

number of years is a marvelous way to learn about a particular place, its people, society, politics and economy. Not clear to me, however, is how long each of these stays was and what Walker did while he was in Ban Tiam. He refers to surveying households in the village at least a couple of times; he also had numerous conversations with residents. At various times two assistants helped him learn from villagers; one of them, writes Walker, spent more time in Ban Tiam than he did (p. xi). I am not questioning Walker's deep knowledge and understanding of the village and its political dynamics. I am keen to know in some detail how he became so well informed.

**Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet**

Emeritus Professor, The Australian National University; mailing address: Dept of Political Science, 2424 Maile Way, University of Hawaii, Honolulu, HI 96822; email: ben.kerkvliet@anu.edu.au.

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*The Lovelorn Ghost and the Magical Monk: Practicing Buddhism in Modern Thailand*. By Justin McDaniel. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 327 pp.

This is a frustrating and even troubling book. I say this not because it is “magnificent, beguiling, and thought-provoking” (Steve Collins, back cover), or “brilliant and innovative” (Anne Hansen, back cover), or “full of fresh observations and original thinking” (Craig Reynolds, back cover). When someone of the stature of Craig Reynolds asks, “Does anyone understand Thai religion in all its complexity better than McDaniel?” (ibid.), the reader tends to take notice (while at the same time surmising that perhaps there are some [millions of?])

Thai people who might understand Thai religion better). However, in the case of this book, the author's imprecision, sloppy thinking and poor understanding of Thai language continually bring the reader up short and call into question the soundness both of the book's content and of the extremely high praise that it has received from some scholars.

McDaniel's study is a supremely ambitious one. He frequently makes claims to providing new views and new understandings, and he even sees fit to "warn" readers (p. 7) and to suggest to them a "wise" course of action (p. 17), quoting along the way Wittgenstein, T.S. Eliot, and Samuel Johnson (from a secondary source). He declares that the book develops new approaches and makes new contributions to a very wide range of fields and their practitioners: "I hope that this style is useful to anthropologists, historians, philologists, art historians, political scientists, and magicians" (p. 19); "It should have some value for scholars of ritual studies, tantra, new philology, and the history of magic" (p. 20); "Here I hope to dismantle the discrepancies between anthropological and textual approaches to the study of ritual and performance in Southeast Asian Buddhism" (p. 21); "Here I speak not only to scholars of religious studies, Buddhist studies, history, and anthropology, but also to art historians" (p. 21). He calls himself a "historian of Buddhism, Pali and Sanskrit, and Southeast Asian literature" (p. 4), and compares himself to a fine artist (p. 18):

I present variations on a theme just as a composer designs different movements in an orchestral composition that are performed over an entire season, or a painter paints the same scene in different lights, at different times of day, in different seasons. I attempt to construct a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (here, a complete work incorporating all media)...

McDaniel spends a good deal of time critiquing the ways in which Thai religion has been studied in the past. He states that there has been a tendency to see Thai Buddhism as corrupt, full of foreign influence, and untrue to Theravada orthodoxy. He emphasizes that Thai religious practice must be seen in new ways, and that

practices (he prefers to use the obfuscatory term “technologies”, repeatedly) involving amulets, magic, shrines and so on need to be taken seriously as the actual praxis of Thai “religiosity” (another jarring term that seems misused in the book). All this is likely true. But is it new? Anyone who has spent time in Thailand will have noticed that, although there are temples nearly everywhere, many of them busy with monks and lay visitors, there are also plenty of other goings-on which seem to balance or even overshadow the ostensibly Buddhist activity. Indeed, students of mine, undergrads with no prior expertise in Buddhist or Thai studies, are within hours of arriving in Thailand asking questions about the spirit houses, shrines, amulets, trees festooned with offerings and more. Perhaps everyone has recognized the centrality of practices outside of orthodox Theravada Buddhism except the scholars of Buddhism themselves.

Using the revered and long-dead monk, Somdet To, and the spirit/legend of Mae Nak as organizing principles for an exploration of contemporary religious practice in Thailand allows this book to address many interesting and fruitful topics. McDaniel makes use of the variety of biographies and oral lore, as well as the practices centred on amulets, figures, murals, and so on, to show the diversity of beliefs and understandings in everyday Thai religion. He identifies four organizing principles as the central tenets of the religious practices he studies. While he gives an indigenous term for each of these (as one would expect in any contemporary study of Southeast Asia), unfortunately these would-be equivalents do not correspond to the English terms that he also provides. He glosses these “Thai Buddhist axioms” (p. 18) as follows:

security: *khwam plotphai*, *kan pongkan*  
 heritage: *moradok*  
 abundance: *udom sombun*  
 graciousness: *khwam sawatdiphap* or *kreng chai*.

This is where the trouble really begins. “Security” in Thai is “*khwam mankhong*”, while “*khwam plotphai*” means “safety” and

“*kan pongkan*” means “protection” or “protecting”; the ways in which the words “safety” and “security” are used and differentiated in Thai are quite similar to English: they are not interchangeable. More serious, though, is the fourth term, “graciousness”. First, “*khwam sawatdiphap*” is an ungrammatical construction, something like saying “safetyness” or “protectionness” in English. Moreover, “*swatdiphap*” does not mean graciousness or anything like it (it has to do with safety, well-being, welfare), and *kreng chai* (frequently rendered “*krengjai*”) is not well translated as “graciousness” either. In a footnote (3, p. 234), the author notes that the Thai term is “very difficult to translate” but suggests it means “feel[ing] bad for putting another person out or bothering another person”, and further states that a “gracious person does not like to put any unnecessary burden on another person”. This explanation completely ignores the hierarchical element that is central to the concept (and to Thai society); one feels *kreng chai* towards those of higher (or sometimes equal) status. Graciousness is not at all an equivalent. “Consideration for one’s superiors; reluctance to inconvenience, or make demands of, someone in a higher position” might be a short approximation of *kreng chai*. Further on in the book, McDaniel describes graciousness as “a comforting blend of beauty and hospitality” (p. 21); how this can be equated with *kreng chai* or *sawatdiphap* is unclear.

These four terms are central principles of McDaniel’s study, as he himself explains, listing them twice in the Introduction and once again in the Conclusion. However, if they are poorly translated, then they do not give an accurate idea of Thai religious values and traits. Furthermore, their mishandling draws into question the Thai language competence on which this study is based.<sup>1</sup> What all this suggests is that McDaniel formulates English (external) categories for what he describes and then tries to come up with Thai terms for them, when instead it would be preferable to listen to the terms and categories that Thais themselves use (no Thai would ever say “*khwam sawatdiphap*”) and then try to understand, interpret and explain them. Much of the book discusses written biographies, as well as oral accounts and discussions in which the author participated. How

much confidence can we place in his analysis and understanding of such Thai sources if even the Introduction (which he presumably had months to consider and dozens of people to comment on) contains such fundamental mistakes in language?

Lack of precision and rigour is evident elsewhere in the book, too. While in the Introduction McDaniel begins an interesting discussion on the shortcomings of overarching religious terms such as “Theravada” and “Thai Buddhism”, critiquing the idea that monolithic “pure” forms of Brahmanism or Theravada even exist (or ever existed), he then goes on happily to use such terms throughout the book, along with other similar categories such as Indian, Khmer, Mon, Lao, and others, on the very same page (pp. 15–16) and elsewhere. Furthermore, in Chapter One he uses terms like “Lao” and “Khmer” alongside “northern” and “northeastern” in an ahistorical manner that mixes ethnonyms and toponyms while failing to define any of them (pp. 34–35). In the period under discussion (the mid-nineteenth century), people living in both northern and northeastern Thailand were generally referred to as “Lao” by central Thai people and authorities. When McDaniel uses the word “Lao”, we do not know if he is using the term as it was used in the period under discussion, or if he is referring to people then living in or recently removed from what is now Laos proper, or what exactly; and it is not clear that he knows either. Other infelicitous (at best) uses of words include the following: he lists the virtues of “nonattachment, indifference, compassion, and selflessness” (p. 14), where it seems that “indifference” does not belong (are indifference and compassion not antithetical?); he calls Mae Nak “a part of the pantheon of Buddhist monks, ‘Hindu’ deities, and Buddhas” (p. 4), which seems patently untrue as she is none of these; he refers to a “cacophony” of influences in religion (pp. 21, 223, etc.), but cacophony refers to a chaotic mix of sounds producing harsh dissonance, if not meaninglessness, and that, I suspect, is not what he means.

So, what is really new here, and why have academics lavished such high praise on this book? McDaniel makes a useful observation

when he states (p. 30), “The importance of Somdet To’s birth and youth is not the sequence of events [the factual basis] but the people and places to which he has been connected.” The same principle can be applied equally to the author himself. In his lengthy Acknowledgements, he thanks roughly 150 people<sup>2</sup> and institutions by name: religious figures, prestigious universities and institutes, and top academics on four continents, including the biggest names in Thai and Buddhist studies, along with all the people whose glowing comments appear on the back cover. Has scholarship produced a mutual admiration society whose members pile adulation on one another’s work without regard to the actual content? The academic edifice seems to teeter on the edge of its own involution, ready to collapse in a great implosion of brilliance.

### **Martin Platt**

Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen, Leifsgade 33, 5, 2300 Copenhagen S, Denmark; email: platt@hum.ku.dk.

### NOTES

1. McDaniel also states on p. 5 that Somdet To’s name is pronounced “doe”, when in fact the Thai word “*To*” (โธ) and the English word “doe” do not have even a single phonetic element in common. He writes “*phoi phae*” (p. 46) instead of “*phoei phrae*” and “*kato*” (p. 41) instead of “*kathoei*”; he mistranslates the title “*thepakawi*” as “poet to the gods” (p. 43) rather than “divine poet” or “celestial poet”; he lists as “Mrs. Thong Yu Hiranpradit” (p. 50) an individual who surely would have been known as “Thongyu”. More glaring are his misunderstanding of *phy*a in his listing of Phya Anuman Ratchathon as “Prince Anuman Rajathon” (pp. 236 and 284) and his suggestion that “*Sri Thanonchai*” and “*Xiang miang*” (p. 239) are the same story, rather than significantly differing collections of tales (in different languages) with variations on a theme.
2. Strangely, though, he does not seem to actually make use of their scholarship. For example, he thanks Arnika Fuhrmann, who has been as active as anyone in publishing and presenting conference papers on Mae Nak (the “Lovelorn Ghost” of the book’s title), but there is not a single reference to her work anywhere in the book (including the Bibliography). McDaniel does refer to Homi Bhabha, Benedict Anderson, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Clifford Geertz, Jürgen Habermas, etc.