

vignettes. The only weakness of this volume would be the vague idea of identities presented in the book title. The understanding of the concept of identity seems to be taken for granted, as the editors did not unpack it in their introduction. Given that identity can refer to any quality and status of an individual, it could easily become a floating signifier without a referent and lose its analytical power. Also, since all chapters share the same focus of the marketplace in Vietnam, the introduction to market development in Vietnam each contributor provides overlaps and becomes repetitive.

I highly recommended this book to students and readers who are interested in economic anthropology, urban planning, globalization, gender, and Southeast Asian studies.

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Read Till It Shatters: Nationalism and Identity in Modern Thai Literature. By Thak Chaloemtiarana. Canberra: ANU Press, 2018. xi+243 pp.

Anyone who has studied modern Thai politics or history will know Thak Chaloemtiarana's classic work on the Sarit dictatorship, *Thailand: The Politics of Despotism*, first published in 1979. They may not, however, be as familiar with Thak's more recent work. In the latter part of his career, Thak has reappeared with a series of stimulating and provocative essays. A number of these have been collected and republished in this volume, *Read Till It Shatters: Nationalism and Identity in Modern Thai Literature*. The

first part of the title is a translation of a Thai saying, meaning to read something closely in order to penetrate to its deeper meaning.

Thak was trained in political science, but these are essays of literary criticism. He explains his explorations into Thai literature as due partly to his disillusionment with the current scientific direction of political science in the United States; his own original love for literature, which he deferred due to the pragmatic calculation that it might be wiser in career terms to study political science; and a shift, late in his career, to teaching courses in Asian literature (pp. 5–6). The happy result for the reader is that Thak brings an unusual and highly readable approach to the sometimes staid and formalistic practice of literary criticism.

The book contains six essays: on the origins of the Thai novel; the fascinating story of two Thai princes, Prince Bira and Prince Chula Chakraphong, and their remarkable and successful adventure into the world of motorcar racing in Europe in the 1930s; a study of the best-selling novel by the nationalist writer Luang Wichit Wathakan, *Sea of Love, Chasm of Death* (*Huang rak haew luk*); a review of Susan Kepner's recent biography of the conservative writer, literary critic and prominent educationalist, M.L. Boonlua Debhayasuwan; an analysis of how the ethnic Chinese have been represented in twentieth-century Thai literature; and a survey of 'lowbrow' but highly popular autobiographies of businessmen, well-known female figures, and popular comedians, all of whom have overcome enormous adversity to achieve success in their lives.

Each of these essays is original, provocative and, not least of all, entertaining. A distinctive and refreshing feature of the collection is Thak's interest in the everyday lives of ordinary people—and the ordinary activities of the occasional prince or aristocrat. Thailand is still lacking in social history, which is partly a function of the elitist hold over Thai politics and cultural life. As Thak points out, "we can imagine the iconic Thai professor, the iconic soldier, or the iconic politician, but never the iconic noodle vendor or the iconic street vendor" (p. 232). Beyond their value to Thai literary criticism, these essays contribute to a better understanding of Thailand's social

history in the twentieth century. In this respect, one can see the connection between Thak's critical and progressive voice in *Despotic Paternalism* and these later essays.

As the book's title suggests, in the literary works he has selected Thak explores the themes of nationalism and identity. But what I did not expect was the attention the volume gives to gender and sexuality. The theme is prominent in four of the six essays, and is touched on in the other two. One of Thailand's earliest novels, *Nang Neramit* (1916) is a Thai Buddhist version of the colonial adventure novel in which "all but helpless" men (p. 51) on an expedition to some caves in Egypt are seduced by mummy nymphs. Luang Wichit Wathakan's remarkable novel, *Sea of Love, Chasm of Death* (1949), features a female protagonist, Praphimphan, who goes on murderous adventures around the world, killing men who have wronged her. One section of the book which relates the travels of Praphimphan and her friend Waenfa in exotic lands reads like a Thai version of the famous movie *Thelma and Louise* (p. 132). Thak argues that the book is really an expression in novel form of Luang Wichit's idea of the "new Thai woman" (p. 120), a potentially dangerous woman who exhibits both feminine and masculine qualities:

Praphimphan ... likes to shoot; to challenge her tormentors to duels; she enjoys drinking coffee (not done by Thai women at that time); and is unforgiving of those who have wronged her. She can be a nurturing woman with her friends, but a vengeful executioner of her enemies. (p. 121)

Sea of Love, Chasm of Death is remarkable for its progressive, challenging and internationalist view of gender, written by one of the most prominent public figures of the day. It preceded the great conservative turn of the late 1950s under the royalist-military Sarit dictatorship, and the imposition of a conservative-nationalist model of gender relations that remains influential today. Thak's review of Kepner's *A Civilized Woman* highlights an important but little acknowledged point in Thailand's modern social history: the dramatic loss of status of aristocratic Thai women due to the economic, social

and political changes of the early decades of the twentieth century (pp. 137–54). In his analysis of the autobiographies of a number of prominent women, in the final essay, the reader learns about the arduous and sometimes degrading struggles that these women have faced in overcoming difficult personal and social circumstances.

The volume is prefaced by an illuminating foreword by fellow Cornell University graduate Craig Reynolds and an introduction by Thak himself that explains the background to his forays into Thai literature. Anyone with an interest in modern Southeast Asia will enjoy and benefit from these essays.

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Myanmar in the Fifteenth Century: A Tale of Two Kingdoms. By Michael A. Aung-Thwin. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2017. xiv+369 pp.

In *Myanmar in the Fifteenth Century: A Tale of Two Kingdoms*, Michael Aung-Thwin reassembles the histories of the kingdoms of Ava and Pegu between the decline of Pagan at the end of the fourteenth century and the rise of the Toungoo dynasty in the sixteenth century. Aung-Thwin’s analysis draws on primary sources, including stone inscriptions (*kyauksa*) and chronicles (*yazawin*). He uses these to create a detailed narrative of the history of each kingdom, in the process critiquing previous scholarly assumptions about each.