

coast in Arakan in the eighth century CE, taken for a certified fact, hinges on just one sentence from Nga Mi's chronicle of the 1840s.

To conclude, Lee's book is a vivid account of the Rohingya crisis over the last decade and will benefit readers who are looking for descriptions of the plight of the Rohingyas. However, one needs to differentiate issues related to the humanitarian and legal causes behind basic rights from the ideological underpinning of ethnic formation and politics. The issue of human rights cannot be delayed as it is a moral duty. However, the myths of origins, discursive strategies, interpretations of archival sources and the writing of history beyond the ethnocentric echo chamber should be at the forefront of continuing critical debates.

Jacques P. Leider

École française d'Extrême-Orient, 22, avenue du Président Wilson, 75016 Paris;
email: jacques.leider@efeo.net.

REFERENCE

Siniša Malešević. 2006. *Identity as Ideology: Understanding Ethnicity and Nationalism*. New York: Palgrave-MacMillan.

DOI: 10.1355/sj38-1g

Belittled Citizens: The Cultural Politics of Childhood on Bangkok's Margins. By Giuseppe Bolotta. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2021. ix+250 pp.

Focusing on *dek salam* (slum children) in Bangkok, *Belittled Citizens* offers the readers a thorough examination of the lives of children living on the margins of society. This comprehensive and easy-to-read book is dedicated to a different way of thinking about children, culture, place and politics. Written in a highly accessible manner, free from disciplinary jargon and dense theory, the book conveys a strong ethnographic sense of young people's identity and agency in the adult world. Moreover, it offers intimate glimpses into the

complex ways in which forms of domination by adults combine to model and shape children's minds and bodies as well as how children make sense of these forms of domination.

Giuseppe Bolotta's book is an account of an anthropologist who first landed in Bangkok as a volunteer with a non-governmental organization (NGO). He later returned to Thailand to do a long-term ethnographic study of *dek salam*. Divided into two parts—the cultural politics of childhood and children's cultures and selves—the book highlights how *dek salam* are considered “not Thai enough” by mainstream society, and traces the arguments by analysing them through different ideological, religious and political approaches. Linking culture, politics and children, the book aims to problematize Western notions of childhood “innocence” and children as “pre-political subjects”, and to deliberately foreground “politically unmarked” features of social life (p. 5).

The book begins with an introductory chapter that sets up two primary arguments. The first argument is that children who remain outside the norm and on the margins of society reflect endemic inequalities in Thailand's wider sociopolitical structure as well as the transformations in the transnational governance of childhood that has become globalized in recent years. The second argument is that different ideas about children's best interests open up a space for both “existential fragmentation” and “creative self-reformulations” to challenge the generational structures of power in Thai society (p. 5).

The book's first part consists of four chapters that elaborate on the environments in which *dek salam* live. Chapter 1 provides a detailed analysis of the school environment attended by *dek salam* and the ideology of the *dek thai di* (good Thai child), which is constructed through extending the hierarchical societal boundaries between *phu noi* (“small people”) and *phu yai* (“big people”) to the relationship between students and teachers (p. 25). Chapter 2 focuses on two Buddhist aid organizations in Bangkok run by socially engaged Thai monks who focus on teaching discipline and gratitude to *dek salam*. They emphasize the notion of filial piety by asking the children to obey their parents. Situating the work of missionaries in Thai political

history, chapter 3 discusses how the construction of childhood has shaped the education project of a Catholic NGO. Chapter 4 examines landscapes of children-centred humanitarian views in urban slums to show how these children are seen as ‘victims’ and how that enables their families to “gain access to political mediations and financial resources through NGOs” (p. 118). Collectively, these chapters offer a comprehensive understanding of how slum children become objects of broader sociopolitical, religious and economic tensions in Thai society.

The second part challenges the various perceptions of slum children that mainstream Thai society holds, and discusses ways in which children build their own sense of self. The two chapters in this part examine everyday practices and the embodiment of *dek salam*. Chapter 5 demonstrates slum children’s capacity to employ various strategies, such as controlling the flow of social information by denying and concealing their hill tribe or minority Thai identity so as to protect themselves from Thai ethnonationalistic discrimination. Chapter 6 unpacks the children’s “multiple selves” by providing detailed case studies of the life trajectories of these children over ten years and how they assume a “Thai (Anti) Self”, “Religious Selves” and “Ideal Selves”.

The way in which the chapters in this book are organized allows readers to distinctly understand the everyday lives of *dek salam* from the viewpoints of various social institutions. At the turn of each page, readers would feel increasingly curious about the lives of these children who are not considered ‘Thai enough’ but yet demonstrate enormous strength and courage to develop a sense of self. A key strength of the book is Bolotta’s use of rich ethnographic descriptions and vignettes to illustrate the marginalization of *dek salam* in Thai society, which keeps readers engaged while not compromising on the quality of the scholarly contributions to childhood studies. The book’s only shortcoming is that the author’s voice remains subdued when discussing his observations. While the author provides some information on his positionality as a researcher, reflections on his research methodology and everyday encounters in research sites are

missing from the book. It makes it difficult for readers to understand how the author dealt with the circumstances under which the research was done.

Nevertheless, *Belittled Citizens* is a phenomenal work that offers an incredibly detailed and thorough analysis of slum children's lives from both their and society's prisms. It makes an important contribution to childhood studies, anthropology and urban studies. The book will be of value to scholars interested in understanding the social construction of 'childhood' in Asian settings.

Balawansuk Lynrah

Department of Geography, National University of Singapore, 1 Arts Link, #03-01 Block AS2, Singapore 117568; email: balawansuk@u.nus.edu.

DOI: 10.1355/sj38-1h

Thai Politics in Translation: Monarchy, Democracy and the Supra-constitution. Edited by Michael K. Connors and Ukrist Pathmanand. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2021. viii+248 pp.

Michael Connors and Ukrist Pathmanand frame the writings collected in their imaginatively conceived and thoughtfully executed collection, *Thai Politics in Translation*, with a discussion of a 2007 lecture delivered by Chiang Mai University legal scholar Somchai Preechasilpakul. They present the English translation of the text of that lecture, on "The Thai Supra-Constitution", as their book's second chapter. The chapter follows two pieces of the editors' own: an introduction titled "Debating the Bhumibol Era" and a first chapter on "Understanding Thai Conservatism".

Somchai understands Thailand's *aphiratthathammanun*—the term that Connors and Ukrist deftly and rather ingeniously render into English as 'supra-constitution'—as a normalized, accepted, authoritarian and hegemonic system "in which parliament, the power of bureaucratic-military forces and the institution of the monarchy coexist" (p. 63). Thai constitutions, with their more and more numerous carefully drafted articles, might come and go, but,