

*The Ambiguous Allure of the West: Traces of the Colonial in Thailand.* Rachel V. Harrison and Peter A. Jackson, eds. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010. 268 pp.

Thai studies often emphasize Siam's lack of formal colonization and push the exceptionalism of Thailand and of "Thainess" to mythical levels. But scholars of Thailand are well aware of the provisions and adaptations made by Siamese rulers to Western colonial powers as well as the ambivalent role that the West plays in Thailand today. Yet Thailand is often treated as a place fundamentally different from its neighbours because of the lack of *direct* European colonization, and therefore it is often seen to be impervious to theoretical insights drawn from other countries.

This overemphasis on the uniqueness of Thailand has led to the downplaying of comparative theoretical research concerning Thailand. *The Ambiguous Allure of the West* seeks to remedy this lacuna by looking at Thailand's relationship with Western powers and the figure of the Westerner (*farang*) in the Thai cultural imagination through examples drawn from history, cultural studies, and anthropology. The edited volume provides a compelling case for new research on the (post)coloniality of Thailand as well as some opening steps in this direction by leading scholars in Thai studies today, including Thongchai Winichakul, Pattana Kitiarsa, Tamara Loos, and Michael Herzfeld. However, *The Ambiguous Allure of the West* is more challenge than conclusion: despite some attempts to tie the chapters together, the real success of the book is in offering a springboard for new research. The authors successfully show that thinking about Thailand's relationship with the West through ideas about hybridity taken from postcolonial studies (especially the writings of Homi Bhabha) can both yield new and exciting analyses of the country as well as provide new twists on theory — although these works provide only a beginning step. Additionally, as Peter Jackson suggests in his afterword, England (and later America) is not the only country which held or holds an "ambiguous allure" for Thailand.

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Studies on Thai hybridity with other hegemonic powers in the area — India and China, for instance, especially before the middle of the nineteenth century, or perhaps China and Japan at present — are also suggested and advocated in *The Ambiguous Allure of the West*, although the authors argue that it is the figure of the *farang* which holds the centre stage from the middle of the nineteenth century until the end of the twentieth.

Ultimately, the authors suggest an engagement with postcolonial theory not simply to push the limits of Thai studies, but also to push the limits of theory. As Dipesh Chakrabarty notes in his foreword to the book, in order to create something new, we must first address the limits of categories derived from (generally European) theory while at the same time searching for common comparative ground (thereby avoiding the trap of exceptionalism). This is the point of doing original research: to test and to find the weak points of prior theories and assumptions and to develop new ways of thinking about a subject. In this light, the contributors largely succeed in making the case that such work needs to be done, although there is an occasional mismatch between the specificity of some chapters and the extremely broad reach of others.

The chapters can be roughly grouped into broad historical and theoretical analyses or targeted and specific ones. Amongst the more general works, Pattana and Thongchai trace the historical dimensions of Siam's interaction with and attitudes towards *farang*, noting how current descriptions of and depictions of Thainess incorporate both a desire for similarity with Western powers (while occasionally vociferously denouncing them) as well as adapting "Western" symbols to Thai contexts. Similarly, Herzfeld and Loos show how outwardly Western forms are often embedded within extremely local systems of signification (systems which the authors are careful to note are not essentialized "authentic" cultures, but are hybrid forms in themselves). Herzfeld's formulation of "crypto-colonial" processes makes the important point that Thailand is not in isolation in its status vis-à-vis dominant powers — Greece was also a site where local elites produced an image of themselves

as always already commensurable with hegemonic Western norms for both local and international consumption. Such a comparison begs more work to be done on similarly “ambiguously” situated countries elsewhere in the world (Japan comes most immediately to mind, but Europe’s borders in Finland and Turkey might also prove fruitful). In her contribution, Rachel Harrison provides concrete examples from modern Thai cinema of how even the essentializing Thai national narrative has been itself fashioned by global processes even as it purports to reject such influences in a fundamental way. In what should seem to scholars of Thailand to be a continually-repeated cliché, the heroine of a recent film, despite her half-French background and Western education, maintains the idea of an essential “Thai” quality that she, and by extension the nation, has preserved at heart despite their changed exteriors. In short, these chapters demonstrate that Thailand and especially the Thai elite, despite claims to have emerged from the colonial encounter at heart unchanged, in fact incorporated foreignness into the definition of what is quintessentially “Thai” — a situation quite comparable with that of the colonized world.

While most of the above authors focus on the broad picture of Thailand’s relationship with the West, Tamara Loos, Thanés Wongyannava, and May Adadol Ingawanij and Richard Lowell MacDonald, in their contributions, address the specificities of Thailand’s hybridity. Loos shows clearly how King Chulalongkorn’s administration was both patterned after British colonial rule (with regards to making concessions for other religious legal systems) and also paradoxically playing into the idea of the Siamese king as an explicitly Buddhist ruler. Loos (and Jackson, in his afterword) also discusses Siam’s internal colonialism: The Siamese elite bent to the forms imposed by colonizing powers externally, but internally they used these same forms of power to legitimate their own colonial project — the takeover of those Lao, Malay, and Khmer territories that Siamese rulers certainly saw as foreign powers. In a strangely parallel vein, Thanés discusses how modern Thai studies often use European theory simply as a means to legitimate their

own positivistic work. He examines Thai academics' unproblematic usage of Foucault. Thanes argues that it is in fact Foucault's very groundedness in historical facts as opposed to other French poststructuralist theory that renders him attractive to the positivistic Thai academy (Herzfeld also notes the zeal for "data" as a mark of legitimacy in Thai bureaucratic and academic circles). Yet the fact that these data are drawn from European examples and speak to historically-dependent conditions does not cause Thai scholars to question his applicability, rather, his idea of "discourse" is widely adopted, adapted, and used as a means for analyzing everything from homosexuality to hill tribes in Thailand. Contributions such as Loos' and Thanes' are interesting and necessary, but to complete the ambitious project proposed by the volume, more such detailed studies are needed.

As a work which largely is a call for a new way of looking at Siam/Thailand via a critical intersection with other works, *The Ambiguous Allure of the West* is perhaps excused for having a wide analytical angle. Jackson attempts a final synthesis of the contributions by casting them in light of the paradoxically liberatory aspects of hybridity (following from Bhabha) and the oppressive role of hybridity (following the work of Néstor García Canclini) in writings from the postcolonies. Yet such a synthesis is perhaps premature, only covering one facet (that of power) of the complex relationship between (semi-, crypto-, competitive) colonizer and colonized. Even so, Jackson successfully points to one way in which the Thai case can be used to push the limits of both Bhabha and García Canclini's work.

Ultimately, *The Ambiguous Allure of the West* is a necessary starting point for new work in Thai studies, whether in history, anthropology, or cultural studies. Far more than simply putting to rest conservative Thai assertions about Siam's inviolability or inherent "Thainess", this volume's call for viewing Thailand as a postcolony lays a foundation for how to think about Thailand as both a point of departure and also as a point of comparison with its neighbours. More such studies are undoubtedly needed, both

within Thailand and also with other places that might share similar conditions. Much like how Jackson analyses Thailand in the light of insights from South Asia and Latin America, scholars of Thailand also need to contribute to the theoretical and comparative discussion, opening the door for a Thai-informed study of areas well outside of Southeast Asia.

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