraphic evidence allow for more dynamic discussions about Mueang Sema's history and its Buddhist and Hindu faiths. It also hints at marriage alliances and the site's political power in relation to Dvāravatī. Beyond Mueang Sema we see the appearance of Buddhist statuary—a form largely missing from the Chi River Valley—and a specific discussion of the famous Prakhon Chai/Plai Bat Hill bronze horde. The general lack of statues is curious and makes the reader consider if this is due to choice, technological skill, or later reuse of buddha images made in copper alloys. Regional connectivity is also indicated by the discovery of *sema* stones at Phnom Kulen in Cambodia. This *sema* tradition is used to indicate support for Buddhism by Khmer. While an intriguing connection, epigraphic records show that Buddhism was a persistent presence behind the Brahmanical veneer throughout the Angkor period (Estève 2023).

Chapter 5 (pp. 165–200) shifts northward into the Middle Mekong and again notes the coexistence of Buddhism, Hinduism, and animism along this important artery. The inventory of items is mixed into the question of pilgrimage and mountaintop retreats and intriguingly discusses examples of Buddhist use of animist rock shelters, most likely repurposing them as rainy season retreats. Interestingly, narrative representations are restricted to core sites and the jatakas here are made in a Khmer and not Mon style.

Chapter 6 (pp. 201–208) reviews the idea of Buddhist landscapes and seeks to outline how art shaped and in turn

became shaped by the cultures, societies, and environments that it encountered. The intent of asking this question is important, but the ability to answer it is, again, limited by the lack of evidence about the lay peoples and specific environmental contexts that supported these Buddhist communities. In a strange irony, the archeological record of the Khorat Plateau provides an inversion to Hawkes' ladder in that the only rung available is religion. While ideas of historical ecology and landscape were used to frame the argument at the start of the book, the ultimate connection to Buddhism imagery is proximity to rivers and their role as natural transportation corridors of ideas and people. Again, this does not diminish the impact of the volume's results but highlights the potential for generating more holistic and anthropologically oriented investigations of Buddhism in the region.

Several key takeaways of this final chapter reinforce the importance of Murphy's study. First, the Khorat Plateau has an undeniably unique Buddhist "aesthetic" centered around the ubiquitous *sema* stones. Second, the mandala concept appears to be an important organizational principle, specifically in relation to larger centers such as Mueang Fa Daet and Mueang Sema. Whether this directly relates to political or just religious structure remains to be tested. Finally, while the Khorat Plateau aesthetic is easily distinguishable from Dvāravatī and Zhenla/Angkor polities, it also shows considerable internal differentiation through the varying distribution of Buddhist imagery,

workshops, and localized emphases on different types of religious media.

Like the innovative, contemporary studies in South Asia, the author successfully uses multi-scalar evidence to tease out traces of Buddhist practice and transcends traditional discussions of what type or where and how Buddhism arrived into the Khorat Plateau. The extensive descriptions of the jataka tales on *semas* alone make this book an invaluable resource for future studies in Southeast Asia and beyond. From a production perspective, the book is beautifully illustrated with significant quantities of color images throughout. Where Murphy's work is unfortunately let down is in the labelling, content, and organization of maps and figures. Maps are labelled 1 to 8 consecutively through the book while figures are labelled according to chapter. Site references interchangeably shift from numbers to names, inconsistent spelling in Thai, and single to multiple colors, making it difficult for the reader to easily understand what they are looking at in the landscape. A similar issue can be made on the placement of figures relative to text, where some images appear pages before the reference yet there is clearly space for it on the actual page (e.g., Fig. 3.24). Minor technical issues aside, this volume is a must for anyone interested in Buddhism and a new narrative of an important, yet largely understudied region of mainland Southeast Asia.

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Eric C. Thompson, *The Story of Southeast Asia*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2024, 320 pages, SGD\$28, ISBN 978-9813252349 (Paperback)



Eric C. Thompson, Associate Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the National University of Singapore, is known for his ethnographic and historical

work on Malaysia, regionalism, and ASEAN. In this single, readable volume, he turns to the ambitious task of telling a long-term “story” of Southeast Asia, from the first arrival of *Homo sapiens* to the establishment of contemporary ASEAN. The stated aim is a historical anthropology of the region that keeps colonialism in view, but refuses to let it dominate the narrative, instead foregrounding longer processes of human movement, state-making, and social change through the agency of Southeast Asians.

Chapter 1, “Populating Land and Seas” (pp. 1–26), overviews how modern humans came to settle in Southeast Asia from as early as 50,000 years ago. Drawing on archeology, anthropology, and historical linguistics, Thompson sketches changing late Pleistocene and early Holocene landscapes (covering 50,000–10,000 BP) and, from 3,000 BP onwards, the spread of agriculture and the now-familiar “Out of Taiwan” model for Austronesian migrations. Individually, these mechanisms are well established in the specialist literature; the chapter’s contribution places them in dialogue,

offering a clear, integrated account of early Southeast Asian lifeways for a general readership.

Chapter 2, “Hub of the World” (pp. 27–48), covers the period from roughly 500 BCE to 500 CE as an era of intensifying trade and exchange. Thompson introduces the transition into Bronze and Iron Age societies, with the appearance of more elaborate grave goods, increased indications of warfare, and the rise of entrepôts such as Funan (Oc Eo) in the Mekong Delta and Khao Sam Kaeo in the Thai–Malay Peninsula. The emphasis is less on dynastic detail than on how people, objects, and ideas circulated through maritime and overland networks, prefiguring later configurations of power.

In Chapter 3, “God Kings of the Golden Lands” (pp. 49–69), Thompson tackles the emergence of “classical” polities. The familiar mandala model provides a loose frame, but the author is careful not to let Angkor and Śrīvijaya monopolize the story. Major lowland kingdoms are set alongside smaller centers, such as Dvāravatī and various highland societies. The chapter showcases one of the book’s main strengths: a thematic ordering of the Southeast Asian past that largely avoids a distracting oscillation between national histories, instead explaining shared political and cosmological frameworks across the region.

Later chapters extend this approach into the more recent past. “Power, Piety and Reformation” (Chapter 4, pp. 70–94), “Family and Gender in Flux” (Chapter 5, pp. 95–119), “Emergent Identities” (Chapter 6, pp. 120–148), and “Contesting Sovereignty” (Chapter 7, pp. 149–181) follow, respectively,

religious transformations, shifts in social organization, and the formation of modern social groups, including nation-states and revolutionary movements. The final Chapter 8, “Modern Southeast Asia” (pp. 182–212), continues the thematic treatment for roughly the last two centuries, taking nationalism, education, media, urbanization, and social movements as lenses through which to view the making of our contemporary region. This culminates in a discussion of ASEAN and the ways in which regional institutions both reflect and attempt to manage Southeast Asia’s diversity.

As an introductory reader on Southeast Asia, the volume succeeds admirably. Thompson’s thematic chapters, each internally ordered chronologically, represent a considerable feat of brevity and breadth. He manages to compress an enormous temporal and spatial canvas into 320 pages without reducing the region to a simple sequence of dynasties or colonial interventions. The integration of archeological, textual, and ethnographic materials will be especially welcome to readers interested in bridging disciplinary divides. The long-term perspective, beginning with early humans and ending with ASEAN, usefully dislodges lingering Eurocentric habits that treat Southeast Asia as coming into focus only with European expansion.

The treatment of mainland polities and of Thailand’s neighbors is particularly valuable. Thai, Khmer, Mon, and related cases recur throughout the chapters on state formation, religion, and modern politics, but are consciously set within a genuinely regional frame

rather than isolated as self-contained national stories. The plentiful maps and figures, together with brief, up-to-date references, make the book suitable for use in undergraduate courses on Thai and Southeast Asian history or anthropology.

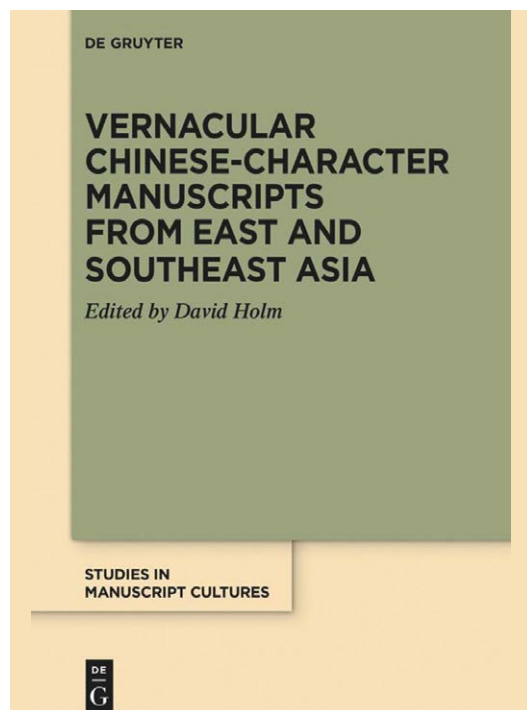
The very qualities that make the book so accessible, however, bring some limitations. Selectivity is inevitable: certain sub-regions, minority histories, and specialist debates receive only passing mention; some readers will no doubt find points of contention in particular summaries or emphases. Thompson himself identifies two such areas—biodiversity and medical history

—that have rich histories but are not integrated into his *Story*.

These are trade-offs in an ambitious, single-volume synthesis. *The Story of Southeast Asia* offers a wide-ranging discussion and explanation of what Southeast Asia is and why the region has taken its present form. It will serve as an excellent starting point for students and non-specialists; even specialists will find much to appreciate—and to argue with—in Thompson's carefully crafted narrative.

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David Holm, ed, *Vernacular Chinese-Character Manuscripts from East and Southeast Asia*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024, 353 pages, €99.95, ISBN 978-3111382326 (Hardback)



Although manuscripts written with Chinese characters may at first seem a niche subject for scholars of Thailand and its neighboring countries, *Vernacular Chinese-Character Manuscripts from East and Southeast Asia* proves otherwise. This edited volume gathers a rich set of case studies that show how manuscripts in Chinese-derived scripts operate across multiple languages, cultures, and disciplines. Several of the eleven chapters (one introduction and ten research articles) focus on materials from Thailand, trace connections with Thai cultural and linguistic practices, or offer models that could inform future work on Thai and Tai manuscripts and other script traditions found in Thailand.¹

The volume investigates both the shared features and the diversity of local manuscript traditions employing

¹ The digital version of the volume is freely available in open access: <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/doi/10.1515/9783111382746/html>.

vernacular Chinese scripts—defined by David Holm in the Introduction (pp. 1–20) as adaptations of Chinese characters used to represent spoken varieties or ritual recitations distinct from standard literary Chinese. It demonstrates how communities across East and Southeast Asia, situated at different points along what Holm calls the Sino–Foreign spectrum, reshaped the writing system to meet specific ritual, social, and communicative needs.

Holm emphasizes (p. 1) that Chinese-character writing and manuscript production constitute social practices embedded in broader cultural configurations. The chapters collectively illustrate this perspective through case studies from southern China, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and the Philippines, revealing the many ways manuscript culture functions within local societies. Several contributions examine manuscripts preserved in Thailand or engage directly with Tai-speaking communities and their textual traditions.

A further strength of the volume is its sustained engagement with linguistic analysis. Three chapters, in particular, stand out for their close attention to language structure and usage. These manuscripts are not only historically significant and often preserve language varieties otherwise absent from written records; they also provide valuable methodological insights for studying languages across East and Southeast Asia and beyond.

Lien Chinfa's chapter (pp. 37–54) examines the *Folangji huaren huabu* 佛朗機化人話簿, a 17th-century collection of Spanish phrases and sentences compiled by the Hokkien diaspora in

Luzon, Philippines. Following the tradition of *Sino–Foreign Glossaries* (*Huayi yiyu* 華夷譯語), this text comprises Spanish expressions and sentences including loanwords from Tagalog and Japanese, organized into eleven semantic categories. Through careful analysis of Hokkien character pronunciations, including both colloquial and literary readings, Lien convincingly demonstrates that Early Modern Spanish in the colonial Philippines retained three sibilant sounds, in contrast to the single sibilant in modern Andalusian and Latin American Spanish. This analysis exemplifies how vernacular Chinese-character manuscripts can illuminate the historical development of languages far beyond East and Southeast Asia.

Robert S. Bauer's chapter (pp. 55–96) explains the unique status of written Cantonese in Hong Kong, where it developed highly conventionalized forms without formal schooling. Meticulously analyzing the different layers of the Cantonese lexicon, the author shows how writers improvised solutions for representing colloquial speech, creating special characters for words without standard Chinese equivalents, including English loanwords. This process illuminates how other Sino–Xenic writing systems, such as Vietnamese and Japanese, developed from informal adaptations into standardized writing systems.

Shimizu Masaaki's excellent chapter (pp. 97–114) examines the *Foshuo tiandi bayang jing* 佛說天地八陽經, a Classical Chinese and Vietnamese Chũ Nôm manuscript now at Kyoto University. Through philological, grammatological, and phonological analyses, Shimizu

dates the text to the 19th century and locates its dialect in central or southern Vietnam. The grammatological evidence includes late-period Chữ Nôm character usage, while phonological features show distinctive central-southern consonant patterns. Lexical items trace southward from Nghệ An province. Beyond textual analysis, microscopic examination of the manuscript's paper composition reveals a high proportion of bamboo fiber typical of pre-20th-century materials. These multiple lines of evidence consistently date the manuscript to the 19th century and locate its dialect in central or southern Vietnam. This chapter skillfully weaves together linguistic, philological, and material analysis to illuminate the complex nature of vernacular Chinese-character manuscripts.

Another notable strength of the volume is its presentation of materials that have rarely been studied. Four chapters stand out in this respect. Though the manuscripts they examine come from different linguistic and cultural contexts, each contribution not only brings these little-known sources to light but also offers thoughtful analysis of their contents, enriched by careful phonological and grammatological discussion.

Henning Klöter's chapter (pp. 21–36) introduces Early Written Hokkien dictionaries and grammar guides compiled by Spanish missionaries in 16th and 17th-century Philippines. While examining how these sources reveal the spread and status of written Hokkien, the author speculates that semi-literate Chinese scribes wrote Min dialect characters following popular usage

rather than scholarly conventions. The chapter opens new paths for future research into this invaluable diasporic material which is unique for the study of historical interactions between vernacular Chinese culture and the cultures of the host territories and the colonial presence.

Chen Meiwen's chapter (pp. 115–148) takes a sociological approach to Yao manuscripts in Western collections, examining their classification and circulation. She traces how these texts reached institutions worldwide through art dealers, researcher donations, and direct collection from Yao villages for digitization. Significantly, the author identifies three forms of textual transmission in Yao religious manuscripts: faithful copies of Daoist texts, indigenous content under Daoist frameworks, and incorporated folk songs. This analysis reveals how local elements influence Yao written traditions, particularly the intertextual relationships between folk songs and ritual texts. Her attention to variations in language, customs, and writing practices among different Yao groups is especially valuable given that many manuscripts in library and museum collections lack provenance information.

Next, Jacob Cawthorne (pp. 149–190) examines Kim Mun letters as valuable yet understudied primary sources for understanding history, politics, and religion in the China–Southeast Asia borderlands. As with religious manuscripts, these letters employ three languages written in Chinese script: vernacular, literary, and ritual languages, with the latter two being varieties of Chinese. The chapter offers clear com-

parisons between these three languages while documenting variations in literary language pronunciation across Yao communities. Through detailed analysis of manuscript passages, Cawthorne demonstrates how these letters provide rich insights into regional history, geography, economy, religion, and traditions. Beyond factual documentation, they capture individual and community perspectives shaped by lived experiences, revealing not just historical events but their emotional and social impact on communities.

Meng Yuanyao's chapter (pp. 243–280) introduces the manuscripts of “Song of the Brigands”, a widely circulated Zhuang song text from west-central Guangxi in China. His richly detailed survey reveals remarkable variation across content, physical characteristics (appearance, size, materials, paper), calligraphic style, script usage, and performance practices. For analyzing and editing Zhuang traditional texts written in vernacular Chinese characters (*sawndip* or “raw characters”), he recommends a field linguistics approach, emphasizing close collaboration with manuscript owners and presenting translations in interlinear format. His first-hand experience offers practical guidance for researchers beginning work on Zhuang vernacular texts and manuscripts.

In addition, three compelling chapters examine cultural practices surrounding vernacular Chinese-character manuscripts. Though diverse in focus—ranging from intergenerational transmission of reading knowledge to traditional papermaking and the logic and ethnography of secret ritual language—they all underscore how these

manuscripts are woven into their cultural traditions.

Joseba Estévez (pp. 191–242) analyzes how Lanten (Kim Mun) ritual masters in northern Laos use manuscripts containing “secret words” to fetch the *hon* (ສອນ) or vital force of rice in their Daoist ceremonies. With rich ethnographic detail, the chapter meticulously documents how ritual masters employ these words to retrieve rice’s wandering *hon*, guide it earthward, and install it in the fields. Understanding this process requires knowledge of oral traditions circulating through Lanten communities. Through careful translation and interpretation, Estévez unveils the metaphors, grammar, motifs, and themes of the ritual text, offering a window into the Lanten magical world. As he notes (p. 236), ritual experts’ explanations were essential for decoding these living manuscripts. His systematic analysis of text and ritual context also reveals intriguing parallels between *hon* and the Tai concept of *khwan* (ขวัญ; Lao, *khuan*, ຂັນ), which share the same religious and etymological root.

Meng Yuanyao’s second chapter (pp. 281–300) documents traditional papermaking in Zhuang-speaking villages of central Guangxi, detailing how paper mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) is transformed into manuscript paper. His vivid documentation not only details the technical processes but also records local language terms for materials and techniques. This meticulous attention to both practice and terminology enables comparative insights: the process shows clear cultural and linguistic connections to *sa* (สา; Lao, *sa*, ສາ) paper traditions among Tai groups in upper mainland Southeast Asia, including northern

Thailand, suggesting the deep historical roots of papermaking among Tai-speaking peoples.

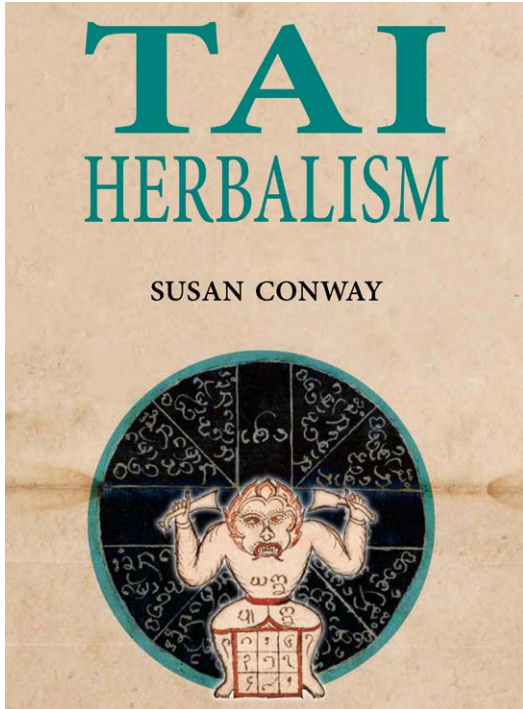
Finally, Holm's chapter (pp. 301–330) examines diverse literacy transmission practices among Tày, Nùng, and Zhuang communities in southwestern China and northern Vietnam. He identifies four distinct modes: performative literacy of vernacular priests (*mogong*), where recitation involves minimal reading; ritual masters' textual practices using mature vernacular script; literate traditions of Tày shamanic practitioners (*then*), featuring female priests' performative orality; and song text literacy transmitted through family or master–student relationships, using simplified characters for singing competitions. His rich fieldwork vividly documents how various text genres are transmitted across generations. Significantly, Holm presents a rigorous methodological approach that combines broad research with philological and linguistic analysis to understand manuscripts in their living social contexts. The author advocates moving beyond script-language relationships to document traditional recitation practices and cultural contexts, suggesting that digitized manuscripts

can facilitate meaningful discussions with knowledgeable community members.

Collectively, these diverse chapters represent a significant advance in the study of vernacular Chinese-character manuscripts. While Thailand has a rich tradition of manuscript studies, the emergence of Tai manuscript culture as a distinct field is relatively recent. This volume stands out for the exceptional quality of its individual contributions and its remarkable integration of multiple disciplines. Notably, while linguistic analysis is often perceived as inaccessible and removed from humanities research, here it is seamlessly woven throughout most chapters, demonstrating how different methodological approaches can enrich one another. This successful interdisciplinary integration makes important contributions to Thai and Tai manuscript studies by introducing understudied materials, opening new research directions, offering methodological recommendations, and connecting this field to broader manuscript culture scholarship.

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Susan Conway, *Tai Herbalism*, Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2024, 104 pages, ฿625, ISBN 978-6162152054 (Paperback)



Tai Herbalism is based on a translation of an early 19th-century Shan manuscript used by specialist traditional medical practitioners. Because Tai medical traditions beyond those of central Thailand have received relatively little attention, this publication is a welcome addition, with the potential to shed light on Shan practice and, more broadly, on Tai traditional medicine.

Across present-day Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, and China, Tai peoples maintain long-standing beliefs and practices related to health and healing. Their medical traditions draw on pills and herbal potions, massage, ritual and symbolic techniques, and spells, administered by lay and specialist healers.

Texts recorded on palm leaves, *kradat khoi* or mulberry paper (กระดาษข่อย), and inscriptions—such as those at Wat Phra Chetuphon (Wat Pho)—circulate widely. While some explain theories of illness, most preserve recipes for medicinal compounds prepared from herbs, animal substances, and minerals.

Because these fragile materials had to be recopied, errors, omissions, and rearrangements inevitably occurred. Sections could be lost, detached, or inserted in the wrong place; intentional destruction, especially during warfare, also took its toll. Medical manuscripts were sometimes carried off as spoils, as after the sack of Ayutthaya in 1767. Surviving texts therefore often reflect a complex *mélange*, with uncertain provenance and unclear intellectual genealogy. Susan Conway's manuscript must be read within this broader history.

The manuscript used for *Tai Herbalism* is held at London's Horniman Museum and was collected by Frederick Horniman (1835–1906) in British Burma around 1860. In good condition, it comprises an accordion-style mulberry paper book of 174 pages, written mainly in old Shan with some Tai Yuan, Burmese, and Tai Khun letters, and appears to have been compiled for specialist practitioners. Today, very few people are able to read it. Its translation into modern Shan required the collaboration of three Shan supernatural experts or *saya* (ဆရာ), one of whom remains unnamed. This modern Shan version was then rendered into English by a professional Shan translator based in Chiang Mai, also left anonymous, rather than by Conway herself. Yet the published book presents

largely a summary, rather than a full critical edition and translation. In this respect, the question of authorship and scholarly responsibility becomes difficult to determine.

The original manuscript is mostly lists of ailments and prescriptions, with about ten pages of mystical diagrams (*yantras*) accompanied by spells (*kathas*). Conway has organized these materials into thematic chapters. The presentation is clear, with photographs of selected pages and all the *yantras*, a list of spells, a glossary, a brief bibliography, and an index of *materia medica* with Latin names. As the author notes, not every ingredient could be rendered into English.

The book will no doubt appeal to tourists and casual readers, but what additional scholarly value does it offer? One stated goal is to preserve connections to endangered languages and scripts. However, publication solely in English severely limits access for Shan readers. While the book raises awareness of Shan medical heritage, it cannot do much more without bilingual presentation and sustained annotation designed for contemporary audiences.

A second objective is to illuminate 19th-century Shan herbalism and magico-religious healing. Here the insights remain partial. The text shows what conditions were treated and what remedies prescribed, but it rarely explains why particular ingredients were chosen. A complex fever treatment, for example, mixes spices, opium, seeds, and bear bile (p. 17), yet no rationale—pharmacological, symbolic, or ritual—is discussed. Moreover, names appear only in English, without Shan transliteration,

greatly limiting comparison with other Shan manuscripts or related Tai traditions (cf. Bamber 1998).

This points to a more general limitation: the book engages only lightly with existing research on Tai medicine. Beyond citing Brun & Schumacher's foundational study of northern Thai healing, it overlooks important works such as Jean Mulholland (1987)'s analyses of central Thai *materia medica* and prescription practices. Such scholarship could have helped interpret the manuscript and situate Shan medicine within wider Tai conceptions of illness and therapy.

A third justification concerns biodiversity. The text records plants and animals once available to healers, from rhinoceros blood and pangolin liver to tiger and vulture gall bladders. Many of these species are now rare or gone. Yet the index lists only English and Latin plant names, complicating precise identification, and there is no guarantee the ingredients were locally sourced. Given historic links between the Shan States, Lan Na, and Ayutthaya, the prescriptions themselves may have circulated widely. At best, the manuscript offers a broad, indirect glimpse of past environments.

The absence of cross-references between the index and individual prescriptions further limits analysis. Without knowing which plants treat which disorders—and without Shan terminology—comparisons with work in Laos and southwest China on therapeutic efficacy, ethnobotany, and environmental relationships are difficult.

One of the most engaging sections of the book concerns magic, protection, and the supernatural. Here the author

draws on earlier publications (Conway 2014) and her informants to discuss *yantra*, *kathas*, and remedies against spirits, ghosts, and witches, themes also noted by Mulholland (1987: 113). Unfortunately, we learn little about how *yantras* were actually used: tattooed on bodies, printed on cloth, or hung in homes and sickrooms?

Given the scarcity of sources and specialists, any study of Shan medicine is valuable. *Tai Herbalism* offers an evocative glimpse of a fragile tradition and the world from which it emerged.

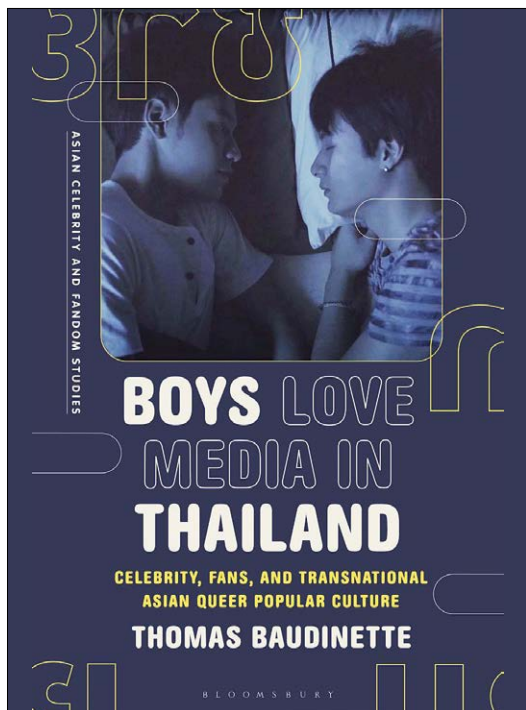
Yet its potential is constrained by summaries in place of full translations, opaque authorship, limited engagement with existing scholarship, and insufficient contextual discussion. The result is, at times, frustrating: a fascinating work that nevertheless feels like a missed opportunity to deepen our understanding of Shan—and more broadly Tai—medical knowledge.

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Thomas Baudinette, *Boys Love Media in Thailand: Celebrity, Fans, and Transnational Asian Queer Popular Culture*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, 248 pages, £85, ISBN 978-1350330641 (Hardback)



Walk into any bookstore across Thailand and, more than likely, the most prominently displayed section will be devoted to “youth fiction”: novels with cover illustrations of attractive young male couples. This genre, called “Boys Love” or simply “BL”, is a form of pop cultural fiction representing romantic and sexual relationships between young men.

The genre began in 1970s Japan as illustrated manga novellas. BL first came to Thailand in the 1990s as pirate translations of Japanese BL manga. However, over the past two decades, the popularity of BL in Thailand has exploded, expanding from manga to novels and television series. Thomas Baudinette’s

Boys Love Media in Thailand is a meticulous study based on extensive research in Thailand and online. This highly accessible book is essential reading for anyone interested in learning what BL is about and how major Thai media corporations and state agencies have taken roles in its development.

Thai BL is not a minority or subaltern cultural form. After Thai cultural conservative criticisms in the early 2000s, in the 2010s and early 2020s, BL moved from the margins to the center of Thai youth cultures and commercial media production. The language of Thai BL has also moved from the world of its fans to become part of mainstream popular discourse. In Thai, BL novels are now widely known as *nawaniyai wai* (นวนิยายวาย) or “Y novels”, while BL TV series are called *siri wai* (ซีรีส์วาย) “Y series” or *lakhon wai* (ละครวาย) “Y soap operas”. *Wai* here denotes the letter “Y”, referring to the first letter of the roman script spelling of *yaoi*, a popular Japanese word for BL.¹ Thai female fans of BL are called *sao wai* (สาววาย), “Y girls”.

Boys Love Media in Thailand is the first book in Bloomsbury’s new monograph series, *Asian Celebrity and Fandom Studies*. The inauguration of this series reflects the importance of media celebrities and their fans in the 21st century and the rise of scholarly analyses, theories,

¹ *Yaoi* is a humorous acronym formed from the first letters of a common early expression for BL manga among Japanese female fans, *yama nashi*, *ochi nashi*, *imi nashi* (“no climax, no point, no meaning”) and which referred to how the genre emphasized sex more than romance. In Japan, fans and scholars write *yaoi* in several ways. Depending on the context, the word is written in Roman script or *romaji* as *yaoi*, in *Hiragana* as やおい, or as the numerical code 801, where the numbers respectively refer to the three Japanese phonemes *ya*, *o*, and *i*.

and university departments of media and cultural studies. Commercial mass media—including printed media of the press, manga, and books as well as visual media of cinema, television, and online digital platforms—are major cultural phenomena, the focus of rapidly expanding media industries, and of interest to government agencies keen to promote soft power.

The book's cover design includes a reverse or mirror image of the Thai word *chai* (ชาย), “man” or “male”, effecting a visual queering of Thai discourses of masculinity resonating with the theoretical queering developed in the book's analyses. Queering is the analytical practice of challenging dominant notions of masculine and feminine gendering and heteronormative ideas of sexual “normalcy”, pointing to the historical contingency of notions of gender and sexuality in cultural patterns rather than nature or biology.

Baudinette's academic training is in Japanese studies; his first book (Baudinette 2021), based on his doctoral dissertation, studied gay cultures in Tokyo's Shinjuku Ni-chōme nightlife district. His expertise in several Asian languages, including Japanese and Thai, and his background in Asian cultural studies enable him to draw on a wealth of sources and to place the origins and success of Thai BL in a broad setting. For the volume under review, Baudinette interviewed people working in the Thai media industry and actors in Thai BL series, attended organized fan events, and analyzed selected BL TV series, websites, and advertising. Combining these sources brings the dimensions of both the production and consumption of Thai BL alive.

The book's Introduction (pp. 13–41) summarizes the origins of BL in Japan and its spread across Asia, including a useful glossary of key terms used by fans and the rapidly expanding academic field of BL studies. Baudinette describes how in both Japan and Thailand, as well as across Asia and the rest of the world, the main audiences for BL manga, novels, and TV series are young women. Many Thai BL TV series are based on novels by female authors, which are often first distributed online before publication by commercial presses. While BL finds fans among some gay men, it is not usually understood as a genre of gay fiction. Rather, BL draws on accounts of romance between handsome young men to fashion imagined relationships that attract many female readers and audiences. The active role of fans' imagination in the success of BL is made clear from the fact that they often engage in “shipping”, abbreviated from “relationshiping”, which describes imagining male characters or actors in romantic relationships. In Thai, these imagined same-sex couples are called *khu-jin* (คู่จิ้น), from *khu* for “couple” and *jin* derived from *jintanakan* (จินตนาการ), “to imagine” or “imagination”.

Chapter 1 (pp. 42–75) traces the origins of Thai BL TV series from underground pirated translations of Japanese BL manga in the 1990s to the impact of the highly popular 2007 Thai movie *Love of Siam* or *Rak haeng siam* (รักแห่งสยาม; director Chookiat Sakveerakul), depicting the romance of two teenage Bangkok schoolboys. Baudinette also documents early Thai BL TV series such as *Lovesick, the Series*, which was broadcast in 2014.² Many Thai BL TV

² The Thai name for this series was *Rak wun wairun*

series have been broadcast on digital channels or online via internet platforms such as YouTube. Online broadcasting means these series can be viewed almost anywhere in the world, allowing them to reach international audiences. The Covid-19 pandemic brought about an even larger audience. Many new fans serendipitously came across Thai BL as they scanned the internet in search of entertainment during lockdowns. Colleagues of mine teaching Thai studies in Europe have related that in recent years many undergraduate students enrolling in Thai language programs have been drawn to Thai because they are fans of Thai BL. In addition, Thai BL is nurturing an up-and-coming generation of *farang* scholars; indeed this genre of fiction may prove a seeding ground for the future of Thai area studies in Europe and elsewhere.

Chapter 2 (pp. 76–106) describes how Thai authors and production companies adapted the tropes of Japanese BL to the Thai context. Baudinette argues that Thai BL is a hybrid phenomenon merging Japanese forms of the genre with the aesthetics and commercial organization of Korean K-pop. To this blend, distinctively Thai elements have been added. Because of Thai BL's innovative development of the Japanese form of BL, which many fans saw as stereotypically repeating formulaic plots and reflecting conservative gender values, Baudinette contends that Thai BL took Asian youth cultures by storm and found new audiences in Europe and Latin America. Overall, the BL genre achieved transformative potential by

adapting to settings outside Japan. While constrained by the commercial strictures of Thailand's media production companies, the involvement of large numbers of Thai LGBTQ+ people in the production of these TV series has given Thai BL an edgier tone attractive to audiences looking for more challenging representations and story lines. Finally, one of Baudinette's interviewees observed that Thai BL has proven to be more attractive to gay male audiences than Japanese BL given the latter's formulaic character. Thai BL has also expanded in a commercial setting where the economic potential of young female and queer consumers is recognized by the country's major media and marketing companies. Homoerotic images are no longer widely regarded as taboo but are mobilized to promote products and the careers of young male stars.

Chapter 3 (pp. 107–137) gives a behind-the-scenes view of how the media and marketing company GMM Grammy has produced Thai BL TV series and manufactured male actors as celebrity idols. Baudinette describes GMM Grammy as a “boys love machine” that produces celebrity male actors through carefully tailored schooling in acting, fan meetings, and product placement advertising in series episodes. Many male actors in Thai BL series have become multimedia stars whose faces adorn advertisements for cosmetics and lifestyle products and who engage in promotional events where they meet fans in Thailand and across East and Southeast Asia. The production of Thai BL series also built on media companies' well-honed skills in producing television soap opera melodramas, often called *lakhon TV* (ละครทีวี).

saep (รักวุ่น วัยรุ่นแสบ; “Confusing Love, Mischievous Teens”). Thai movies and TV series are often given different, unrelated Thai and English titles.

Baudinette observes, “GMM’s business model has rested on the mainstreaming of queer romance due to a recognition of the market potential of *sao wai* [female fans] rather than a commitment to queer representation” (p. 104). He nonetheless argues that while the male actors in Thai BL series may not be gay, the significance of the genre has influenced the ways same-sex desire is depicted in Thai popular culture. While highly commercialized and intimately tied to marketing and advertising, Thai BL TV series contribute to debates on the status of queer people in Thailand. Some BL series actors publicly called for the legalization of same-sex marriage in the lead-up to the mid-2024 passing of the marriage equality law by the Thai parliament. Baudinette states that the influence of Thai BL in opening space for greater social acceptance of queer people shows that “Asia has the agency to narrate its own accounts of queer emancipation without relying on Western European or North American models” (p. 183).

Chapter 4 (pp. 138–165) details the highly successful marketing strategies of the GMM Grammy media production company in organizing ticketed events where the *khu-jin* stars of BL series perform live on stage, meet fans in person, and promote the sale of branded merchandise bearing the names and images of stars. Chapter 5 (pp. 166–193) traces how Thai BL began its global expansion beyond Thailand’s borders among fan communities in China and the Philippines.

The adaptation of Japanese homoerotic manga by Thai female authors and fans, and the commercialization of

this reformulated genre by Thai media production companies on the model of South Korean popular culture, has created a phenomenon that has proved tremendously attractive to young audiences across the world. Is it any wonder, as Baudinette notes in Chapter 6 (pp. 194–219), that Thai government agencies have taken note and attempted to capitalize on this phenomenon to promote Thailand as a tourist destination for BL fans? In this regard, Baudinette contends that existing theories of soft power have overlooked the potential of mid-ranking countries like Thailand to project cultural influence internationally. This is because these theories have assumed that soft power is only an adjunct to the political and economic power of globally dominant countries such as Japan or the United States.

The Thai BL wave shows no signs of receding. This was brought home to me by the large number of Thai publishers selling BL *nawaniyai wai* novels at recent Bangkok Book Fairs in 2023 and 2024. Increasing numbers of Thai and international scholars are also studying Thai BL and its influence beyond the country. In 2023, a special issue of the online journal *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* was dedicated to studies of Thai BL by Thai scholars. Perusal of the many new Thai academic journals that have blossomed over the past decade will also reveal articles on Thai BL.

A minor gripe, not with Baudinette but with his publisher, Bloomsbury Academic, is that his marvelous book is expensive. It is a pity that many Thai scholars, students, and fans of BL

will not be able to afford this book and Baudinette's important findings may not have as much of an impact in the country's academy as they deserve. I hope that a more affordable edition and a translated Thai version are published soon. Nonetheless, this book provides an essential key to understanding the complex networks

of Thai youth cultures in the 2020s, revealing the history, evolution, and trajectories of a major cultural phenomenon in contemporary Thailand.

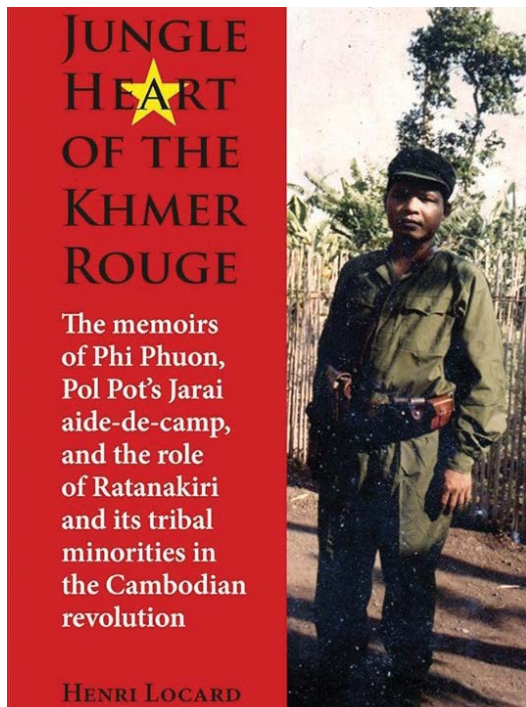
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Henri Locard, *Jungle Heart of the Khmer Rouge: The Memoirs of Phi Phuon, Pol Pot's Jarai Aide-de-Camp, and the Role of Ratanakiri and Its Tribal Minorities in the Cambodian Revolution*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2023, 374 pages, €27.99, ISBN 978-8776943240 (Paperback)



Few academic books are fully dedicated to the Jarai; one of the most numerous and historically fascinating ethnic minority groups straddling the northeast of Cambodia and the central highlands of Vietnam. This book—focusing on arguably the most prominent Jarai individual who served in the Khmer Rouge regime—is a significant addition to the literature on ethnic minorities and the ways their history becomes intertwined in the darkest chapter of Cambodia's recent past.

The book has three main parts. Part I (pp. 3–54), Introduction, delves into the Khmer Rouge regime and the ways in which author, Henri Locard, came to Ratanakiri and, in 2001, met Phi Phuon, the former bodyguard to Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot (1925–1998). Part II (pp. 43–202), the largest section, centers on Phi Phuon's memoirs covering nearly four decades of his life, thirty of those years dedicated to the revolutionary cause alone.

The book's third part (pp. 203–310) brings additional materials from the

extraordinary chambers in the courts of Cambodia where Phi Phuon testified. This section also includes the author's analysis of Ratanakiri's role in shaping the Khmer Rouge's societal ideals. The book concludes with three vignettes in the Epilogue (pp. 311–325) bringing together a high-profile wedding in Phnom Malay where Phi Phuon had been appointed Deputy Governor in 1997, Phi Phuon's sudden death, and Ratanakiri's desolated social, cultural, and physical landscape.

Phi Phuon's memoirs tell the extraordinary life of a seemingly ordinary Jarai adolescent, who started as one of Pol Pot's servants but slowly climbed the ranks and was eventually entrusted with safety and logistics at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at the height of the Khmer Rouge regime (1975–1979). While in charge of security, he explained that he travelled to the provinces between 1977 and 1978 and reported to the “upper echelon”.

Phi Phuon recounts how, in many cooperatives, people were given barely any food and that they were mistreated. Faithful to the cause and to Pol Pot himself, he attributed the fault to the local leaders of the cooperatives: “But what I saw was not really the same as what was agreed” (p. 225) for the Revolution. At the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, Phi Phuon, known for his frank and direct nature, testified that he reported what he saw to Pol Pot (Brother Number One) and Ieng Sary (third in command). Reflecting on his survival, he admitted “one could say that I managed to slip through the net” (p. 194).

Phi Phuon's memoirs provide the reader with one individual's personal experience, rendered at times in surprising levels of detail, on a particularly complex and bloody period half a century ago. Phi Phuon's proximity to a Khmer Rouge leadership that operated largely in the shadows offers a distinct and sometimes illuminating perspective. For the same reason, it inevitably has its limitations as an objective account of a regime whose appalling crimes with which no one wants to be associated.

Henri Locard extensively used the services of Suong Sikoeun (for French to Khmer and Khmer to French translations) to carry out all his interviews. This dependence raises serious issues concerning Phi Phuon's singular vantage point. Suong Sikoeun, a Paris educated Khmer Rouge intellectual who also worked at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1977–1979), was a former assistant to Pol Pot. As with other former Khmer Rouge officials, Sikoeun claimed that he was unaware of the scale of the executions and other crimes the party that he served perpetuated against the population. I once accompanied Henri Locard to one of his meetings with Phi Phuon, which took place at Suong Sikoeun's house and remember the host as a very charismatic man, who indulged himself in speaking, and particularly, in speaking in perfect French.

A related point is how Locard implies that all his visits to interview Phi Phuon were public events that attracted locals' attention: “During my investigation, I was always surrounded by a crowd,

and it was difficult to get biographical information from my interlocutors” (p. 299). It is perhaps not surprising that in a remote village of Banteay Meanchey near the Thai–Cambodian border, such interviews may have triggered the local curiosity and interest. Either way, that Phi Phuon may have done much of his reminiscing before an audience of neighbors (and possibly former subjects of his deputy governorship) raises further questions about whether one can take all his claims at face value.

The account of Phi Phuon’s life provides an entry point for Henri Locard’s exploration of ethnic minorities in Cambodia and Ratanakiri’s privileged role in contributing to the Revolution. The author writes, “In a way, *Angkar* wanted to turn the country into a great Ratanakiri and return to what the Revolutionary Organization considered the pre-feudal and pre-capitalist era, annihilating 2,000 years of Khmer history [...]” (p. 299).

Although Pol Pot was, indeed, initially enthused by the loyalty, discipline, and physical strength of ethnic minorities, it is telling that none were given a decision-making position in shaping the Revolution. In stark contrast with the autonomy, vibrancy, and elevation of traditional rites and customs of Jarai communities, the Khmer Rouge regime was all about centralising control and erasing individual and communal expression and culture. The regime’s signature policy was massive, forced collectivization in pursuit of a vision steeped in xenophobia. Its intention

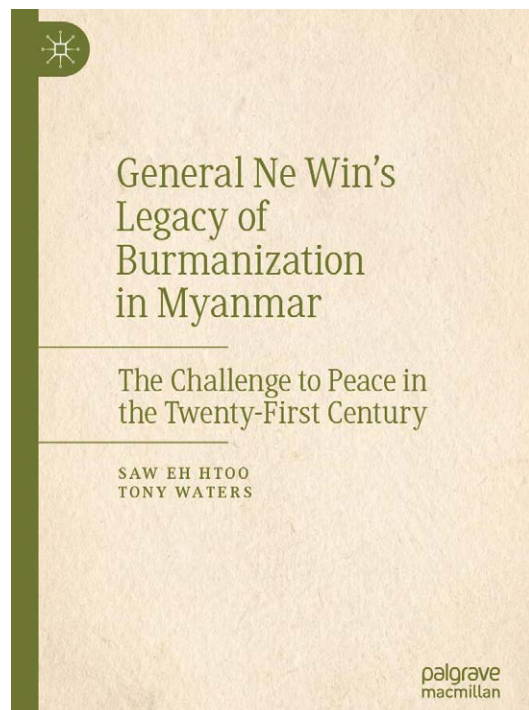
was to arrive at a form of Communist utopia far faster than other Marxist regimes. All forms of spirituality, religions, and languages were banned. It is hard to see much of this as a reflection of Ratanakiri. This is even true of the Ratanakiri of the early 1970s where the Khmer Rouge leadership first went to hide and subsequently came to exercise control and influence prior to their takeover of the whole country in April 1975.

Among the book’s strengths is that it introduces an array of voices to illustrate the complex ways in which various ethnic groups were caught in the conflict. It also brings together some materials from the Extraordinary Chambers in the courts of Cambodia that take the reader straight into the heart of the tribunal.

Amidst the wealth of autobiographies and memoirs written about the Khmer Rouge regime, only a few have been written by former Khmer Rouge cadres or leaders. Khieu Samphan’s *L’histoire récente du Cambodge et mes prises de position*, originally published in 2004, is one prominent example. Another is the book by Suong Sikoeun whose 2013 publication, *Itinéraire d’un intellectuel Khmer Rouge*, is also published in French. As the first such English account from a Khmer Rouge official from an Indigenous minority, Phi Phuon’s memoirs are an intriguing addition.

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Saw Eh Htoo & Tony Waters, *General Ne Win's Legacy of Burmanization in Myanmar: The Challenge to Peace in the Twenty-First Century*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, 225 pages, US\$129.99, ISBN 978-9819712694 (Hardback)



What a story this book tells! It opens with an almost Hollywood-like plot: a boy from a repressed minority in the remote countryside manages to become a self-made man. He secures an education on his own in the challenging environment of the country's largest city (back then the capital), dominated by a majority ethnic group unfriendly to his. All of this occurs under a military dictatorship, failed rebellion, and unsuccessful protests. Against all odds, he becomes a sought-after contractor for international NGOs, taking him into no-go areas of his country. He survives the military dictatorship, the democratic transformation, another coup, and

COVID. As an expert with a rich personal life, he decides to transform his insider knowledge into a PhD. Unfortunately, unlike Hollywood movies, there is no happy ending; he dies prematurely from cancer.

Luckily, there is a sort of redeeming sequel. Our hero's PhD supervisor, a distinguished visiting American professor in Germany who values his student's work, knows how underrepresented non-Western Burma-related voices are in the global academia. Believing that Eh Htoo's thesis is groundbreaking, the professor decides to resurrect the languishing dissertation. He edits the text from its rough drafts, finds a reputable publisher, and adds his (modest) contribution. In doing so, the professor does justice to Eh Htoo's ideas, saving them from oblivion. The protagonist described here is the late Saw Eh Htoo, a Karen from Yangon, Myanmar, the professor is Tony Waters, and the book is *General Ne Win's Legacy of Burmanization in Myanmar*.

Let us be honest—academic books are often dry and hermetic in style. Self-aware authors usually try to capture the reader's attention at the start, knowing that it may be difficult to hold it later. In contrast, Saw Eh Htoo and Tony Waters do not have this problem. Thanks to Eh Htoo's compelling story, the book secures a “wow” effect from its beginning. Once you start reading *Burmanization in Myanmar*, you want to continue—the reader's attention is instantly captured.

Naturally, as the book progresses, it shifts from personal memoir to an academic exploration of Burmanization—a brutal yet unsuccessful policy aimed

at assimilating all non-Bamars into a Bamar-centric nation. This policy, initiated during General Ne Win's rule (military dictator from 1962 to 1988), is the book's focus. Since Eh Htoo lived through this era—he was educated with propagandist school textbooks—and subsequent military and quasi-military regimes, he possessed something invaluable: insider knowledge. This is the book's strength. For example, Eh Htoo introduces the concept of “the armed royal state” (*le net nainggan taw*, လက်နက်နိုင်ငံတော်, p. 170), showing how military-ruled Myanmar continues the traditions of pre-modern Burmese kingdoms ruled by warrior kings. He also describes the military doctrine of “total elimination” (*a pyaut taik yey*, အပျောက်တိုက်ရေး, p. 96), rooted in the militarized need for security, alongside alternative policies such as “assimilation” (*taingyintha si long nyi nyunt yay*, တိုင်းရင်းသား စည်းလုံးညီညွတ်ရေး, p. 112) or “accommodation” (*nayyar pay thi ah mat phut chin*, နေရာပေးသိအမှတ်ပြုခြင်း, p. 115). His analysis of Bamar “chauvinism” (*maha lu myo*, မဟာလူမျိုး or “superior race”, p. 137), also known as “Burmese [or rather Bamar] dominance” (*bamar baho phyu*, ဗမာဗဟိုပြု, p. 26), is equally insightful.

The merit of Eh Htoo's research does not exactly lie in the novelty of this information—it was already known in Burma studies, even if not universally—but rather that a Burmese person wrote it, using indigenous concepts and terms from a domestic perspective. This insider view carries more weight than even the most well-informed observations of foreign scholars.

A particularly good example of the value of Eh Htoo's approach is his

analysis of the Burmese Way to Socialism (BWS), the official ideology of the Ne Win regime, usually written off in the West as window dressing for military rule. Eh Htoo notes that the regime inserted Buddhism into its philosophy as a way to distinguish itself from the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), the capitalist West, and Christian and Muslim communities. Seen from this angle, BWS appears less illogical and more reasonable. Tony Waters adds to this analysis with irony: “Ne Win's philosophers were not writing for a critical audience of comparative political scientists, but for the Burmese masses, who were susceptible to a righteous ideology that protected them against their enemies and fears” (p. 123).

Eh Htoo's sharp observation of politicized Buddhism after 1962 is another highlight. While Buddhism traditionally places obligations on both rulers and ruled, Eh Htoo points out that “under Ne Win's Burmanization program, the teachings of the Buddha for leaders have been somehow omitted; monks do not typically mention moral teaching for the monarch in their sermons in the post-1962 world” (p. 205).

Another strength of Eh Htoo's work is his ability to combine this insider's view with knowledge drawn from academic literature. He uses both Burmese and English sources, including military memoirs and other primary materials. Importantly, he does not just recount his personal experiences; he places them within the broader context. For example, inspired by Thongchai Winichakul's seminal *Siam Mapped* (1st ed., 1994), Eh Htoo theorizes that at the heart of Burmanization is the Tatmadaw's (Myanmar's army) “sanctity

of the borders inherited from the British” (p. 175). This distinction between precolonial kingdoms, relatively indifferent to borders (compare with the well-known concepts of “mandala system” or “galactic polity”), and the postcolonial state’s focus on rigid boundaries reflects a colonial legacy.

I also enjoyed Eh Htoo’s use of vivid expressions like “Ne Winism” (his proposed term for Ne Win’s rule, p. 12) and “Machismo of ethnic militarism” (his description of the generals’ style, p. 203). His humour shines through in lines such as, “I also enjoyed reading Moscow-published socialist novels which were widely available. The English translations were clear and concise, so some of my English education was based on Communist ideology!” (p. 7). These details make Eh Htoo someone you would love to converse with over tea—or something stronger!—in a Burmese teahouse.

To this rich personal narrative, Tony Waters adds academic rigor and theoretical depth. His sociological introduction to Part III (pp. 179–204) is probably the second-best part of the book (after Eh Htoo’s memoir Introduction). It provides an academically sound overview of Myanmar’s structural problems and proposes ways to resolve them through three interlinked narratives: de-Burmanization, de-militarization, and decentralization. Waters’s Conclusion (pp. 209–218), summarizing the state of knowledge in Burma studies calling for more indigenous-centric research and asking vital questions, is equally noteworthy.

While the personal circumstances behind this book’s creation evoke

sympathy, this cannot excuse some serious flaws. The first and foremost handicap is the lack of fact-checking. For an academic monograph, the number of factual errors is troubling. For example, U Nu was not the President of independent, postcolonial Burma, but the Prime Minister in office intermittently between 1948 and 1962. Similarly, U Saw was not the President of colonial Burma—the title did not even exist—but the Prime Minister (in office, 1940–1942). Conversely, in 1988 Maung Maung was the President of the Socialist Union of Burma, not the Prime Minister. Aung San never was Prime Minister, even though he was popularly referred to as such (his official title was “Deputy Chairman of the Governor’s Executive Council”); this irritating error is repeated throughout the volume, even appearing in a subchapter title: “Prime Minister Aung San 1946–1948”, which is doubly wrong as Aung San was assassinated in 1947. The CPB collapsed in 1989, not 1990. Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in 2010, not 2011. Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar in 2008, not 2006. The First Anglo-Burmese War took place not only in Rakhine (Arakan); Yangon (Rangoon) and the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) Delta are hardly in Rakhine. The Taungoo dynasty (or the Second Burmese Empire) was not established by King Bayinnaung (r. 1550–1581), but by Mingyi Nyo (r. 1485–1530), the father of Bayinnaung’s predecessor, Thabinshwehti (r. 1530–1550). The persistence of these inaccuracies raises concerns and falls well below the standards expected of a serious academic publication.

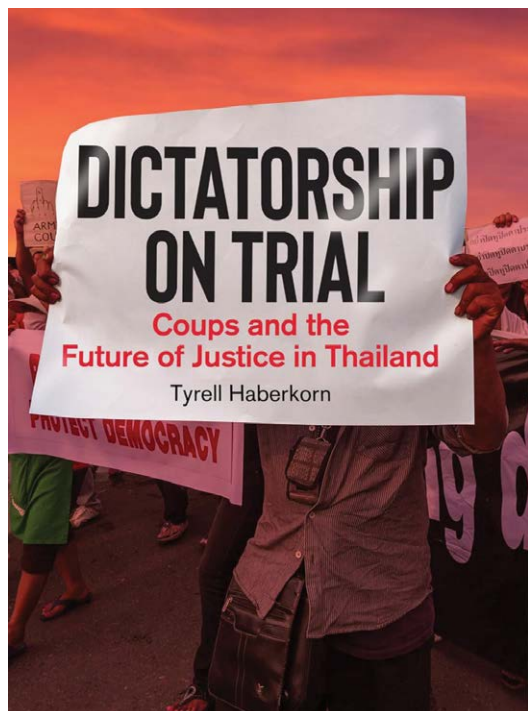
Another limitation is that Eh Htoo often moves from topic to topic—or from past to present—without sufficient contextualization, which can be confusing. At times, the discussion becomes diffuse, particularly in attempts to connect the National League for Democracy (NLD) period with the era of Ne Win. Finally, the narrative relies heavily on description while offering relatively little personal experience. Although the book originates from a PhD dissertation project—which may partly explain its conservative narrative style—it would have benefited from more of Eh Htoo’s own reflections on life under military rule, rather than extended summaries of well-known works.

Despite its shortcomings, *Burmanization in Myanmar* remains a valuable and engaging read. As Tony Waters rightly

observes, it is “truly an emic document, reflecting Eh Htoo’s insider view of Myanmar’s politics and society” (p. 209.); this perspective is its principal strength. Equally stimulating are Saw Eh Htoo’s more provocative arguments, such as his conviction that “the Greater Burma (Maha Bama) ideology is so deep that no simple training program or peace curriculum, would change the hearts of the Burmese people” (Ibid.). His interpretation that the military under Ne Win preserved national independence only by producing an inward-looking country mired in protracted civil war is also compelling. For these insights—and the distinctive voice behind them—the book deserves serious attention.

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Tyrell Haberkorn, *Dictatorship on Trial: Coups and the Future of Justice in Thailand*, Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024, 287 pages, US\$30, ISBN 978-1503639409 (Paperback)



22 May 2014 witnessed Thailand's latest military *coup d'État*, an event which submerged the country under both political repression for the next five years and under a legal system rationalizing authoritarianism. In this well-researched study about the 2014–2019 years under Thai military rule, Tyrell Haberkorn, an anthropology professor at University of Wisconsin–Madison, traces how Thai law was exploited in the service of the junta. She herself is well-known for writing about the history of Thai state violence. In this book, borrowing from feminist perspectives, she offers hope for the future, examining how junta-influenced

judgements could have become more just (p. xvii).

In the Prologue, Haberkorn states the purpose of her book: to write a history of Thailand's 2014–2019 martial law under military rule. She adds that her study of this period came on the heels of a previous study in which she examined a history of "illegitimate violence" in Thailand since 1932. That research led her to the conclusion that "impunity is the foundation of [Thai] state formation rather than an aberration" (p. xv). In the Prologue, she then wondered to what extent support for human rights might be possible under existing Thai law: What if the judiciary ruled that arbitrary detention of dissidents was illegal and/or that peaceful demonstrations against the junta was not sedition? Haberkorn thus sought to rethink judicial decisions that favored the junta during this period, rewriting them with a more just interpretation. While she admits her effort might be utopian, she contends that, some 90+ years after the end of absolute monarchy in the kingdom, it is necessary to place the just needs of Thai people as the central focus of the law.

In the Introduction, "History and Jurisprudence" (pp. 1–24), Haberkorn stresses that the proliferation of coups in Thai history means that they have become the principal nexus between the Thai state and its people. Thus, Thais are subject to a history of dispossession (p. 3). The first lesson of dispossession is that the king holds everything while the people have no standing. The second lesson is that juntas have increasingly received legal protections. The third lesson is that in terms of coups,

courts have always sided against the people, giving coup-makers impunity. Finally, Haberkorn then reveals the organization of the book: to examine a series of court decisions (with no appeals allowed) rendered under the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO; คณะรักษาความสงบแห่งชาติ) to “trace the formation of the jurisdiction of impunity” (p. 17). Each chapter analyzes a particular kind of case—each a dimension of junta repression—followed by details of the case itself.

Chapter 1 (pp. 25–46) examines the case of the anti-group Resistant Citizen which in 2015 filed charges of rebellion and treason in the Criminal Court against the 2014 coup-makers, accusing them of being guilty of abrogating the 2007 Constitution and Articles 113 and 114 of the Criminal Code. In 2018 the Supreme Court dismissed the case. This was to be expected. As Haberkorn points out, a 1972 case against a 1971 putsch had met with a similar fate, that, according to then-coup maker Field Marshal Thanom Kittikachorn (ถนอม กิตติขจร; in office 1958, and 1963–1973), once a coup occurred, it became legal. Resistant Citizen’s case in 2015 brought attention to the destruction of pluralism by the 2014 coup and the need to transform laws to force militaries to be accountable to the people. A detailed review of this case shows that the coup-makers did indeed violate the Criminal Code and the rights of Thai citizens.

Chapter 2 (pp. 53–72) looks at the case of Apichat Pongsawat (อภิชาติพงษ์สวัสดิ์; b. 1989) who held up a sign on 23 May 2014, the day after the coup, stating that he did not accept “illegitimate power” (p. 53). Sent to prison for

32 days, his case was finally adjudicated in 2019 and he was found guilty of violating Head of NCPO Order no. 3/2558 because he had been part of an illegal assembly of five or more persons. In reality, he had stood up against the “coupocracy” of coup-makers who, backed by weapons, sought to intimidate Thais into submission. Haberkorn writes that a jurisprudence of accountability would have found that the criminals in this case were the coup-makers. The case had relied on a martial law order, not a royal proclamation: it abrogated the Constitution of 2007 which had guaranteed the “rights” and “liberty” of the people (p. 75). Finally Order no. 3 had already been revoked before Apichat was charged under it.

Chapter 3 (pp. 79–107) investigates the post-2014-coup NCPO Order, summoning 472 individuals to the Army Club to enter into detention. Some did not report, instead choosing civil disobedience. Worachet Pakeerut (วรเชษฐ์ ปาเคียรุต; b. 1969) petitioned the Constitutional Court regarding the constitutionality of the summons. The court ruled the petition unconstitutional in 2020 and the case against him was dropped in 2021. Haberkorn criticized Articles 1, 37, and 41 because she sees them in clear contravention of the junta’s own 2014 Interim Constitution which guaranteed all Thais the “right to security and liberty of person”, with the arrested informed as to the reasons for the arrest and anyone arrested allowed to access to the court (p. 112).

Chapter 4 (pp. 114–138) scrutinizes the actions of Piyarat Chongthep (ปิยารัฐ จงเทพ; b. 1990) who, on 7 August 2016, at a referendum vote on a new Draft

Constitution, tore up his ballot rather than filling it out, yelling “Down with Dictatorship!” (p. 140). He and two other defendants were found guilty of violating the Draft Referendum Act. In this case, the NCPO-influenced court seems to have used judicial devices to intimidate anyone willing to oppose the junta-supported Constitution. The author argues that the tearing up of the ballot repressed freedom of expression under Article 34 of the 2017 Constitution.

In Chapter 5 (pp. 143–161), the author looks at the case of Pansak Srithep (ปันศักดิ์ ศรีเทพ; b. 1967), a member of Resistant Citizen, who petitioned the Administrative Court against wrongful detention, challenging Ministry of Justice Order no. 314/2558. This law created a prison in Bangkok for civilians in “national security” cases. 47 people (including 45 civilians) had been detained in this prison. While imprisoned, two had died under mysterious circumstances, including Mo Yong (aka Suriyan Sucharitphalawong, สุริยัน สุจริตพลวงศ์; 1962–2015), a famous fortune teller. Pansak himself had initially been charged with participating illegally in a protest. The author argues that the brevity and ambiguity of Order no. 314 gave too much leeway to the state regarding those detained. There must be much more clarity in such laws to protect people’s rights.

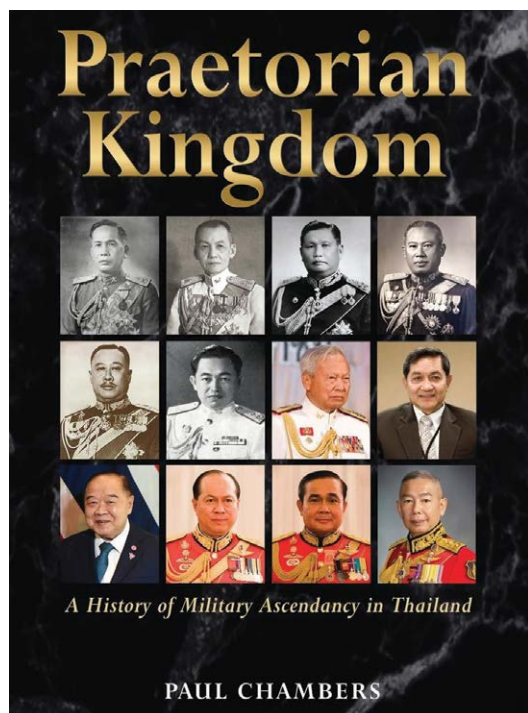
In the book’s Epilogue (pp. 167–173) Haberkorn discusses four demands of youths who demonstrated in 2020: (1) General Prayuth Chan-Ocha (ประยุทธ์ จันทร์โอชา; in office 2014–2023) must resign; (2) there must be a new, more progressive Constitution; (3) the state must stop threatening dissidents; and (4) the institution of monarchy must be

reformed. These demonstrations continued well into 2021—though they were ultimately repressed. The author states that her book, in support of these protests, seeks to create a jurisprudence of accountability centered on the needs of the people rather than the monarchy. She ends her volume by pointing to the urgency of reforming Criminal Code Article 112 on *lèse-majesté*, which makes it illegal to defame, insult, or threaten the king, queen, heir to the throne, or regent of Thailand. Since the Thai judiciary is devoid of impartiality because it acts in the name of the king, it lacks legitimacy (of impartiality) to act on 112 issues (p. 173).

In sum, this work appeals to multiple scholars and policymakers who examine comparative jurisprudence as well as to scholars of Asian studies as an examination of civil–military relations and the politicization of courts. The book also appeals in its use of feminist approaches to examine marginalized Thais in court processes. The examination of legal rationales for previous coups in Thai history as a comparison with the 2014 putsch was innovative. Additionally, the book offers important detailed cases representing key dimensions of legal repression which might be repeated in the future. Finally, the author’s attempt to bring hope to decisions overshadowed by the junta, by demonstrating how they might be reworked to benefit the people, was novel. Ultimately, as a work which looks at how law might be transformed in a democratizing country of Southeast Asia, this book is an essential tool.

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Paul Chambers, *Praetorian Kingdom: A History of Military Ascendancy in Thailand*, Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2024, 705 pages, SGD\$50, ISBN 978-9815104240 (Paperback)



In *Praetorian Kingdom: A History of Military Ascendancy in Thailand*, Paul Chambers offers a path-breaking and expansive political history of Thailand through the lens of military-monarchy relations. Across 700 engaging pages, he constructs an incisive assessment of the military's role in shaping, and often dominating, domestic politics and international relations, particularly Thai-U.S. relations. Framed by an illuminating discussion of different theories of praetorianism, Chambers asks three urgent questions: "[1] Why did Thailand evolve to become a praetorian kingdom? [2] What is the detailed history of Thai praetorianism? And [3] why has Thai military influence across politics never been curtailed?"

(p. 2). The chilling answer is one rooted in impunity: the military has never been held to account or subject to democratically-elected civilian control. Organized chronologically, the book begins with the end of absolute monarchy in 1932 and continues to 2023, covering 14 successful coups and many other forms of more insidious military interventions into Thai public life. Chambers pairs his theoretical elegance with rich evidence, combining interviews with Thai military sources and exhaustive use of government documents. Thai government documents pertaining to the military since 1932 are not readily available, so Chambers uses declassified U.S. government documents, including those from Foreign Relations of the United States, Wikileaks, and the Central Intelligence Agency Freedom of Information Act (CIA FOIA) Electronic Reading Room, to painstakingly unveil how the Thai military cemented its position in politics and public life.¹ Four appendices condense information about overt and silent coups, the presence of security forces in parliament and in the cabinet, and details of the annual military reshuffles. The sheer amount of information that Chambers has consolidated means that *Praetorian Kingdom* should be required reading for anyone interested in Thailand, defense and security studies, and how to use declassified documents.

The book's importance, however, goes far beyond making new data widely available. *Praetorian Kingdom*, by centering

¹ The Foreign Relations of the United States series can be accessed online via the U.S. Department of State Office of the Historian website here: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments>. The CIA FOIA Electronic Reading Room can be accessed online here: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/>.

the military with its most significant partner, the monarchy, tells a new set of stories about Thai history. The very nature of these two institutions and the shifting form of the relationship means that the book becomes a history of state violence, corruption, capital accumulation, and the deferral of democracy. Two chapters—one focused on the prelude to the 6 October 1976 massacre and coup and the other on the long arc of the most recent coup regime, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO)—illuminate this history.

The 90-page Chapter 6 (pp. 259–349) on the 6 October 1976 massacre and coup draws on newly-available evidence to offer a month-by-month account of the breakdown of democracy between October 1973 and October 1976. Focusing on General Krit Sivara (พล.อ. กฤษณ์ สีวะรา), commander-in-chief of the army between 1973 and 1975, Chambers argues the general was “the most powerful person in Thailand” during this period and “was also more powerful than the king. Though Krit declared his loyalty to King Bhumibol, the General controlled the monopoly on state violence and the king’s guards; moreover, he was wealthier than the palace” (p. 259). The chapter is at once a mini-biography of Krit and an analysis of the struggles over power that created the conditions for violence.

Krit used his spectacular wealth, gained from involvement in sugar, air travel, and other Thai industries, to support a range of pro-military and other candidates in the January 1975 election. But shortly after retiring from the military and appointment as defense minister, Krit died suddenly and

mysteriously on 16 April 1976. Chambers queries the circumstances of his death, noting there were rumors that he was poisoned and an autopsy was never performed. This was significant because “with the king having become amenable to supporting a coup, Krit was the only person who seemed able and willing to preserve Thai democracy—and he conveniently died only hours after being named defense minister” (p. 303).

In the wake of Krit’s death, the army broke into six cliques. Once this happened, “[...] other security forces were used to repress the NSCT [National Student Center of Thailand] and enable a coup [...] the strongest and easiest to manipulate was the BPP [Border Patrol Police]” (p. 322). The massacre that ensued was not an accident, but the violence at Thammasat University and the coup “appeared more as a long-conceived plan” (p. 322). Chambers argues that those behind the violence had likely planned to use the BPP while omitting Krit and the army. Accompanying the text, Chambers includes a staggering two-and-a-half page chart mapping key leaders across the security forces, palaces, government, (un)civil society—with their positions, units, and role vis-à-vis the massacre and coup. Alongside his careful analysis of Thai figures, he also draws on U.S. government documents to show the CIA’s direct financial and propaganda support of Thai right-wing and para-state actors, as well as its indirect support of the massacre and coup. Chambers is particularly compelling when he explicates possible meanings of the both terse and wordy cables traveling between Bangkok and Washington, D.C. In particular,

a cable from Henry Kissinger (U.S. Secretary of State, 1973–1977) about a possible coup in late July 1976 suggests both foreknowledge and a profound willingness to act against democracy by the United States. No one's hands are clean.

Chambers marks 1980 and the General Prem Government (1980–1988) as a key transition point during which a reversal takes place and the “military became quite ‘monarchized’ in the sense that it functioned as the junior partner to the palace” (p. 6). The most recent iteration of this is the subject of the last chapter (Chapter 14, pp. 619–647) in the body of the book, on the regime of the NCPO that carried out the most recent coup on 22 May 2014, stayed in power for five years, and continues to exercise influence today. The junta leader, General Prayuth Chan-Ocha, claimed that the NCPO launched the coup to preserve the monarchy, foster happiness, and return the rule of law after years of Thaksin Shinawatra-induced lawlessness. Instead, Chambers parses the unstated but real goals of the coup: “[1] ensuring arch-royalist order amidst an impending monarchical succession; [2] re-asserting monarchical–military domination over Thailand amidst perceived threats from civilians (especially Thaksin and Yingluck Shinawatra); [3] consolidating the domination over the armed forces and police by the junta leaders’ military faction; and [4] enhancing military corporate interests, particularly those of the senior brass” (p. 620). The effects for civilians, particularly those who dissented, were disastrous. During the five years (2014–2019) that the NCPO was in power, those critical of the monarchy

and military were prosecuted, public speech was constricted, and a legislative order was put in place by the 2017 Constitution that created permanent obstacles to democracy. Despite a return to elections in 2019, the military remains highly influential in governance and public life. The military is able to do this because it became a “monarchized military”, secondary only to the palace and essential as its protector.

Chambers concludes his comprehensive and chilling indictment of praetorianism in Thailand by noting that, “The military has overthrown governments when it has been unified under a military personality to do so, finds a rationale based around political pandemonium to usurp power, and is encouraged to act by the palace for all of these motives” (p. 649). He reiterates one of the questions with which he began: how might the Thai military be brought under civilian control? Providing answers may be beyond even the best scholarship, of which *Praetorian Kingdom* is an example, because doing so must rely on the will of the military, government, and other key figures in the Thai polity to change. The sheer lack of this will is witnessed with every intervention of the military into politics, every Article 112 prosecution for dissenting expression, and the general climate of fear that ensures silence around many key matters in the kingdom.

Assessing the contributions of this ground-breaking political history and analysis of Thailand's military would be incomplete without discussing the unjust legal proceedings the author faced in 2025. In early April 2025, police appeared at Naresuan University in

Phitsanulok, where Chambers was a Faculty member, with a warrant for his arrest for violation of Article 112 of the Criminal Code. Article 112 stipulates that, “Whoever defames, insults, or threatens the king, queen, heir-apparent, or regent shall be subject to three-to-fifteen years imprisonment”. Present in the Criminal Code since its last major revision in 1957, Article 112 has been used extensively over the last two decades. Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (TLHR) reports that there were at least 169 cases during the five years of the NCPO’s regime with at least 284 cases since the youth-led movement for democracy between late 2020 and August 2025.² The vast majority of these cases have been for peaceful expression, including questioning, or even merely analyzing, the institution of the monarchy. Article 112 cases are frequently characterized by procedural inconsistencies, the arbitrary exercise of power, and the presumption of guilt. Chambers’ experience was no different.

The case against him was brought by a military official and centered on the text of an advertisement—which Chambers did not write—for a talk on the military and monarchy he gave for the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore. When he reported to

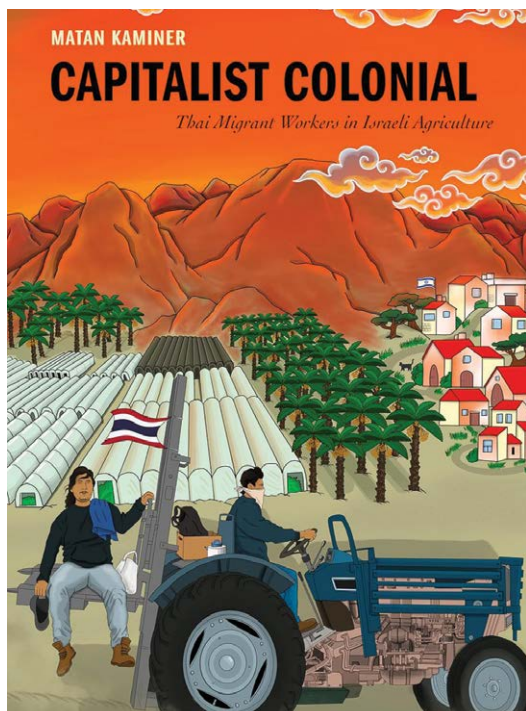
the police, he was initially denied bail and spent nearly two days behind bars at the Phitsanulok provincial prison. When he was released, he learned that he had been summarily dismissed from his longstanding Faculty position at Naresuan University and his visa revoked. His passport was seized and he was forced to wear an electronic monitoring anklet. His case prompted outrage and concern about implications for academic freedom. While the Office of the Attorney General ultimately decided not to prosecute the case, there was no assurance that the military would not try again; Chambers eventually left Thailand at the end of May 2025.

The attack on Paul Chambers is a very concerning development indicative of the declining climate of academic freedom and freedom of expression generally in Thailand. Naresuan University and Thailand lost a brilliant scholar and generous colleague. His work will continue and so must the work of all of us who are concerned with the unjust and arbitrary actions of the military, judiciary, and other key institutions of the Thai nation.

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² For information of Article 112 cases, see the TLHR website: <http://www.tlhr2014.com>.

Matan Kaminer, *Capitalist Colonial: Thai Migrant Workers in Israeli Agriculture*, Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2024, 298 pages, US\$30, ISBN 978-1503641099 (Paperback)



“Don’t try to change Thailand [...]. We want them like this [...]. Don’t think we really want [the Frontier Settlement Project]. We are pretending” (p. 74). This quotation from Matan Kaminer’s book is from an Israeli key informant directly involved in the Frontier Settlement Project training program—a cooperative enterprise between the Thai and Israeli governments since the late 1980s. In the end, this project turned out to involve the export of Thai (Isan) migrant workers to Israeli agricultural settlements along the Israeli–Jordanian border—the phenomenon under study in this book. The most interesting aspect of the quotation is that it comes from a direct conversation between an

Israeli informant and a member of the Thai elite. It illustrates what the author refers to as the “structural hypocrisy” (p. 72) of the Thai state regarding the Frontier Settlement Project, in which it requested technical cooperation from the Israeli government from the outset. For the Thai government, this project—modeled after Israel’s NAHAL (Fighting Pioneer Youths), a paramilitary Israel Defense Force program and mixed military–civilian settlement along disputed borders—seemingly aimed to “kill two troublesome birds with one stone”: securing the border with neighbors, notably Laos and Cambodia, on the one hand, and promoting economic development in remote areas on the other (pp. 68–70).

As the title *Capitalist Colonial: Thai Migrant Workers in Israeli Agriculture* indicates, however, this book is not about bilateral cooperation between the Thai and Israeli governments. Rather, it is the story of Thai migrant workers in Israel. The request for technical assistance for the Frontier Settlement Project was only a pretext to facilitate the entry of Thai migrant workers into Israel. This coincided with Israel’s increasing demand for farm labor following the Palestinian *intifada* in the late 1980s and its adoption of neoliberal economic policies. To increase global competitiveness in the agricultural sector, Israel could not rely solely on advanced technology but also needed cheap agrarian labor. Persistent conflicts with the Arab world, however, made importing workers from neighboring countries increasingly difficult. Since the late 1980s, Thai migrant workers have consistently been a major source

of labor for the Israeli agricultural sector, making this phenomenon worthy of study.

In the Introduction (pp. 1–21), the author discusses key concepts such as domination, difference, the capitalist-colonial world system, and the role of ideology. He critically examines Thai migrant farmworkers in Israel through the lens of domination and difference, posing his central research question: “How do domination and difference become interdependent in this way?” (p. 1). To address this, Kaminer employs the concept of “capitalist coloniality”. It is “capitalist” in the sense that Israeli entrepreneurs are compelled to recruit cheap Thai labor to compete in the global market. It is “coloniality” in that it involves the Zionist assertion of sovereignty and rule over migrant workers. The logic of capitalism produces a particular form of domination and unequal relations between capitalists and workers. Yet domination does not manifest itself through simple economic exploitation alone—it is more complex. The author therefore introduces the role of culture and ideology. In this regard, the book is not only about Thai migrant workers in Israel but also about the cultural encounter between Jewish Israelis and Thai (specifically Isan) migrants. Ideology, intrinsically hegemonic, reproduces domination—but it is not one-sided. Rather, it is interactive.

Chapter 1 (pp. 23–52) traces the history of Israeli settlement in the Arabah (an ancient word meaning “desert”) from Bedouin inhabitants to the colonial “redemption” of the land. The key challenge was the maintenance of Jewish cohesion while recruiting workers

to make the desert arable. At the root of this recruitment was “exploitation anxiety”—a distrust of non-Jewish workers. With the Israeli government’s turn to neoliberal policies and the outbreak of the Palestinian rebellion in the late 1980s, this challenge became even greater, paving the way for the importation of Thai migrant labor.

Chapter 2 (pp. 53–75) provides the Thai historical background, with a special focus on the Isan region. It examines the Siamese colonization of Isan and the establishment of paternalism as the leading ideology of hierarchical integration. During the Cold War and the struggle against Communist insurgency, the Thai government sought models to counter local Communist movements and contain neighboring Communist states. This is the context in which cooperation with Israel in the Frontier Settlement Project began.

Chapter 3 (pp. 76–98) narrates the arrival of Thai workers in the Arabah desert, which the author defines as the “Thai revolution”. He sees this as a revolution for two reasons: (1) Thai workers came to outnumber the Israeli population, and (2) they overcame Israeli xenophobia. Here ideology played a crucial role. Because Isan workers neither demanded participation nor sought social integration, they did not trigger Jewish anxieties. Moreover, paternalism served as an ideological bridge between Israeli employers and Isan workers. For the latter, domination was acceptable due to another ideology: karmic reciprocity—the belief that meritorious actions are eventually rewarded or literally in Thai “*tham di dai di*” (ทำดีได้ดี; p. 13). The following

Chapters 4 and 5 (pp. 99–147) elaborate on the reproduction of domination, examining the spatio-temporal life cycles of Israeli employers and Isan workers. The key points highlighted are the separation of the public sphere and the differing rhythms of daily life.

Chapter 6 (pp. 148–166), “Social Reproduction and Karmic Reciprocity”, moves beyond the spatial context of relations within the Arabah. The author delves into the life histories of Isan workers, with a focus on gender relations and marital problems. When workers faced family crises back home, they sometimes asked their Israeli employers to intervene. This reflects the transnational extension of paternalism, in which the patron’s role extended beyond the farm. In the concluding Chapter 7 (pp. 167–175), after synthesizing the overall argument—especially the role of ideology in reproducing domination—the author expresses uneasiness about the exploitation of workers. He calls for transcending the colonial–capitalist structure in favor of a “decolonized, democratic, and socialist Arabah” (p. 175).

This work contributes to many fields, including Thai studies, migration, sociology, and development studies. Although the study of Thai migrant workers has long been and remains a popular topic, this book makes a distinctive contribution. Existing material tends to focus on Thai migrant workers in “3D” (dangerous, difficult, dirty) jobs—particularly in construction and industry (Pattana 2014) or the sex industry (Watanabe 1998)—with case studies mainly from Asia and Europe, such as Singapore (Pattana 2014), South

Korea (Kanika & Penchan 2020), Japan (Watanabe 1998), and Germany (Supang et al. 2001). Although several studies have examined Thai migrant workers in Israel (e.g., Or & Shohamy 2020), this is the first book to apply anthropological methods and analyze the subject through the lens of capitalist coloniality and paternalism.

In the same vein, it would be fruitful to conduct further comparative research on Thai (Isan) migrant workers in other countries, to examine whether similar forms of domination or capitalist–colonial relations exist elsewhere. Some key informants in this book had experience working in other countries, such as South Korea and Sweden. It is worth asking whether patron–client relations emerge in those contexts as well. Furthermore, in Israel itself, there are also migrant workers from other countries, including the Philippines, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Can the concept of capitalist coloniality also be applied to these groups? As long as global labor migration shows no signs of diminishing, this book is well worth reading. It demonstrates how to combine a critical theoretical lens with ethnographic research to understand the complexities of contemporary labor migration.

Amidst the Israel–Hamas war which began on 7 October 2023, and tends to persist and develop into the “perpetual conflict”, this book is a timely read. As the Thai workers have been direct or indirect victims of this war, they are unfortunately under a critical dilemma whether to live under conflict-ridden areas and make a good money or get back home and live under economically insecure life in Isan. The above dilemma

is perfectly encapsulated in an interview of one of the Isan worker who already evacuated to Thailand after the Israel–Hamas war that: “I want to go back (to Israel). In Isaan I can’t make any money” (Neuman 2023). On the Israeli side, in order to secure the food security, which is equally important as the national security, the demand for migrant workers is still high or even higher considering the lower supply of workers. As such, the concept of “capitalist coloniality” seems to be

applicable in that the Israeli entrepreneurs are even more compelled to find laborers not just to make profit in the global market but to secure the nation’s food security and the Israeli government is eager to assert its sovereignty over the conflict-ridden areas and continues the hegemonic domination over the migrant workers.

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