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Sarah Wijesinghe

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Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University



Fire Dancers in Thailand's Tourism Industry: Art, Affect, and Labor

TIFFANY RAE POLLOCK

New York: Cornell University Press, 2024.

Tiffany Rae Pollock's *Fire Dancers in Thailand's Tourism Industry: Art, Affect, and Labor* is an invitation to a deeper understanding of the affective worlds of fire dancers in Thailand's tourism industry. Informed by an ethnography in the popular Southern Thailand islands of Koh Samui and Koh Phi Phi, and to some extent Koh Phangan, Koh Lanta, and Bangkok, the book narrates how fire dancers navigate the tourism economy, build communities in increasingly precarious environments, manage their identities, give meaning to their art and labor, and create opportunities despite challenges. One important tenet of the book is that by giving prominence to the voices of fire dancers, the reader is challenged to move beyond the stereotype of fire dancers as mere beach labor entangled with promiscuity and accept them as active social agents who negotiate interpersonal, cultural, political, and economic constructions to give meaning to their art form.

The central foundation of the discussion is guided by the theory of affect, a "key component of fire dance labor as it is moved and exchanged among bodies to create feelings on the beach through performances and engagements" (p. 14). The introduction vividly sets the scene of a fire dance on Thailand's southern islands. It lightens the imagination and guides the reader to integrate themselves within the often-unobserved shifts that occur in island destinations from daytime to nighttime economies. The reader is then introduced to a brief history of the emergence and development of fire dance in Thailand, beginning with flow art—a movement practice introduced in the country by the backpacking tourist community in the 1980s and 1990s. The discussion briefly presents how fire art began in Thailand, founded principally on the community ethos of flow art, before its integration into the neoliberal tourism economy and its consolidation primarily as an island genre catering to young international tourists arriving in Thailand's beaches for its popular parties and the generally lively beach scene. This shift into the market exchange led to changing performance motivations amongst fire dancers. The shift was accelerated by the tourism boom in Thailand from 2009, leading to the development of more bars and a demand for more labor across the industry. Competition in the fire dance scene has since intensified as positions in the tourism

industry—specifically fire dancing—are filled by underpaid migrant laborers (mostly undocumented) from surrounding countries, especially Myanmar.

While the author acknowledges the lack of recorded history of fire dancing in Thailand and her dependence on oral history, an important aspect missing from the beginning of the book is how fire dancing evolved within Thailand and came to be integrated into the tourism industry and form a core part of the tourist experience. Furthermore, considering that the erotic/sexualized narrative is superimposed on the discussion of Thailand's beach tourism (fire dancing in particular), an explanation of how fire dancing became entangled in bars, beach parties, etc., would have helped to clarify how the negative image of fire dancers (as deviant beach boys) became consolidated in Thai society. In many instances throughout the book, Pollock creates an image of the local Thai community—and Thailand, in a totalizing or universal sense—perceiving fire dancing and fire dancers to be not valued, not acceptable, not artists, deviant, shameful, dirty, sexualized and marginalized figures, dangerous, uneducated young men, and bad for the environment. From this point of view, the discussion appears judgmental without a clear historical analysis of the negative perceptions in line with the changing fire scene and broader tourism politics in Thailand. For instance, in Chapter 1 the author presents an encounter with a government official of a national park in Koh Phi Phi, where the official proposes to the author that “instead of researching on the topic, we must change the practice. He wanted fire dancing to stop because it was bad for the environment and dirty” (p. 24). The author criticizes this view, but as a reader I was curious about the historical roots of such perceptions, which remain unexplored in the book.

In general, the book lacks local community perspectives (beyond that of the dancers), which limits the analysis. Thai society is depicted largely through the author's lens, and a supposed Thai image, culture, femininities, and the like are continuously brought forward, reinforcing colonial and orientalist tropes. Indeed, the coloniality of the discussion, subsumed in dichotomized and orientalist thinking, Western feminist narratives, and paradoxes common in anthropological studies of the East, is a big criticism of the book. This perspective is partly due also to the lack of deep reflection on the author's positionality throughout the book. Though Pollock briefly mentions her positionality as a young white woman from Canada in the introduction, how this intersects with her perception is largely absent.

The book has seven core chapters, each engaging in varying themes and voices of fire dancers and their community. Chapter 1 explores the village-to-beach narrative commonly observed among fire dancers. Readers are introduced to Som and his journey from a “poor village boy” to a highly paid performer in Thailand's tourism industry. The author challenges the dominant narrative of tourism as exploitative and presents a discussion on how tourism has led to dramatic shifts in fire dancers' lives because of encounters, friendships, and opportunities on the beaches. The chapter also explores how dancers are eroticized via racialized colonial affects and imaginaries, and how dancers themselves navigate these imaginaries that provide opportunities to reimagine their bodies

and increase their social and economic capital. However, despite the author engaging very briefly with the theme of Eurocentrism in the beginning, the rest of the discussion is largely uncritical and does not engage with the colonial and neocolonial histories shaping the landscape of aesthetics and “exotic” tourism imaginaries leading to the fire dancers’ perceptions.

The author highlights that the dancers’ dark skin is a fascination for tourists (i.e., white/Western tourists), and dancers work out to have their bodies crafted for *farang* (foreign/Western) imaginations and the exotic gaze. Fire dancers have become empowered and learned to love their skin color thanks to foreign female tourists’ fascination with dark skin. This is in contrast to the culture in which fire dancers live, where dark skin is associated with low status. Empowerment is uncritically presented as a reality that was founded because of the “white gaze.” The chapter extends to further colonial dichotomies of modesty (Thai femininities), Western female sexuality, and more with little to no engagement with the important theme of coloniality (and whiteness) underpinning these interactions. Indeed, the book has largely ignored much of the extensive literature that has been written about colonial and neocolonial legacies of tourism (see, for instance Richter 1989; Hall and Tucker 2004; Tucker 2009; Patil 2011; Williams 2012) and beyond that plays an important role in contextualizing the sociopolitical and economic dynamics presented in the book.

Chapter 2 explores fire dance as a form of affective labor, emphasizing the creation of energies and intersections of sexuality. Chapter 3 laments the anxieties stemming from the influx of Burmese dancers in Thailand’s fire dance scene and how fire dancers build solidarity to sustain their art. Chapter 4 expands on the concept of sharing and collaboration, centered around a fire dance center for community building, developed by one of the pioneer fire dancers in Thailand. Burmese dancers’ narratives are explored in depth, paying particular attention to how they renegotiate deviant subjectivities ascribed to them. A form of reverse gaze is also observed where Thai dancers position Burmese dancers as “deviant beach boys” as a method of differentiation. Racial and class distinctions within the fire dance scene are also highlighted, such as luxury venues (acceptable to the upper class) favoring white performers over locals, because they are “considered to be better artists in a global hierarchy of value” (p. 73). Unfortunately, while the author briefly mentions art in white neoliberal capitalist markets, the analysis of whiteness, capitalism, and coloniality remains superficial.

Chapter 5 focuses on the concept of *sabai sabai* (contentment) in tourism economies and fire dancers’ lives, while Chapter 6 highlights fire dancers’ resilience amidst neoliberal capitalist expansions. The discussion centers on the concept of “slow violence” or “unspectacular violence” in tourist economies. Lastly, Chapter 7 investigates the gender dynamics of the fire dance scene, bringing into the discussion the voices of female fire dancers in Thailand, who are in a minority. While the author acknowledges how the image of Thailand as a sex scape has largely shaped Thai femininities, she frequently imposes Western feminist and Eurocentric ideals that cannot be ignored. For instance, she claims that “while Thais do frequent tourist entertainment areas, women

are not present, and if they are they are in a group" (p. 129), and "I am yet to see a group of Thai women alone at any beach party (without an accompanying male)" (p. 129), and "if a man and woman are hanging out together in public, it is usually because they are intimately involved or related" (p. 129). Such depictions are essentialist and orientalist in nature (see Mohanty 1984; Spivak 1988; Grewal and Kaplan 1994), but besides this, I wonder whether they imply a hierarchy of modernity (Western) and the opposite (the other) where the solo presence of a woman in such a setting represents cosmopolitanism.

Adding to this, compared to the stories of the Thai female fire dancers Kat and Khao, who both had foreign boyfriends and were depicted as having a "different type of femininity that opposes dominant Thai ideals" (p. 130), Dao was identified as the "most conservative" (p. 138). Her conservativeness was symbolized by her being rarely sighted in public without her (Thai) boyfriend, being accompanied by another male ("big brother") in the fire art center in case her boyfriend was away, not driving, not drinking, occasionally smoking ("which is not acceptable for women in Thailand"), dressing modestly, coming from a conservative family, soft-spoken, and shy (p. 138). Funnily, despite Dao's depiction based on the author's heavily Westernized ideas of feminism, Dao left her career as a teacher to become a fire dancer, occupying a hyper-masculine space. I was surprised at how the author failed to comprehend her agency. Similarly, being a *farang* is continuously associated with cosmopolitanism. Such representations risk reinforcing hierarchies of modernity aligned with Western ideals.

Despite its limitations, the book presents valuable insights into the realities of fire dancers, shaped by capitalist (tourism) structures and affective labor and the complexities of tourism, labor, and identity in Thailand.

Sarah Wijesinghe

Jeffrey Sachs Centre on Sustainable Development, Sunway University

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1925-038X>

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The Story of Southeast Asia

ERIC C. THOMPSON

Singapore: NUS Press, 2024.

The Story of Southeast Asia is certainly not the first or only book on Southeast Asia. Dozens of academic works from various perspectives have been published on the region. The question is, why did Eric C. Thompson decide to be part of those dozens of researchers? Thompson explains that he was introduced to Southeast Asian studies while a graduate student at the University of Washington in 1990. This sparked an interest in Southeast Asia and led to a career at the National University of Singapore along with the opportunity to explore his interest through scientific research. Thompson has had a stellar academic career in Southeast Asian studies, having published dozens of studies on the region in journals and books. In general, his research falls within the scope of sociology, gender, and anthropology.

At the outset, *The Story of Southeast Asia* contains a disclaimer that it is not a theoretical book but can be used to look at Southeast Asia from a social-theoretical and historical perspective. Nevertheless, the book is written from the perspective of history and anthropology, using Ernesto Laclau's theoretical approach that social structure can be understood as objective reality composed of sentiments laid down through the historical choices of subjective actors (p. xiii). From the perspective of historical studies, the long historical periodization of this book is seen as a form of writing *longue durée* history or history over a long duration. Although it is not specifically explained, this choice is seen as an attempt to correctly understand the historical process. Fernand Braudel, who introduced the concept of *longue durée*, believed that the longer the time perspective, the greater the chance of interpreting events correctly (Henley and Schulte Nordholt 2015). *Longue durée* has led historians to shift the direction of their research from social movements to social structures (Vovelle 1978), as Thompson does in this book.

The human activities that shaped the layers of social structure and cultural meaning in Southeast Asia are explained by Thompson in eight chapters. The discussion begins with Southeast Asia in prehistory, in the chapter titled "Populating Land and Seas." Starting with a focus on human activities in the Southeast Asian region from fifty thousand years ago, the narrative continues with