

*Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States*. Edited by Andrew Turton. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000. 376 pp.

One problem of academic publications, I guess, is that it takes too long — far too long in some cases — to get the books out. And this is one of those books. This book is a collection of papers presented at the 5th International Conference on Thai Studies held in London in 1993. But one should not be disenchanted by such a delay. The book is full of scholarly richness; and I enjoy reading several papers. There are fourteen articles, excluding the Introduction and Postscript, starting with the histories of some ethnic groups who have relationships with the Thais. The articles then focus on those who live near the Thailand-Malaysia border, in Laos, and in northern Thailand. The only region excluded from the discussions seems to be the western frontier. As a matter of fact, as one of my colleagues pointed out, the western frontier — apart from the Karens — has been little studied, historically and culturally.

Let me begin with the book's Postscript written by Nicholas Tapp (a strange way to start a book review — perhaps, but Tapp makes several good points). He remarks that the International Thai Studies Conference was shaped by the movement within the Thai academic community "associated with notions of Thai nationalism". Added into this — before 1997 — were also the expansions of Thai economy and politico-cultural hegemony in mainland Southeast Asia (p. 352). The remark on nationalism is true. One should not be surprised to see the armies of Thai scholars going to Yunnan, then the Shan states, especially Kentung, to discover the good, old "real", "genuine" Thai outside Thailand. Phibun might be nationalistic in a political sense, but the Thai academics — in my view, many of them — are culturally nationalistic. It is thus not surprising that many papers written by Thai scholars and presented at the Thai Studies Conference reveal the Thai cultural hegemony. Unfortunately — or fortunately — none of these papers is included in this book.

Relationships between the Thai state and other ethnic minorities or its neighbouring countries are often not easy. Laos is a good example. We all know how uncomfortable the Laotian government is on the flood

of Thai culture in Laos through the media. But the Thai media is not the sole agent of Thai hegemony. If Keyes's "A Princess in a People's Republic: A New Phase in the Construction of the Lao Nation" is correct, we may have to re-think the roles of the Thai monarchy — and of course its popularity among Laotian people — in Thai cultural expansion. But there is also "Tai-ization", not just "Thai-ization". Evans's "Tai-ization: Ethnic Change in Northern Indo-China" shows that the spread of Tai culture is not only by force or groups of warriors, as Condominas suggests, but also by economic reasons and nationalism. So one may end up being "Tai-ized" under the larger framework of "*Thai-ization*" or "*Lao-ization*". It may be true in Laos that younger women prefer Lao style *sin* to show that they are Laotian, not Black Tai (p. 285), but my own experience in Thailand confirms that younger females would choose jeans and T-shirts to traditional Thai dresses (most of which have been products of the recent "invention of tradition" anyway), except when they go to the temples on special occasions. Thais love being modern. And modernity can be included in Thai nationalism.

Yet if "Thai-ization" is seen as a cultural expansion, northern Thailand seems to be affected most. Three articles (by Tanabe, Ratanaporn, and Bowie) tell us about local practices in the north before the power of Bangkok arrived. The north was then centralized and things were never the same again.

There are other minority groups too. Tapp's "Ritual Relations and Identity: Hmong and Others" tries to construct the history of the Hmong by looking at their rituals. Alting von Geusau's "Akha Internal History: Marginalization and the Ethnic Alliance System" begins the classifications of the Akha/Hani, who live in various places across national boundaries throughout mainland Southeast Asia. The author then attempts to interpret their oral history. But what is new to me, I must confess, is to learn about the Sam Sam, the Thai-speaking Muslims in northern provinces of Malaysia. Although the Sam Sam has been studied and documented by some scholars, this is the first time I read about them. And both Kobkua and Nishii have done a good job introducing them to me.

Thongchai Winichakul always has interesting tales to tell. His “The Other Within: Travel and Ethno-Spatial Differentiation of Siamese Subjects 1885–1910” is no exception. He deals with the issues of “civilization” and the “wild others” in Thai views, starting from the days of King Chulalongkorn and his travel-cum-adventure in Siam. Thongchai concludes his paper with a diagram that relates the “others” in Thai world (hill tribes, people who live in the forests and on the mountains) to “civilization” (peasants and city folk) and to “modernity” (Westerners) (p. 57). It is not surprising, therefore, that the young Thai women favour jeans and T-shirts. Thais who always claim that their country is the only one that has never been colonized are keen to be Western.

After I finished reading this book, I wondered what would have been the outcome if there had been no economic meltdown in 1997. How different would things have been if the economy in Thailand were still growing? Would we be seeing Thai politico-cultural hegemony in the region? If that were the case, I guess Laos would be the first country to feel very unhappy. For Laos, Thai hegemony is not a national pride.

*Civility and Savagery: Social Identity in Tai States* is a collection of excellent articles on Thai studies. But even if you are not interested in Thai studies, the book is still a worthwhile read.

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