

of what is wonderful about the state of knowledge and understanding of reality within Thailand. Its authors are clearly well-informed about the operation of the current pattern of inequality and, to be honest, of political oppression. Remarkably, they are also able to express optimism about the potential for change and improvement in Thai society. While it is clear that eventually there will need to be a shift in the philosophy of governance to reflect the conviction that people are actually entitled to the government that they elect and thus truly to solve Thailand's dilemmas, it is reaffirming to read such good scholarship delivered with so much hope for the future.

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Thailand's International Meditation Centers: Tourism and the Global Commodification of Religious Practices. By Brooke Schedneck. London: Routledge, 2015. xii+197 pp.

In an era of globalization and intensified transnational exchanges, the reimagining of Buddhism as it is reconfigured in new social contexts and for new audiences has become an increasingly prominent topic of scholarly interest. And, given modern interpretations of meditation as a universal spiritual technology and of Buddhism as strongly identified with meditative practice, the question of how Buddhist meditation travels across cultural and religious boundaries raises questions concerning the localization of Buddhism in the contemporary world. Not surprisingly, much of the resultant scholarship has focused on cases in which Asian traditions of Buddhist meditation are taught in the West to either non-Buddhists or recent Buddhist converts. Thus, the scholarship of David Preston, Patricia Campbell and Michal Pagis has explored how Western spiritual seekers have taught, learned and embodied various sectarian traditions of Buddhist meditation.

Westerners travelling to Asia, where they encounter and learn about meditation in the various homelands of Asian Buddhism, has, however, hardly been the focus of research.

Brooke Schedneck's thought-provoking new monograph *Thailand's International Meditation Centers* explores the question of how Theravada vipassana meditation is strategically reimagined and translated for Western tourists who take part in Buddhist meditation retreats in Thailand. Utilizing historical, textual and ethnographic data, Schedneck examines the discourse and practice of meditation retreats explicitly designed for international travellers but typically conducted within existing temples and sometimes alongside parallel or concurrent retreats for Thai Buddhists. Her argument weaves together an historical analysis of the growth of mass meditation in Southeast Asia; a close reading of scripture, publications aimed at tourists, and materials produced by meditation centres; and interviews and observations carried out at numerous international meditation retreat centres in Southern, Central and Northern Thailand.

As a study of transnational Buddhism, Schedneck's book examines the reconstruction of Buddhism in Asian contexts for non-Asian audiences, the negotiation and translation of religious and cultural difference, and the postmodern religiosity of sampling and experimentation pursued by international tourists with limited commitment to and understanding of Buddhism. Central to her argument is the claim that the Buddhist meditation taught to international travellers is disembedded from its Thai cultural and ritual matrix and represented as a decontextualized, even commodified, practice resonant with the frames and tropes drawn from modernist global Buddhism. This form of meditation and Buddhism is familiar to Western tourists precisely because it is grounded in a variety of cosmopolitan discourses about science, psychology, secularism, universality and individual choice. Schedneck seeks in her monograph to document a creative, emergent intercultural dialogue. Paradoxically, in that dialogue meditation teachers seek both to communicate Buddhism in an authentic way and to meet the expectations and assumptions of international tourists, even as Western travellers seek

out both authentic cultural and spiritual difference and a comfortably familiar journey of personal and psychological discovery.

Schedneck's monograph has many strengths. She illuminatingly situates international meditation retreats in Thailand within the scholarship on both the transformation of vipassana meditation in the colonial and post-colonial eras and the rise of mass lay meditation movements in Southeast Asia. She carefully shows how the vision of Buddhism animating these retreats builds upon the modernist Buddhism that emerged out of a global collaboration between reforming Asian elites and pioneering Western intellectuals. She provides a rich overview and description of the various types of international retreats, instructors and teaching strategies found across Thailand. She persuasively unpacks the foundational tropes of nature and peace, health and well-being, that frame the meaning of Buddhist meditation for international tourists. And through a close reading of brochures, guidebooks, pamphlets and Internet blog posts, as well as statements by instructors and tourists, she shows that the enduring modernist discourses of Rational and Romantic Orientalism continue to shape the vision of Buddhist practice and experience conveyed in and through international meditation retreats.

The power and reach of Schedneck's argument is limited, however, by certain constraints to her argumentation. The monograph never comprehensively describes or compares the programmes of daily practice, meditative techniques and instructional strategies pursued in conventional as opposed to international meditation retreats in Thailand, and so the full dynamics of decontextualization and reinterpretation that it would analyse are sometimes difficult to discern. Schedneck's account privileges the voice and perspective of meditation instructors relative to those of international travellers, and thus it is unclear how much the experience of tourists as meditative consumers actually conforms to either dominant discourses or the expectations of instructors. Also, while her argument is presented as an analysis of intercultural dialogue in "[the] contact zone" (p. 124), in fact very few ethnographic accounts of actual social interaction among tourists, instructors and Thai practitioners are provided. Finally,

Schedneck's analysis would have benefitted from a more robust unpacking of some of the scholarly concepts that she employs — “commodification”, “imaginary”, “field”, “embodiment”, “habitus” — as well as from a sustained, critical engagement with the specific arguments and claims advanced by other scholars, such as Preston, Campbell and Pagis, who have analysed similar phenomenon.

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“Getting By”: *Class and State Formation among Chinese in Malaysia*. By Donald M. Nonini. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. x+348 pp.

This is a remarkable ethnographic study of Bukit Mertajam, a small Malaysian town known as a transport hub linking the state of Penang to the rest of the country. As such it shares many characteristics with other small towns on the west coast of Malaysia. What makes the study remarkable is not necessarily the study site, but the time span covered through intensive participant observation and the focus on Bukit Mertajam's male Chinese — mainly Hokkien — population of *towkays* and labourers. As Donald M. Nonini quite rightly points out, the rich literature on the Chinese of Malaysia and, indeed, on Chinese throughout Southeast Asia has focused on the richer segment of that population, on business leaders and the middle class, whereas the lower classes have been largely ignored. It seems obvious, but it is often overlooked, that most Chinese are wage labourers or belong to the low-income self-employed, whereas only a small proportion are rich businessmen or professionals. The author has made this clear and focused on the Chinese majority.

After conducting a survey of the Chinese mercantile elite of Bukit Mertajam in 1978–80 while working on his doctoral dissertation,