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## <Book Review>

Chiara Formichi

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Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

The shortcomings of the book are few. Zucker might have engaged more with the literature on memory from the Holocaust, including whether certain kinds of trust and ideas of security can ever be restored. The book would be very useful in a range of different courses. I teach a Mainland Southeast Asia course that uses a selection of ethnographies from across a 50-year period to teach the history of the region as well as this genre. Zucker's book offers insight into yet another stage in the development of the ethnography, "village" life without a fixed or reified set of customs, lived on the margins of the wider culture and set within a historical context not of stability, but of conflict and suffering. The book could be used in courses on violence and social memory, on conflict resolution, and on life in contemporary Southeast Asia. Like most excellent anthropological studies, Zucker's work teaches us significant lessons about what it means to be human.

Judy Ledgerwood

*Department of Anthropology, Northern Illinois University*

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## *The Buddha on Mecca's Verandah: Encounters, Mobilities, and Histories along the Malaysian-Thai Border*

IRVING CHAN JOHNSON

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012, 223p.

"One's identity . . . is never static" (p. ix). Irving Chan Johnson's *The Buddha on Mecca's Verandah* goes deep into anthropological "thick description" to highlight how "messy" collective identities along the northeastern Malaysia-Thai border are. Focusing on ideas of fluidity and movement Johnson identifies the border as a space for exchanges—commercial, cultural, political—rather than as an imprisoning parameter. It is on these foundations that *The Buddha on Mecca's Verandah* addresses the question of Thai ethnics' marginality in Kelantan through the lens of "interactive experiences that encounters across the boundaries bring about" (p. xiv).

The book unfolds thematically, as Johnson identifies five analytical categories, each investigated in a substantial chapter. These are themselves subdivided in multiple snapshots illustrating the life of Ban Bor On and its villagers. This is the product of 18 months of fieldwork, but it is also much more than that. Johnson has been visiting Ban Bor On since 1979, as this is his own mother's

birth-place. The author thus straddles between being an anthropologist (outsider) and doing research “among friends [and] relations” (insider) (p. ix). Johnson’s insider’s knowledge, writing style, and approach make Ban Bor On and its actors come to life from the book’s pages, but as “the voices of Kelantan’s Thai villagers ring out loud and clear” (p. xiii), the reader is often left wanting to hear more from the anthropologist’s own voice.

Most problematic is Johnson’s overly positive assessment of inter-ethnic relations in Kelantan and Malaysia more generally (e.g. pp. 109–118). To illustrate a specific example, I might refer to the sustained characterization of Kelantan as a place where Muslim-Buddhist relations are friendly and cordial, *versus* the Thai South—omnipresent throughout the narrative as Kelantan’s counterpart across the border—which emerges as a hotbed of Muslim extremism and violence that terrorizes the local Buddhist population as much as Kelantan’s Thais. Whilst the realities of the Malaysian northern province are highly nuanced, as its Thai population’s marginality is illustrated through multiple lenses, the Thai South is consistently painted in broad brushes.

After an Introduction that sets the stage of Thai marginality in its historical and post-colonial context, Chapter 1 begins the exploration of Ban Bor On from its inception. Titled “Places,” this chapter addresses local narratives of origin and migration, as Johnson reports “everyday histories . . . [that] referred to traditional and contemporary patterns of movement and non-movement that had been shaped by a changing border and a shifting cartography” (p. 27). This chapter thus takes “roads” as the conduit of identity expression: it is on the road that the Thais (and their dogs and pigs) encounter the Malays; it is thanks to British-built roads that the Thais can travel back and forth into Siam/Thailand to maintain ancestral networks and advance commercial enterprises; it is the local roads that shape temples’ “sacred geography” (p. 42) demarcating where monks should be seeking alms and hosting ordination parades.

Chapter 2, “Gaps,” addresses heads-on the most compelling of problems; how can Kelantan Thais shape their identity as independent from Thailand’s own (p. 55)? Despite the fact that the chapter seems to lose its thread at different points—or maybe the development of the argument is not too clearly signposted, a recurrent problem throughout the book—Johnson clearly illustrates how this subsection of the population struggles to define itself. During the British period they were labeled as “Siamese” despite their being from Kelantan (p. 62); in the 1950s ethnic parameters became more subjective, with each villager being assessed individually based on their name (to the point that a new-born Thai girl was classified as Punjabi: “Valerie Mei-Ling must have sounded Punjabi to the Malay clerk at the registrar of births office” [p. 65]); in more recent year, they have become closer to the *bumiputras* (“sons of the soil”), enjoying some of their same benefits (pp. 67–68). As the British saw Kelantanese Thais as Siamese, similarly Thailand has since the 1950s attempted to shape Thainess across the border. As per Johnson’s assessment of these efforts, “Thailand could enter the temple through its standard Thai-speaking representatives, but it was prevented from monopolizing the meaning of Thainess for the Kelantanese” (p. 81).

“Forms,” the third chapter, continues to reflect on the issue of identity and border-crossing now from the perspective of external projection, analyzing the construction and style of Kelantan’s Thai statues and temples. Wat Bot Ngam is a Thai temple in the (Chinese) village of Kampung Kulim. Built in the mid-1960s, from staring at its facade one “could easily mistake it for a temple in Bangkok” (p. 86). Tucked into the temple is also a statue of Thailand’s national deity, Phra Sayam Thewathiraj. Along with many other “Thai-type” structures built in the 1960s–70s (pp. 90–91), a newer phenomenon is the inclusion of “Sinic representations with little or no Thai artistic accents.” Johnson suggests that “the materiality of the statues and buildings mediate between local Thai social actors, Chinese economic players and the Malaysian state” (p. 91), reflecting the marginality of the local Thais. Although in a not-so-linear fashion, Johnson unpacks this reflection pointing at the surge in Chinese statues as an attempt at diffusing concerns over local forms of Thai expressivity that were seen as offensive by the Malay majority (p. 97). The fact that “Chinese religious tourism in Kelantan began to boom” (p. 94) also seems to have boosted this style.

Chapter 4, “Circuits,” places Kelantan’s Thai villages at the geo-political intersection of Thailand and Malaysia. Johnson starts off with some villagers’ nostalgic remarks on how little interested the current Sultan is in his loyal Thai population—“Ban Bor On’s residents had gathered along the road in eager anticipation of catching a glimpse of their ruler . . . but the sultan’s motorcade zipped past the assembled crowd without pomp or ceremony” (p. 120)—and how much of a “people’s King” King Bhumipol Adulyadej was instead in Thailand. The chapter unfolds to address how Kelantan Thais submit to a double sovereignty. In 1902—hence before the Treaty of London—Siam had reasserted its sovereignty over Patani and Kelantan as well as made the king “de facto head of the Thai monkhood” (p. 127); a century later, Kelantan is still fully plugged into Thailand’s sphere through “their exposure to the Thai monarchy’s media cult” and the diffusion of television (p. 121; again on p. 170). Yet, political patronage is a different matter as Kelantan is now ruled by the Islamist Partai Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), leading “Kelantan’s monkhood [to] negotiate the ‘gaps’ between the encounters of two powerful figures—one Thai and Buddhist, the other Malay and Muslim” (p. 135). The conclusion to this chapter points to the duality between a strong “Thai cultural identity” and an “unquestionably patriotic [attitude] to [their] birth country, Malaysia” (p. 147).

The fifth chapter, titled “Dreams,” points however in a different direction as it investigates the spread of a Buddhist modernist group in Kelantan, the Dhammakaya Foundation, which trod the path of the 1902 Sangha Act and 1960s unification policies run in North-eastern and Southern Thailand (*Thammathut* project), which ultimately rested on the association of “being Thai with being Buddhist, and [that] Buddhism was what held the nation together” (p. 148). The presence of *Thammathut* monks, sent to “correct” localized Buddhist practices “allowed Ban Bor On villagers to feel that they were a part of a larger Thai Buddhist moral polity, reducing feelings of

social and ethnic marginalization as a cultural minority in a Muslim state” (p. 151). Johnson labels the *Thammathut* project as “politically non-threatening” (p. 154), but it is difficult—at least for a Southeast Asianist who focuses on Islam—to not see this project as a mirror image of the much feared and condemned Wahhabi expansion started in the 1970s, and more generally the orthodoxization of Muslims in Southern Thailand, which in this book is consistently branded as a terrorist threat.

*The Buddha on Mecca’s Verandah* is a captivating narrative of how a marginalized minority inhabiting the complex reality of a borderland area manages its cultural and political identity. It is unfortunate that Johnson opted to not engage with the reality across the border, as a more nuanced understanding of Muslim-Buddhist/Malay-Thai relations in the Thai South would have further enriched his perspective on the Malay North, but maybe that will be addressed in his future work. This book presents the results of a much-needed investigation that further contributes to our understanding of inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia, Thailand’s own religious politics, and the legacy of British colonialism in Southeast Asia to mention just a few. More generally it is a welcome addition to the literature on ethno-religious diversity, borderland histories, and identity construction.

Chiara Formichi

*Department of Asian Studies, Cornell University*

***The Golden Lands: Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam (Architecture of the Buddhist World)***

VIKRAM LALL

Kuala Lumpur: JF Publishing, 2014, 280p.

This is a large-format (335×260 mm) book with a hard cover, printed on glossy art-quality paper, and contains numerous color photographs by professional photographers as well as sophisticated maps and other graphics. It is thus in danger of being lumped with coffee-table books.

The author is a practicing architect based in Delhi. According to his LinkedIn description, the book is the first of a series which is planned to consist of six volumes on the architecture of the Buddhist world, (not specifically “Buddhist architecture,”) employing an interdisciplinary perspective including architecture, history, religion, and philosophy. The company with which he is associated, Lall and Associates (established in 1969) has obtained commissions for a wide range of projects, in the fields of urban planning and design, education (22 schools), hospitality and tourism, residential, offices, transport, industry, and medicine, in addition to institutional and religious buildings. In the latter category are a Japanese temple at Bodhgaya (one of the eight places where