

the lived experience of ordinary people — a focus that the author readily acknowledges is beyond the scope of his project. Nevertheless, Davidson's timely, incredibly detailed and meticulously researched book deserves wide cross-disciplinary readership on the part of students and scholars attuned to the increasingly salient politics of *infrastruktur* in a developing archipelagic nation.

**Andrew M. Carruthers**

Visiting Fellow, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace, Singapore 119614; email: [andrew\\_carruthers@iseas.edu.sg](mailto:andrew_carruthers@iseas.edu.sg).

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*Luk Thung: The Culture and Politics of Thailand's Most Popular Music.* By James Leonard Mitchell. Bangkok: Silkworm Books, 2015. 208 pp.

Impressively researched and well written, this is the first book-length introduction in English to the most popular Thai music genre, *phleng luk thung* (songs of children of the fields). It treats the genre's historical development, performers, songwriters, producers, audiences and wider socio-political impact. Other than a few journal articles, university theses — including Mitchell's own dissertation — and books on Thai or Southeast Asian popular music, little has appeared on *luk thung* in English by Thai or Western writers. Indeed, except for that on Indonesia, the English-language literature on popular music in Southeast Asia is modest in comparison to that on regions such as South Asia, Latin America and especially Sub-Saharan Africa. This book should thus find an audience among Southeast Asianists, ethnomusicologists and scholars of popular music or culture.

Most Thai and some foreign scholars contend that *luk thung* arose either as an updated folk or acculturated urban music in Central Thailand. But Mitchell argues that *luk thung* derives from, and is largely a product of, Isan, the traditionally impoverished and culturally distinct northeastern region historically marginalized and

dominated by Thais from Bangkok and the Central Plains. Most *luk thung* performers and songwriters live in Lao-speaking Isan or are Northeasterners residing in Bangkok. Songs in the genre have frequently reflected their low status and hardscrabble life experiences. Mitchell regards *luk thung* as an eclectic mix of diverse local and foreign elements, but one with a strong foundation in the use of Isan dialect and dance and musical styles, such as *ramwong* and *molam*. Like many recent observers, Mitchell criticizes the Central Thai and nationalist/royalist bias of much Thai scholarship on both history and popular culture. This scholarship has served to integrate ethnic minorities into the Central Thai-dominated state and culture. While utilizing a wide range of Thai sources, including many interviews and — often quite critically — the few extant scholarly studies, Mitchell also offers a somewhat personalized account of the music. He has clearly immersed himself in the *luk thung* scene and in Isan culture, speaks Thai and lives and teaches in the Northeast.

As a result of history and politics, this book contends, many in Isan have resented the Thai speakers from the Central plains who have considered the region's peoples as backward and rustic. Thus, the growing popularity of *luk thung* music over the past half-century and especially in recent years has reflected and fostered Isan identity and cultural influence. *Luk thung* appealed to rural peasants and urban working class audiences, especially those of Isan background, but in recent years its appeal has expanded beyond that audience. More than any other Thai music, *luk thung* has bridged ethnic and class divisions.

After an informative overview of *luk thung* history, musical influences and structures, the recording industry, and other Thai musical genres, Mitchell discusses an array of performers, songwriters and lyrics, from the famous to the obscure. But he offers only cursory coverage of some of the most renowned *luk thung* performers, such as Suraphon Sombatjaroen and Phumphuang Duangjan, preferring to downplay celebrities and to concentrate on others who built the *luk thung* tradition and industry. His detailed profile of the life,

music and career of the Isan singer-songwriter Soraphit Phinyo, an important source for this study, is particularly interesting. Mitchell also dissects rivalries and disputes among performers while offering an astute analysis of the important role of fan clubs, films (especially musicals), radio, and television, despite their hegemonic structure, in promoting *luk thung* music and thus Isan culture.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter for a wider audience is the last, on the role of *luk thung* in the Thai communist insurgency of the 1970s and, in greater detail, on the country's turbulent national politics since 2005. This chapter refutes the notion that the genre has been apolitical. Mitchell tells the story of how the modernized folk rock *phleng phuea chiwit* (songs for life) became the preferred protest music of the 1970s and then were rehabilitated in the 1980s as the main vehicle for protest. Less widely known, however, was the role of *luk thung* in the communist insurgency. The genre proved popular with the largely Isan peasant rank and file, but not with Communist Party leaders. Official censorship prevented *luk thung* from becoming prominent as protest music in the 1970s–80s. This changed with the rise of controversial tycoon Thaksin Shinawatra in the 1990s. His policies favouring the rural poor fostered a populist movement that challenged the long-entrenched urban and royalist establishment. Military coups or judicial intervention ousted several reformist but corrupt governments led by Thaksin or his allies. The resulting bitter political divisions have led to years of protracted conflict, and sometimes serious violence, between the pro-Thaksin Red Shirts of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), supported strongly by Northerners, and the Bangkok-based, anti-Thaksin, often royalist Yellow Shirts of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD).

Over the past three decades, Mitchell contends, the ideological lines in Thai music have become increasingly tangled. Mitchell shows how the UDD successfully used *luk thung* musicians and songs to recruit and sustain support, promoting cultural unity among the Red Shirts by allowing for regional and ethnic differences within a broadly Thai framework. The PAD, which has largely favoured

other genres, including songs for life, made only half-hearted attempts to use *luk thung*. It failed to engage with the working and peasant classes and thus found it difficult to appeal to Thaksin's Isan partisans. The junta that took power in the most recent military coup, in 2014, has brutally repressed both political activity and dissent, including all oppositional music and culture. *Luk thung* has become a mainly commercialized pop music. Mitchell concludes that *luk thung* reflects "the collision between globalization and localization ... [and] provides a snapshot of non-elite Thai society adapting to the modern mediated world" (p. 177).

Given the use of music over the years to mobilize support for political campaigns and social movements in countries like Jamaica, Chile, Indonesia and the Philippines, the book might have benefitted from a comparative perspective. Helpful appendices identify artists and the music's chronology, but a glossary of the many Thai terms used in the book would have been useful. In overall terms, this is a fine study, by a passionate fan, of a neglected subject.

**Craig A. Lockard**

Center for History and Social Change, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, Green Bay, Wisconsin 54301, USA; email: lockardc@uwgb.edu.

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*Living Buddhism: Mind, Self, and Emotion in a Thai Community*. By Julia Cassaniti. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. xiv+213 pp.

Over a period of about ten years, the American anthropologist Julia Cassaniti visited and revisited two families in the northernmost part of Thailand. Her interactions began with Goy and Gaew, two shop-owning women, and, over time, extended to their relatives.

In the first chapters of the resultant book, the author recalls a number of remarks that her informants made after they had experienced a traumatic event, such as the demise of a member of the family. She noted a remarkable equanimity. "Letting go"