

## *Book Reviews*

*The Intimate Economies of Bangkok: Tomboys, Tycoons, and Avon Ladies in the Golden City.* By Ara Wilson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. 272 pp.

Ara Wilson's attempt to redraw a cultural map of Bangkok from an "intimate" viewpoint makes her book a highly engaging read. Her premise is that Bangkok's economy should not only be viewed from a public perspective, from statistics and "hard" evidence officially approved by the government for press releases; intimate realms, those that involve such hidden yet powerful issues as sexuality, gender, and ethnicity, should be considered alongside. This is made possible by her claim that the effects of capitalist modernity are far-reaching, entering the intimate geographies of daily life and eventually breaking down the boundaries between the public and the private. It is her task to point out that certain facets of urban living long regarded as non-economic in nature are in fact deeply intertwined with economic developments.

This dynamic interaction between economic systems and social life is the focal point of her book, from which she develops five main areas of study. These "intimate realms" are themselves highly charged spaces involving complex negotiations and reorientations between economic impositions and personal life. The first is a case study of one of the major department stores in Bangkok and how women featured in its development from a small shophouse to one of the biggest retail giants in Southeast Asia. The issue of gender is related to that of ethnicity in this case, as the ruling family was part of the Chinese community who migrated to Thailand for economic reasons. That these women's contributions to the birth of this empire in its early phase were downplayed in some official narratives of the company is unquestionable

and Wilson also focuses on analysing how women in later generations are more successful in making themselves seen and heard in public arenas and how this shift is related to Bangkok's capitalist modernity.

Wilson then moves on to analyse the everyday lives of sex workers in Bangkok's go-go bars and how the issues of gender and displacement influence their career adjustments. There are, Wilson argues, certain protocols that people in this intimate industry need to observe, even though these protocols and codes of practice are not easily laid down into clearly visible rules. Sex workers, especially those migrating from rural areas, need to learn new codes and reorient their lives around these invisible protocols, which inevitably entail negotiations with foreigners in terms of not only sexual practice but also other moral and psychological dilemmas. Unfortunately, due to her limited research period, Wilson omits the story of Chuvit Kamolvisit, a tycoon whose immense wealth was reported to have come mainly from Bangkok's nightlife businesses and who recently attempted to enter the political sphere by running as Governor of Bangkok. His story would have been an excellent example of how the intimate and public geographies interact within the economic framework.

The space of urban nightlife is no less intriguing and dynamic than that of the vibrant daytime commercial ground, the Mah Boonkrong Centre. Like go-go bars, urban shopping centres are the sites whereby the intimate interacts with the public as the force of global market economy shapes and affects our intimate identities and relationships. Wilson argues that the Mah Boonkrong Centre is a plural space that fosters and accommodates the emergence of variegated identities and romances that do not conform to traditional norms. She particularly focuses on the notion of the tomboy and analyses how its emergence is related to that of the shopping centre and how this identity navigates through the construction of gender and sexuality, especially that of prevailing heterosexuality, in the deeply capitalist space emblematic of consumer culture. What is remarkable about Wilson's study is that with the analysis of the tomboy alongside that of the heterosexual couple, she manages to argue that the prevalence of heterosexual codes is a pretty recent phenomenon in Bangkok and that, with the aid of the media,

these codes are no less an invention than homosexual ones.

Wilson's next focus is the media. Based on her work experience as a translator at the (now non-existent) IBC, a cable television company linked to the current Thai Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, Wilson analyses how such issues as class, gender, and ethnicity transform the workplace into a complex site, where intimacy plays a significant role in office politics and work relationships. With her first-hand experience and friendship with people from a range of background and attitude, from a minor royal to a cleaning staff member, she is able to analyse how the economy influences intimate aspects of daily life in the workplace and how these aspects in their turn inform economic differences. What is most interesting is that these differences are intertwined with the mass media. As the IBC was a cable television company, it provided a relevant example to show how intimate, as well as public, economies dictate taste in the mass media and how the media became a channel through which we could learn about people's intimate economies. In addition, Wilson also analyses how certain staff could be regarded as flexible citizens for economic reasons, which are reflected in intimate terms. These flexible citizens are at ease in more than one cultural context and most are able to move freely in our increasingly globalized world. The key to this privileged status is their economic background: those who are rich enough to be educated overseas, especially in the hegemonic countries such as the United States or the United Kingdom, are able to understand and communicate in different cultural contexts. The access to these different contexts and codes signifies another dimension of power relations, which are seen to involve and affect intimate economies.

Flexibility in moving across geographic terrains can also be related to that of moving across classes, as evidenced in Wilson's focus on direct selling. Even though most direct sales companies did not enter Thailand until the last two decades of the twentieth century, their tactics, such as closer relationships between seller and buyer and avoidance of "official" retail space, permit them to penetrate into the fabric of daily life in the city. Direct selling provides an invisible space that enables people to climb the social ladder; its success is based on people's dreams of a better future, a utopia which is made possible mainly by economic means. Wilson

argues that direct sales is another type of economic space, in which the boundaries between the public and the private remain blurred, as its mechanism is contingent upon the seller's ability to penetrate into the buyer's private realms, thus creating an atmosphere of friendliness and abolishing the traditional picture of ruthless business negotiations and transactions. It goes without saying that such issues as class, gender, and ethnicity, are also important here. Different selling tactics are adopted, dependent upon these intimate dimensions of both the seller and the buyer. Due to these intimate aspects, certain sellers are highly motivated by direct sales as they identify themselves strongly with the company's mottos and past successes. Wilson also cogently argues that direct sales should be viewed alongside the ideologies of self-help and self-improvement, which in a way promote a sense of individualism atypical of Thai culture. This disparity creates certain resentment when some direct sellers are alleged to bring "public" economies into the private realms.

Each of these geographies forms a myriad of dimensions from which one can see how intimate and public economies in Bangkok overlap. Wilson uses quite a few entertaining examples to support her arguments, thereby making her book a pleasure to read. As an American, she has an outsider's perspective, enabling her to bring into light certain significant aspects of urban life that Thai people have long taken for granted. With her ability to read and speak Thai, she is able to mingle with native Thais who cannot always speak English. Her picture of Bangkok therefore is comprehensive and cuts through the borders between class, sexuality, gender, and ethnicity. One of the weaknesses is that with so many issues in hand the book may lack an essential thread that brings everything together seamlessly. However, this weakness can be viewed as a strength if one's aim is to have a general look at how public economies penetrate into the fabrics of people's daily life in this vibrant, global city.

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