

All in all, this is a highly valuable and rich ethnographic account of the resurgence and expansive redefinition of Akhanness, especially in Thailand. It will be of great interest to scholars of Southeast Asia's cultures and of how Indigenous people can flourish when permitted to take charge of themselves.

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A Sense of Place and Belonging: The Chiang Tung Borderland of Northern Southeast Asia. By Klemens Karlsson. Northern Illinois University Press, an imprint of Cornell University Press, 2025. xviii+228 pp.

Scholarship on the borderlands of northern Southeast Asia has always been somewhat marginal, like the region itself, compared to mainland states like Myanmar and Thailand. Klemens Karlsson's new book places the margin at the centre by exploring the Khuen people and the city and region of Chiang Tung, with both impressive breadth and detail. At its core, this book explores what makes a particular place unique to those who occupy it, and what connects a people to that place. Drawing on notions of space-making, identity formation and ritual performance from scholars such as Pierre Nora, Edward Relph and Clifford Geertz, Karlsson paints a vivid, multilayered picture of Chiang Tung, a unique point in the inland constellation of city-states that stretched across northern Southeast Asia.

Karlsson's exploration of Khuen identity and place-making reaches from deep myth through dynastic and colonial history, and from

religious ritual to contemporary performances of the Songkran New Year festival. It is his experience of this festival that both opens the book and anchors the wonderful final chapter. In many ways a continuation of the introduction, chapter 1 establishes the aim of the book, as “an interdisciplinary inquiry about Chiang Tung as a sense of place and belonging for the Khuen people” (p. 16), and outlines the importance of both local history and Buddhist practice for maintaining this connection.

The next three chapters cover local history, from mythical origins through dynastic states and colonial regimes and finally to the present. Chapter 2 examines the origins of the city and the collective memory of interaction between the Indigenous Lua and the Tai migrants to the region, which helped shape Khuen identity. Chapter 3 explores Chiang Tung’s relations with China, Burma, Siam and the Lanna world, highlighting the historical in-between-ness of the region. Displacement and violence, whether during the repopulation wars of the early nineteenth century, under colonialism or under military rule, underline the need for the core theme of the book, a sense of place and belonging. Chapter 4 follows Chiang Tung’s navigation of its identity in the contexts of British annexation, world wars and the modern politics of Myanmar, including both Shan nationalism and the central state’s policy of Burmanization.

The two following chapters turn to Buddhism in the borderlands, beginning in chapter 5 with the sacro-spatial landscape and religious traditions, which Karlsson closely identifies with Lanna centres like Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai. These sacred spaces are animated not only by more formal monastic practice, but also by adornment with temple banners (*tung*), and through veneration of the written word in the form of palm-leaf manuscripts. Chapter 6 explains the durability of Chiang Tung’s religious connections with Lanna, even while British and Burmese policies sought to disrupt these links.

In chapter 7, the threads spun in previous chapters are woven together into a satisfying tapestry of Chiang Tung history and culture through a detailed explanation of the Songkran celebration,

building on Karlsson's experience narrated in the introduction. This "thick description" of the festival is a standout, as it connects the mythical origins, dynastic and colonial history, Indic and local religious traditions, and contemporary politics into a clear example of the power of place and belonging. Though the festivities share important similarities with cities throughout the inland, such as Chiang Mai or Luang Prabang, the particularities of the drum ceremony, procession and Buddhist traditions are both a pleasure to read and neatly illustrate the author's central argument.

The book shines in its treatment of the diverse elements that combine to create the titular sense of place and belonging in Chiang Tung. The author clearly demonstrates affection and deep respect for the land and people in question. Moreover, the wide net he casts across a variety of subjects and sources yields a truly interdisciplinary picture of a unique place and its people. Though many of the author's interviewees remain unnamed for obvious political reasons, and therefore are discussed rather than directly cited, on occasion one wishes for a direct conversation or two. For example, while the author rightly asks what the Tai Loi (Lua) men think of their role in the twenty-four-hour drumming ceremony (a highlight of the Songkran festivities), one also hopes to hear from them directly on this point. There is a relatively strong reliance on materials in translation, as well, but these few weaknesses do not seriously discount the value of the book.

For anyone with research or teaching interests in the region of Chiang Tung, the Golden Triangle or Lanna history and culture, this book will be essential reading. It would also be welcome in undergraduate courses on Southeast Asia, particularly when focusing—as more of us should—on marginalized peoples and places outside the dominant national cultures and capitals.

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