

*Thai Images: The Culture of the Public World.* By Niels Mulder. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1997. 353 pp.

Niels Mulder's new book comprises a collection of studies gathered under the rubric of the Thai "Public World". Readers of his best-selling works — *Inside Thai Society* and *Inside Southeast Asian Society* — will recognize the continuities in this work, particularly his non-ethnographic brand of "culture-as-world-view" anthropology, through which he defines "culture" as the way people think about their lives, and "anthropology" as the study of text-derived images that are taken to represent the common patterns guiding social life and its comprehension. Mulder's earlier writings have dealt essentially with the principles of power, respect, and hierarchy in the this- and other-worldly realms of Thai reality. Unfortunately, this book does not share the conciseness of its predecessors.

The book comprises eight chapters, together with an introduction and conclusion. The introduction sets out his "anthropological approach", and a definition of the "public world" and its Thai version. There follows three chapters discussing the social studies textbooks used in Thai schools at elementary, junior high, and senior high school levels, respectively. These long chapters make up over a third of the book. The next chapter deals with critiques of contemporary Thai society and alternative views of Thai history as exemplified in a Chiang Mai University reader on *Thai Society and Culture*, with selections of the thoughts of prominent monk Phra Prayut Payutto, and passing reference to the social critic Sulak Srivaraksa. Chapter 5 is a commentary on newspaper coverage of selected public issues, and is followed by a chapter looking at a number of Thai novels and their themes on the current state of family and social relationships. Chapter 7 analyses *Thailand in the '90s*, a publication of the National Identity Office, offering the opportunity for Mulder to comment on official representations of Thai society, economy, history, and customs. Chapter 8 considers the origins of the modern Thai public world, drawing on the previous chapters, and with reference to the state, politics, the economy, and civil society. The conclusion attempts an integration of the book through talking about the "culture" of the public world, the production of public images, and

the future of Thai society.

The introduction sets out his guiding framework and objectives, proposing a “discovery tour” of modern Thai culture through studying images of Thailand as well as the hidden assumptions that underpin these images. Mulder proposes that the “emerging culture of the public world” is defined in terms of “the opinions and debates that animate it”: the study of this public world of debate and image creation needs to be addressed in terms of modernity, and in the Thai case, the emergence of the middle class. Mulder then discusses the growth of this public world within modern Thai socio-economic and political evolution. He argues that the Thai public world (whatever it is) is an historical construct with particular features.

This introduction is less than satisfactory: Mulder wants to integrate his study of textbooks with novels, newspapers, and social criticism, but in the process produces a varied definition of the public world as a container, a matrix, a mediator, and a product (a world of ideas) of key paradigms in Thai society. He goes on to propose (as others already have) that social changes attending modernization and globalization have produced a new generation of Thais who have no cultural moorings, that the “public world they live in looks more like a market dominated by business and commercial interest than like a civil society filled with the critical discourse of a committed public” (pp. 16-17).

The three chapters on social studies textbooks offer the potential for an interesting portrayal of the way society is represented to school children. Mulder describes (in detail and with great repetition) how the elementary school texts stress an overwhelmingly moral view of the world, comprising respect-hierarchy relations which emphasize gratitude and respect for superiors and duties accorded to social position. This interesting chapter is marred by a number of judgements (implied, for example, in his usage of the term “indoctrination”) that presume the chapter’s content analysis of texts is adequate to justify such judgements of the school room process.

Mulder points out that he has also interviewed a number of school teachers and headmasters. However, the references to the interviews (whose scope, length, and comprehensiveness are never outlined) are all too few. As he proceeds through a critique of the texts for the upper

primary schools, his analysis takes on an increasingly pedagogical tone (for example, claiming that certain concepts are too complicated for students). Since the research is a content study, ethnographic perspectives derived from classroom observation cannot be drawn upon to determine what the social frameworks of children's learning are, and other key influences on their behaviour. What is implied as the goal in early grade school lessons — the emphasis on developing appropriate respect — could well be developed into a concept of the culture of the school as *one* (but not the only) reality that Thai children experience. Interestingly, Charles Keyes' study of Thai schools and national integration rates no mention, despite Mulder's acknowledgment that the trinity of Nation, King, and Religion are key images in the early texts.

While the elementary school textbooks are marked by the simplicity of a moral world of relationships, the junior and senior high school textbooks are characterized by the fragmentation of topics and formality of language. Thai history is treated as a story of the maintenance, by monarchs, of national integrity and stability, with no room for the acknowledgment of ordinary people as historical agents. This treatment lacks theorization and structure, according to Mulder, and thus do nothing to encourage the "social imagination" among students (p. 111). There is no line to connect the past to the present through the constructs of history by a periodization based on political and economic categories. This leads to an important point: the textbooks reflect what appears to be a weakness in thinking about the past as a dynamic process; instead, the past is presented as a series of royal and, later, political dispensations.

The difficulty with this chapter is that Mulder uses his notion of "culture" to unevenly punctuate the discussion, even while his own truisms about the Thai world-view are brought up to explain the constraints to the ways history and society are conceptualized in the textbooks. Despite this critique, Mulder's discussion here is marked by the assumption that schools *are* the appropriate agents for the development of the "social imagination", in which there is the discovery of the "real" Thai world of exploitation, corruption, and the struggle of ordinary people. One remains confused about the relation between Mulder's articulation of culture to his critique of learning; and while one expects

Mulder to shed some light on this, he does not, preferring instead to castigate the textbook writers and the edifice of institutionalized education.

In Chapter 4, Mulder considers an example of “Repairing the Damage” inflicted in primary and secondary school social studies through reviewing the Chiang Mai University Humanities Department reader used in a 42-hour course on Thai society and culture. Here he considers examples of writing by some of the maverick Thai academics, Chatthip Nartsupha and Nitthi Ieowsiwong, offering critical insights into the dynamics of social and cultural change. He applauds these two scholars for their use of interpretative schemes, which allow insights into the historical and cultural dynamics of Thai society — Chatthip for his political economy view of the relation between the village subsistence economy, the state, and emergent capitalism, and Nitthi for his treatment of rituals and ceremonies as expressions of collective memory.

To Mulder, these and other essays help sweep away the errors transmitted in secondary school, demystifying the platitudes, which posited a benevolent historical dispensation of heroic monarchs and élites serving the interests of the nation. Again, his pedagogical judgements hold sway in his view that such readings open up the social imagination to university students: this is “a pre-requisite for democratic reconstruction” (pp. 182–83). Despite his general approval, he cautions against the tendency of the readings to present a nostalgic view of pre-capitalist village Thailand and the self-reliance of the peasantry, on the grounds that it does not help people face the challenges of current social changes.

The fifth chapter, “Making Public Opinion”, is the least satisfactory in the book. It comprises a content analysis of English and Thai language newspapers, which he argues “mirror” as well as “construct” the public world. After a brief comment on the nature of the Thai press (but nothing about ownership and different business and intellectual fractions represented), he launches into a survey of issues covered between November 1994 and February 1995 — including the Phra Yantra scandal and Sangha affairs, the new constitution and the Saudi gems case, and the Thai military. The following, rather limp, speculative judgement is reached: “Nobody seems to worry about the way modern Thai society is portrayed to the Thai public. The ugly side of life seems to be

accepted [whom by? readers? editors?], people know about it, and probably think that it does not concern them: it is not their affair. As long as the king, national and religious ceremonies, and beautiful traditions keep existing, there is enough to identify with" (p. 201).

What are we to make of such comments? With no theory of audience reception, representation, institutional influence, or ideological discourse, he treats the Thai public as cultural dopes, without a possession of a countervailing framework for accepting multiple realities. Interestingly, he refers to the notion of the "theatre state" in the way political contests are portrayed, and justifiably points out that politics is portrayed by the press faithfully as it is a power game between contesting egos; but what does this say about ordinary people's realities? Mulder's judgements are unconvincing and rely again on his own rather smugly delivered opinions: he is predisposed to recommending models of a desired state of society and political order in Thailand. We start to realize that the book is about "Thai images" in relation to Mulder's desired realities. This book is hardly anthropological in the accepted sense.

In Chapter 6, "Society and Fiction", the Thai middle class begin to take centre-stage as both the subjects of writing and as the reading public. Mulder includes a selection of novels which he draws upon to present images of relationships, institutions, and change. His objective is not literary criticism, but rather to use the contents as a set of themes to make general statements about Thai middle-class problems. The novels allow him to then discuss issues relating to the destructive effects of competition for educational achievement, family life, cultural anomie, youth, and the struggle of families to maintain their status. The picture that emerges is a pessimistic one: Thai society — if one accepts the novels of Botan, Wo Winitchaikun, and Wimon Sainimnuan as representative — is one where people exploit one another, scramble for status at the expense of true authenticity, and perpetuate a system of inequality.

This chapter is readable, but previous studies (for example, by Herbert Phillips and Rachel Harrison) have covered most of these themes. Again, Mulder's discussion does not lead to any theoretical formulation and instead he relies on an image/reality dichotomy which is supposed to support the author's conclusions.

Probably the best chapter is the eighth, "Constructing the Public World: The Discourse of the 1990s", if only because the mass of details presented is brought together. However, we find new terms emerging where they should have been introduced at the beginning. For example, "Lifeworld reasoning". This refers to those features of everyday experience (dependency, personalized relationships and hierarchy), which he has explored in previous work. The Thai public world, as Mulder sees it, is construed as a moral order based on reciprocal benevolence-respect-power relationships. His overall critique invokes Habermasian ideals of communicative order and rational individual actors: Thai society does not promote individual autonomy, and by implication, falls short of those universalizing aims of civil society and a fulfilling democratic framework. This view-point is inherent in this quotation of his: "... the very idea that nation equates with family, the school trains for subjectship rather than citizenship. It does not prepare for moral autonomy, social responsibility, and independent citizenship. As a result, the students are morally abandoned in the public world, and quite a few get lost" (p. 313).

One feels that Mulder needed to put a lot more thought into the construction of this book. Comprehensive editing could have cut the length by a third without sacrifice. Further, his study of school texts, buttressed with more adequate treatments of education policy and Thai teachers' ideas on classroom behaviour, could have made a distinctive contribution to Thai studies. But the problem is not merely a lack of content. The conceptualization of the "public world" is ambiguous and not well articulated with the concept of "culture", in which we would expect an anthropologist to excel. Overly long, repetitious, opinionated judgements, all-too-brief-references to other anthropological studies, too-detailed and turgid descriptions, and at times clumsy writing, make this book a less-than-worthy successor to Mulder's earlier work, despite some interesting material.

Marc ASKEW

---

Marc Askew is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Asian and International Studies, Victoria University of Technology, Australia.