

James Taylor, *Buddhism and Postmodern Imaginings in Thailand: The Religiosity of Urban Space* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2008), 244 pp., \$99.95 (hbk), ISBN-13: 978-0-7546-6247-1. Review doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v5i1.110.

The author, a professor of anthropology at the University of Adelaide, Australia, paints a picture of a contemporary Thai Buddhist society held captive by secularization and a people disenchanted by modernity. Taylor believes that because of globalization, people feel more insecure and dislocated. Personal insecurity gets intensified by political and economic instability, and the increasing fragmentation and polarization of the Thai metropolis. Moreover, religious history and tradition have lost significance for people, and Thai Buddhism is caught in contradictions of history and tradition, with this national religion becoming more marginal to the lives of people, or assuming a more private form of practice.

For Taylor, this negative situation leads to a tension between rural regions and urban areas. This tension between rural and metropolitan spheres manifests in urban dwellers' nostalgia for a rural way of life, which the author dates to the 1997 economic crisis in the country. This yearning for an imaginary rural lifestyle, for simplicity in nature, is reflected in the cinema where rural localism and village wisdom, a knowing grounded in bodily experience, contest national ideas. In this stark contrast, the putatively contented lifestyle of the rural area is considered preferable to a city like Bangkok, which is viewed as an irredeemable and unnatural space that has been defiled by the forces of modernity. The contradictions and paradoxes of Thai society need a resurgence of sacred space, according to the author. Location and space are thus the major focus of this book as they apply to contemporary Thai Buddhism.

In order to demonstrate a variety of Thai cultural forms and religious responses to modernity, the author examines the Thammakaai Movement. This movement is a new religious response to the forces of modernity, one that subverts the religio-political system from within by actively recruiting politically connected members and repositioning itself close to religiously influential and powerful people. According to the author, this leads to a new type of religious spatiality that is associated with already existing power relationships. Using education and capitalist resources, the movement pairs a millennial origin narrative with the idea that the Buddha is a reincarnated messenger of peace in a battle between good and evil, and creates profit by combining traditional Buddhist merit-making with the collection of material returns. The author also calls attention to the production of Foucaultian docile bodies that are easily manipulated, shaped, and marked by society without resistance (i.e. Foucault's notion that human bodies are ultimately controlled by their particular cultures).

In the third chapter, another response to modernity is evident in Sanam Chan, a monastery 100 kilometers east of Bangkok, which the author describes as representative of a new postmodern form of Buddhism because of its chaotic and disordered use of space. The monastery created a Superman Buddha, an artificial simulation and a substitute for the real person that focuses devotional worship. Evidenced in the sale of holy water, Sanam Chan represents a strange collection of religious ideas and practices that are contrary to traditionally accepted forms of authorized practice.

From the rural monastery, the author turns in the fourth chapter to changes in urban space and the Buddhist cyber world. The author discusses the increased reliance on the Internet and cyberspace. This electronic medium creates communities that are not limited by location because users can inter-react with others many miles apart. For

Taylor, the epistemological potential for such space is radical because of its possibility for transforming knowledge into action. Within the non-hierarchical and de-centered power relations of the hyperspace of the Internet, time and distance become irrelevant, and the human body is rendered meaningless because it is invisible.

In Chapter 5 Taylor examines the Thai charismatic saint Wang Taa Maha Bua (born in 1913), a highly regarded master in the austere Forest tradition. The meditative Forest tradition within Theravada Buddhism is known for its conservatism, asceticism, and adherence to strict orthodoxy, relying upon mountainous wildernesses and secluded forest monasteries as centers for spiritual practice. Maha Bua's monastery is south of the village of Baan Taad:

Today the monastery...is the only relatively untouched pocket of forest remaining in the area. In the early days Maha Bua recalled forest all around and the tigers and leopards in that forest wandered in and out of the monastery. This was the time before walls sponsored by influential patrons were built around forest monasteries to prevent encroachment by land-hungry peasants from the 1960s onwards (p. 112).

The significance of this monastery is enormous; 'anyone with power must visit at some point in their public careers to show their veneration to the living saint' (p. 113). Taylor follows Maha Bua in using the physical body of the individual as a metaphor for the social body of the nation (i.e. body politic). 'In the Thai context, the body is consistently controlled and organized by religious discourse' (p. 114). Moreover, Maha Bua interprets the body/nation as sick and in need of a cure. Drawing on Maha Bua, Taylor concludes by observing that the civic Thai religion and politics (body as nation) represents a combination of discursive power relations that resembles a kind of national political spirituality.

The theme of location and body is continued as the author discusses the Kamma-thaan monks, a one hundred year old monastic tradition, by examining their social memory. More specifically, the author examines how the monks remember and enact the past by means of rites and ordinary behavior. In response to the onslaught of modernity upon monastic life, the author finds that these monks took refuge in the nostalgia for a wandering lifestyle, which is akin to the Pali textual tradition's injunction to live a life like that of a horn of a rhinoceros, an ancient ideal of detachment from society.

Free from state political influence, monks develop a counter-discourse to the official political jargon. Because they represent marginal figures, Taylor compares these Buddhist monks to postmodern nomads and errant wanderers, and observes that modern life requires unrestricted movement. After approvingly citing Henri Lefebvre on this point, Taylor recalls Deleuze and Guattari's interpretation of nomadism as rhizomatic, ignoring boundaries, hierarchical structures, established spaces, and pre-existing tracks.

There is much to admire in this book when the author examines modern Thai society and its reactions to modernity, and the reader is rewarded by updated observations about the cultural situation in contemporary Thailand. But because of the extensive use of postmodern thinkers and jargon to interpret the contemporary situation in Thailand, the following question needs to be raised, particularly for those unfamiliar with postmodern discourse: Is it appropriate to use postmodern terminology and notions to analyze a civilization that has just recently encountered the forces

of modernity? By relying on thinkers such as Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari, and on Baudrillard's notion of simulation, the author seems to be imposing foreign Western notions on an Eastern culture. Would Thai readers recognize their own culture through the postmodern lens used by Taylor? I doubt that they would conclude that the author is correct in his analysis. In part, postmodernism is a French intellectual movement with its roots in art and architectural changes and political demonstrations of the late 1960s that cannot be easily applied to a Southeast Asian culture such as Thailand. This book is weakest when the author loses the reader in postmodern jargon, and is at its best when Taylor refrains from extensive use of such discourse, as in Chapters 6 and 7. It is doubtful that uninitiated readers of postmodern thought will be able to make much from the thick jungle of language.

Whatever one thinks about Taylor's postmodern analysis, he does fulfill the two-fold task of his study: to interpret the variety of religious experiences and particular sites of social encounter, and to develop a new way of thinking about religiosity in Thai culture that reflects a process of recovering and recording lived worlds. A reader interested in the issues of modernity and its influence on a contemporary Asian culture will find this timely book of interest. Others interested in issues of space (urban and village), nostalgia, politics, and the human body will also profit from this study. But readers should be wary of becoming nomadic themselves by getting lost in postmodern jargon.

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