

have become inundated with dread, mistrust, and a lack of cohesion; as Racelis writes, ‘communities are gripped with fear and mired in violence under the “new normal” of continued killing with impunity’ (p. 168).

The Philippines’ war on drugs has been profoundly violent. Patrick Winn, in his 2019 book *Hello, Shadowlands: Inside the Meth Fiefdoms, Rebel Hideouts, and Bomb-Scarred Party Towns of Southeast Asia*, declared the war on drugs to be ‘among the bloodiest massacres in recent Southeast Asian history’ (p. 25), ‘racking up a body count seldom seen outside large-scale land battles’ (pp. 128–9). Lasco’s book is an excellent contribution to scholarship on the Philippine war on drugs and, as Maria Fernandez and her coauthors state in chapter 6, ‘It may take at least a generation to reverse the effects of this devastating drug war’ (p. 131).

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## Thailand

*Wayward distractions: Ornament, emotion, zombies and the study of Buddhism in Thailand*

By JUSTIN MCDANIEL

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Images, Bibliography, Index.

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Justin McDaniel’s new book, *Wayward Distractions: Ornament, Emotion, Zombies and the Study of Buddhism in Thailand*, is a compilation of nine articles written between 2018 and 2021. Seven of them were originally published in scholarly journals (for example, *Journal of the Siam Society* and *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*), one in an anthology (*Material Culture and Asian Religions: Text, Image, Object*, ed. Benjamin Fleming and Richard Mann), and one was written for this volume. What makes this book special is that it covers not only a wide range of topics on Thai Buddhism and Buddhist texts, but also encompasses traditional and contemporary art, art history, and cultural anthropology. Even though this book is published in a scholarly series, the Kyoto Series on Asian Studies (Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University), the articles are written in a casual narrative style, and include descriptions of McDaniel’s personal experiences. Thus his arguments are easy to follow and serious subject matter is made accessible to a wide range of readers: scholars, students, and anyone who is interested in Thai religion and culture.

The book showcases McDaniel’s diverse interests and deep knowledge of the featured Buddhist topics. McDaniel draws on his wide experiences, including teaching at a school in Thailand and time spent as an ordained monk in the northeast near the border with Laos during his fieldwork. As a result, he gained deep knowledge and insight on Thai and Lao lifeways, languages, Buddhism and its rituals (including meditation, and chanting in Pali).

Chapter 1 introduces the scope of the book. Chapter 2 covers the *Sujavanna Wua Luang* (SWL), an apocryphal Buddhist *Jātaka* tale written in the Khun language. McDaniel addresses the importance of this local text, which provides background on historical events, political and social concerns, as well as the cultural values and practices of the region. He compares and contrasts the SWL to other canonical stories.

The diverse ethnicities and galactic polity of Bangkok is the focus of chapter 3. McDaniel dissects in great detail Edward Van Roy's book, *Siamese Melting Pot: Ethnic Minorities in the Making of Bangkok*. Although he considers it one of the most important books on Bangkok history, he questions Van Roy's term 'galactic polity/*mandala*' and his presentation of ethnicity (p. 55). McDaniel also points out important facts regarding these issues and adds more examples in support of his own perspective on both topics.

The new material written for this book, chapter 4, examines the subject of marriage in *Jātaka* stories. He utilises the *Vessantara Jātaka* as a reflection on the role of marriage in Thai Buddhist cultural tradition. McDaniel addresses how the influential marriage ideology in this *Jātaka* can be traced throughout canonical and extra-canonical Pali and vernacular texts in many regions of present-day Thailand (p. 81).

Chapter 5 examines relevant studies of images and texts in Thai Buddhist literature. He argues that not all images of birds, animals, and flowers represent stories in Indic or Pali Buddhist texts. He comments that art historians often try to find textual sources, but in fact most images are mainly ornamental. I agree that this is usually the case, but note, for example, that temples built during the reign of King Rama III (r. 1824–51) generally followed Daoist iconography and included Chinese art and symbolism. Flowers, birds, and decorative elements symbolise the concepts of longevity, wealth, and happiness. Illustrated examples of some of the motifs mentioned in the article would have been welcome in this chapter.

One popular aspect of Thai Buddhism, the use of talismanic objects and amulets, is covered in chapter 6. McDaniel investigates the development of *phraphim* (Buddhist tablets and amulets). He points out examples of the popular types of amulets, such as those with images of the late Somdet Tho (from Wat Rakhang) and the materials used for making them (roof tiles from monasteries). He remarks that 'amulets create communities and texts' and that 'the trading of amulets can be seen as emerging doctrine' (p. 138). I find this to be an interesting argument. McDaniel also points out that the ball-shaped amulets called *takrut* were originally texts and still display inscriptions. Amulets are popularly used among Thais to the present day and are an important part of Thai Buddhism.

Chapter 7 is devoted to art installations by artists inspired by Buddhist teachings. McDaniel provides excellent examples of works by internationally known artists such as Montien Boonma and Jakkai Siributr. He compares their works to other international contemporary artists. Generally, most Buddhist specialists do not write or study contemporary art. McDaniel, however, seems to have deep knowledge and interest in art history and visual culture and theory. He has interviewed Thai artists and viewed and carefully analysed their work. As a historian of Southeast Asian art, I plan to assign chapters 5 and 7 as required reading assignments in my upper division classes.

Chapters 3 and 8 address the subject of Brahmanism/Hinduism in Thai Buddhism. McDaniel describes unique mixtures of stories and images of Hindu deities that are utilised in the Thai Buddhist context. These deities are depicted on mural paintings and their statues are installed in halls and shrines in monastery compounds. The most popular deities regularly found in wats are Indra, Brahma, Ganesa, and Jivaka Komārabhacca (Thai: Phra Chiwok Goman). Thais do not necessarily regard these deities as ‘Hindu’ in this context.

Chapter 9 investigates the use of corpses as objects of meditation. He raises an important question about why there are many religious uses of corpses in a culture that promotes cremation. He traces the development of this practice to India and provides references of textual sources from South India, such as a manuscript dated to 1031 CE from Mysore (p. 196). He also identifies when the practice was introduced to northern Thailand in the mid-1400s through the tradition of *Vasubhāga*. McDaniel concludes that ‘scholars of Buddhist history and practice in Southeast Asia need to pay more attention to both southern Chinese and Sanskrit literary sources’ (p. 198).

Chapter 10 focuses on Buddhist nuns (Thai: *mae chī*). He examines why Thai nuns do not feel that they need to re-establish the identity of bhikkhunī (the fully ordained female Buddhist monastics during the time of Sakyamunī Buddha). Even though most of the *mae chī* he interviewed achieved high levels of knowledge of the Pali scriptures, they felt that the Order of Nuns cannot be revived before the arrival of the future Buddha, Maitreya. Thus, they teach Pali and concentrate on Buddha’s teaching. Some decide to remain ordained for the rest of their lives to encourage the spread of *dhamma*. This chapter also includes two interesting appendices: ‘Terms for Non-monastic Ascetics in Pali texts’, and ‘Vernacular Terms for Modern Professionally Celibate Women—“Third Status(es)”’.

The bibliography contains important sources in English, French, and Thai. Traditionally, Thai names are listed with their first name followed by their last name. However, some Thai names in the bibliography are listed both ways. In conclusion, this book should be read by scholars of both Buddhist and Southeast Asian Studies. It provides important explanations of Thai Buddhism and its religious beliefs from the past to the present.

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Thailand

*Belittled citizens: The cultural politics of childhood on Bangkok’s margins*

By GIUSEPPE BOLOTTA

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In this engrossing book, based on six years of fieldwork, Giuseppe Bolotta analyses the experiences of Thai slum children (*dek salam*) within many institutional