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*Wayward Distractions: Ornament, Emotion, Zombies and the Study of Buddhism in Thailand.* By Justin Thomas McDaniel. Singapore: NUS Press, 2021. 292 pp.

*Wayward Distractions* is the first of a two-volume collection of essays by Justin McDaniel. An influential and widely read scholar of Buddhism and Thailand, McDaniel has also published some relatively difficult-to-access articles. Such collected essays are especially valuable: they collect very specific and disciplinarily important arguments, evidence and analysis, opening up new perspectives on the subject as well as introducing the scholarly communities that produce that knowledge.

McDaniel calls these articles side projects—studies that were important to him, but which emerged out of what were initially distractions from his primary subjects, drawn by an attraction to a sense of abundance in Thai Buddhist life. Human beings are of course deeply complex despite our many attempts to create systems that simplify and capture their complexity in the service of particular scholarly projects. There is nothing wrong with such attempts, but McDaniel productively places the emphasis in his studies on subjects that have often been rendered peripheral in scholarship on Buddhism. These divergences are not merely local colour added to some universal Buddhism, but are often representative of the ways in which religious life is primarily constituted for people.

In this collection, McDaniel includes studies from his previous work that focus on: Buddhist art and material production, including paintings, temporary art installations, and amulets and their trade (chapters 5, 6 and 7); the ongoing production and reproduction of Buddhist knowledge and its instantiation in everyday life (chapters 2 and 10); the diversity and complexity of ethnicity in Bangkok's history, and the attempts to categorize religion and religious diversity (chapters 3 and 8); and “zombies” and the “living dead” (chapter 9). Finally, he includes a previously unpublished chapter on the celebration of marriage and romantic love (chapter 4).

These studies offer significant engagement with and detail to a field that has often prioritized very particular and often doctrinal focuses on Buddhism in Southeast Asian countries. What McDaniel calls the “plenitude” of engagement with Thailand and Thai Buddhists is often the first type of engagement everyday Buddhists have with their tradition: art, murals, the categorization of physical space and religious identity, thoughts about romantic love and duty, and more. It is valuable for scholars to refocus on such ubiquitous and powerful influences when studying Buddhism.

McDaniel has woven these disparate writings together via his themes of distraction, abundance and plenitude. These excellent writings are illuminating. His self-characterizations in the introduction, however, seem unnecessarily self-diminishing and not entirely satisfying. These articles contain arguments and evidence that should influence others and should not be seen merely as “distractions”. I would rather McDaniel had asserted that these apparently peripheral subjects and distractions had helped him, and perhaps us, reconceptualize what is central and what peripheral, and to what, and how, our theories and methods should attend—an approach that would be appropriate given the quality of scholarship included.

The lesser-known moments and focuses of McDaniel’s prodigious publication history and influence are nicely collected and made available here. Volume 2 intends to collect essays that focus on “textual and historical studies in Thai Buddhism” and will likely be equally well-received. NUS and the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University have done a service to scholars of Buddhism, Thailand and the region by bringing these volumes into publication.

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