

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.

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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 *aphiraththammanun*—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,

in Somchai's words, this hegemonic system "soars above" those legalistic documents (*ibid.*).

The concept of the supra-constitution is meant to serve in the volume as "an organising framework for understanding Thai conservatism" (p. 22). The editors take the "uncodified power of royal and military ascendancy" as "a spectral presence" in chapters 3–8 of their book (*ibid.*). Those chapters present translated versions of texts by Nakharin Mektrairat (originally published in 1990), Kramol Thongthammachart (1983), Chalermkiat Phiu-nuan (1992), Pramuan Rujanaseri (2005) and Saichon Sattayanurak (2016), as well as an essay by Pasuk Phongpaichit that originally appeared in English (1999). As Connors and Ukrist note, the period from which the texts reproduced in the volume date coincided with the final decades of the reign of King Bhumibol Adulyadej (r. 1946–2016)—with, that is, "the rise and decline of what Kasian Tejapira called the 'Bhumibol Consensus'" (p. 2). This consensus, framed ideologically as a 'democratic regime with the king as head of state' (*rabop prachathippatai an mi phramahakasat songpen pramuk*), cast the monarchy in a "regulatory role" (p. 12) for a Thai polity facing the stresses and strains of immense social and economic change.

The texts that follow Somchai's in *Thai Politics in Translation* sort into three pairs. Pramuan's and Nakharin's pieces comprise the first pair, and Kramol's and Chalermkiat's the second. The third pair includes two texts, those of Pasuk and Saichon, that are—like Somchai's and Chalermkiat's, but unlike Pramuan's, Nakharin's and Kramol's—analytical rather than programmatic.

Pramuan's text, titled "Royal Power" and drawn from a book of the same name much celebrated when it appeared by opponents of then prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, catalogues in a strikingly unreflective manner the supposed roles and functions of a supra-constitutional monarchy. It thus codifies the corollaries of what Nakharin calls the "Traditionalist School of Thought" (pp. 65 ff.) in his rather more pointed text, "Political Discourse on Thai Democracy". The pointedness of that text lies in its comparison of establishment understandings of the supposedly democratic nature of the Siamese

and then Thai monarchy, understandings already rather dated by the time that Nakharin wrote, with analyses of Thailand's political and social evolution that he lumps together as the "Western School of Thought" (pp. 80 ff.). While rather disingenuously dismissing that second putative 'school' as "haphazard and inconsistent" and "fragmented" (pp. 86–87), Nakharin makes clear that what he finds most objectionable about it is its "partial[ity] to universal doctrines" (p. 85) and its related lack of "fit with the unique and fundamental aspects of Thainess" (p. 89).

In their categorical tone, and in the apparently unexamined assumptions on which they rest, Pramuan's and Nakharin's pieces in *Thai Politics in Translation* offer a fundamental challenge to liberal cognition. Reading them recalls listening to nihilistic 'MAGA' activists in the United States as those activists invoke a once 'great' country. And yet to pose such a challenge to readers is just what has motivated Connors and Ukrist to prepare and publish English translations of these and several of the other texts collected in this volume.

In marked contrast to Nakharin's discomfort with understandings "alienated from Thai political society" (p. 91), Kramol approvingly cites the cases of India, Indonesia, Malaysia and what was formerly called Burma. He views them as countries whose "leaders have tried to establish a national ideology that people of different races, politico-economic backgrounds and religious groups can embrace as a way of living" (p. 96)—and thus as models for Thailand. A document prepared for the Office of the Prime Minister, Kramol's text is rather bland. Its most notable feature may be its marked lack of emphasis on the monarchy—a feature that it shares with Chalermkiat's chapter, on "Thai-style Democracy: Concept and Meaning", drawn from a book on the political thought of the Thai military. Chalermkiat's text in effect fleshes out Kramol's illiberal conception of the Thai social and political order. This conception is one that, beneath a surface of increasingly flamboyant hyperroyalism, has retained importance since the time of its origins in the counter-insurgency era of the 1960s–80s. With its emphasis on

security and its vision of statist domination of a depoliticized mass of rural people as an alternative to competitive, pluralist democracy, this conception is less otherworldly than Pramuan's and Nakharin's monarchy-centred vision. Too few observers of, for example, the National Council for Peace and Order junta that seized power in 2014 or the Prayut Chan-ocha government that remained in power following the elections of 2019 appear to recognize either the continued relevance of the conception of Thai politics advanced in Kramol's and Chalermkiat's texts or its implications.

Pasuk's text treats the then-emergent alliance of the Thai state, in its determination to maintain social control, with big business and elements of the country's middle class. With its stark closing reference to "the debate [over] whether the Thai village could or should have a part in Thailand's future" (p. 164), the text resonates with Chalermkiat's emphasis on rural Thailand. It also shares an emphasis on the middle class with Saichon's piece in *Thai Politics in Translation*, which is unsurprisingly, as the most recent to appear, the text in this volume that captures the concerns of the present most clearly. In her treatment of the political orientation of the Thai middle class in the twilight years of Bhumibol's reign, Saichon offers a masterful study of the ambiguous relationship of interests and convictions in Thai—and other—'conservative' systems of thought.

Thai Politics in Translation makes noteworthy contributions on at least four levels. First, it incorporates the case of Thailand into efforts to understand the nature and varieties of conservative political and social visions. In explicitly "invit[ing] engagement with a conservative worldview" (p. 4), Connors and Ukrist open the door not only to a richer understanding of contemporary Thailand but also to comparative study of the worldviews of 'conservatives' in other settings. This invitation provokes consideration of the meaning of 'conservatism', of its coherence, and of the degree to which it represents anything but an ideological smokescreen for material interests. These issues matter to understandings of politics in many historical and geographical contexts—contexts that certainly include post-1945, and even contemporary, Southeast Asia.

Second, the volume quite simply takes Thai intellectual life seriously. The historical scholarship of a figure like Craig J. Reynolds and several of his students notwithstanding, English language studies of modern Thailand have—in marked contrast to work on, to cite an outstanding example, Vietnam—been laggards in their attention on the country’s thinkers and their significance. The past decade has, perhaps not least as a result of the political crisis that has engulfed Thailand since 2005, seen this picture begin to change, and *Thai Politics in Translation* is an outstanding example of that happy development.

The book’s third major contribution comes in its success in furthering understanding of Bhumibol’s momentous reign. In their range and variety, the texts that *Thai Politics in Translation* presents force readers to assess the balance of ideas and interests on which the apparent ideological consensus of the final decades of that reign rested.

Fourth and finally, those texts also raise questions about what was enduring and what was ephemeral in the conservatism and royalism of Bhumibol’s late reign. The authors of some of the texts would certainly ascribe deep historical foundations to their ideological positions. But their pieces’ evident efforts to grapple with developments of the years in which those pieces appeared also make one wonder if much about Thai conservatism, like other ascribed conservative ideologies, is not in fact rather innovative, its historical roots slender and fragile. This matter of innovation is important. The editors of *Thai Politics in Translation* state very clearly that theirs “is a book about an era that has passed” (p. 6). This frank observation makes several questions inevitable. What does post-Bhumibol Thai conservatism look like? Does Thai royalism retain in the current reign the capacity to innovate, and thus to remain useful, that has ensured its survival during at least the past century and a half? And will the required innovation bring, as ongoing calls among Thai youth for the withdrawal of military and monarchy from politics suggest, the demise of Thailand’s supra-constitution itself? The effort and vision of Michael Connors and Ukrist Pathamanand—along with

the commitment to excellence in the publication of scholarship on Thailand of Gerald Jackson and NIAS Press—have made informed consideration of such questions more likely.

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Black Market Business: Selling Sex in Northern Vietnam, 1920–1945.
By Christina Elizabeth Firpo. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020.
xiii+259 pp.

Christina Firpo's latest book is a lively social history of the black market sex industry in late French colonial northern Vietnam, known then as Tonkin (1920–45). Focusing on impoverished Vietnamese women, an understudied group in the historical scholarship, Firpo maintains that the booming underground sex industry thrived because of what she calls the "spaces of tension" (p. 3) brought about by the inequality and discord of colonial policies. The policies led to inconsistencies in law, culture, economics, geography and demography that incentivized historical actors—pimps, madams, kidnappers, traffickers, sex workers—to exploit loopholes to seek out more favourable economic opportunities. The portrait that the book paints is nevertheless a sobering one. For the female sex workers whose lives Firpo reconstructs, most of whom were rural migrants, the sex industry was often the last resort to survive. Working conditions, as Firpo demonstrates, were often poor with high risks of catching venereal diseases.

Chapters 1 and 2 establish the geographical and legal contexts of Tonkin's illicit sex industry. Chapter 1 looks at the "geography of vice" (p. 20), surveying sex work's spatial dimensions. Firpo shows how each of the different geographic conditions—whether physical, political, economic or urban—shaped the migration and distribution of sex workers. Colonial policies that impoverished peasants forced