

BOOK REVIEW

Wayward Distractions: Ornament, Emotion, Zombies and the Study of Buddhism in Thailand

by Justin Thomas McDaniel. Singapore: NUS Press, 2021. 292 pages.
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Life is a messy business. And when faced by this mess, there is often a certain scholarly temptation to tidy things away, to fit the mess into an overarching system, or to have recourse to simple narratives that can replace the messiness of life with a more straightforward story. And there is, of course, sometimes value in this approach: it allows us to see things we might otherwise not see, to sense patterns among the teeming multiplicity of the world. But, on the other hand, a commitment to seeking out simple narratives also leads us to miss a great deal that is interesting, or provocative, or compelling about the world in which we live.

Justin Thomas McDaniel's *Wayward Distractions: Ornament, Emotion, Zombies and the Study of Buddhism in Thailand* is a book of collected essays – a record of side-projects and obsessions – that resists this urge to systematizing. There is plenty of mess in this book, and the stories McDaniel tells are, to his credit, rarely straightforward, as he brings together a miscellany of intriguing side-shows from almost two decades of research into Buddhist and Theravada studies, exploring things that 'began as delightful distractions from my main research agenda but blossomed and became obsessions' (p. 2). As the introduction to this collection makes clear, however, this book is not just a collection of curiosities. Instead, the very waywardness of McDaniel's itinerary – his willingness to wander off-topic, to pay attention to things that others might find trivial, or to stray across well-policed academic boundaries – brings to our attention phenomena that we might otherwise miss, we were less distracted, and less wayward, and perhaps more high-minded. This is waywardness and distraction not as a regrettable lapse in scholarly judgement, but instead as a *method*.

Throughout this collection, McDaniel makes a case for a more wayward and distracted approach to exploring of the messiness of Thai Buddhist lives and cultures. He invites the reader to plunge into mess and complexity, not in search of a single principle or an overarching truth, but rather out of the conviction that this mess and complexity is the stuff of life, and as such, is worthy of our attention. He asks us to notice things we wouldn't otherwise notice, and to entertain ideas we might not otherwise entertain. In the introduction to this collection, McDaniel takes Heather Love's idea of 'Thin Description' – a riposte to Geertz – as his starting point. He argues that in our quest for meaning and depth, we often miss the surfaces. Intoxicated by our search for meaning, we simply don't notice what is going on in front of our eyes. Before we think to ask "what does this mean," in other words, perhaps we need to attend more closely to what *this* actually is, whether we are talking about the shimmering birds that ornament a temple wall in Thailand, the lush cadences of a poem, or the gestures of a shared ritual. McDaniel argues that scholarly work on religion often works under the cognitivist assumption that 'rituals, art, objects, and even stories have to have a cognitive or symbolic meaning... they have to be a vehicle for advancing some deeper ethical or philosophical truth claim' (p. 13). And the papers gathered together in this collection push back against this traditional view which sees the

underpinning principle of human activity as *meaning*. Meaning, McDaniel wants us to recognize, is neither more fundamental, nor more real, nor truer than the surfaces of things.

As a philosopher, I too have in the past been guilty of talking up meaning, believing that it lurks somewhere subterranean, waiting to be unearthed by subtle analysis. And I have sometimes fallen prey myself to the belief that rooting out meaning is the ultimate purpose of scholarship (what else is there, after all?). But McDaniel makes a good case that our obsession with meaning often risks rendering us oblivious to the primacy of our esthetic, bodily immersion in the world. As human beings, we do not live just in a world of meanings. We live in a world of material things. Things among things, we are bathed in the world – in its richness and heterogeneity. The essays in McDaniel’s collection of wayward distractions are a testament to this heterogeneity, and – perhaps unsurprisingly, given the title – are themselves very diverse. Although they cluster around topics relating to Thai religion, society and art, there is no overarching story, and no single thread. Nevertheless, as the introduction makes clear, there are several intellectual commitments underlying these essays that make this a book that is more than the sum of its parts. One is the concern with surfaces, and with thin description: a willingness to linger over details, and to recognize the sheer complexity of the phenomena under discussion. Another is a concern with blurring the boundaries between the meta-categories – religion, nationality, art, ethnicity, even Buddhism – to which scholars so often have recourse. And a third commitment comes from McDaniel’s evident love of the boisterous profusion of the world. This is nowhere more clear than, when talking about the counterintuitively unmeditative mood of many Thai monasteries, he refers to this the “sea of senseless cajoleries” that make up the world in which we live – a stark contrast to the more refined realm of ideas and meanings to which we might claim to aspire.

McDaniel’s opening chapter on the sea of senseless cajoleries in which we swim is followed by an exploration of the Jātaka story, the *Sujavanṇa Wua Luang*, and a reconsideration of vernacular Buddhist literature as a form of transcultural creative engagement. In the following chapter, McDaniel considers Edward Van Roy’s (2017) *Siamese Melting Pot: Ethnic Minorities in the Making of Bangkok* to make the case that Thai culture is a motlier affair than it is often taken to be, effectively replacing notions of cultural, religious, and ethnic homogeneity with a more complicated story made up of a myriad of interactions. The fourth chapter explores marriage in the Jātaka tales, and argues that contemporary Thai notions of (temporary) monkhood are not, as often assumed, opposed to marriage, but instead often seen as a precondition for a successful marriage. McDaniel writes that ‘monkhood “cooks” a man and prepares him for the restraint and the dedication needed to be a good husband’ (p. 92). Chapter five, perhaps the most pivotal chapter in the book, explores the role of birds in ornamental Thai temple art. Here, McDaniel talks about his long-standing obsession with tracking down the textual sources for the images painted on the walls of Thai temples, before coming to the conclusion that sometimes – perhaps often – a bird is just a bird. Chapter six explores the complex trade in Buddhist amulets, following the social lives of these amulets as places where art, religion, and economics converge. Here, McDaniel pushes back against the prejudice that sees things as inferior to ideals, and the stuff of the world as secondary to meaning, and argues that amulets, as with many other aspects of Thai material culture, are tokens in the creation of community. Chapter seven moves on to contemporary installation art, and explores how urban artists in Thailand take Buddhist themes as their inspiration, rendering art galleries becoming alternative (non-monastic) Buddhist spaces. In the following chapter, ‘This Hindu Holy Man is a Thai Buddhist,’ we see a blurring of the boundaries between Hinduism and Buddhism. Chapter nine explores zombies, drawing together Buddhist practices of meditation on corpse decomposition, the trade in corpse oil (sourced according to various dubious methods by necromancers), the *Vetāla-prakaraṇam*, or *Collection of Stories of Zombies*, and contemporary horror films. This inquiry into the way corpses are imagined and reimagined in Thai society leads to an investigation into the complex historical influences on contemporary Thai corpse-culture, from Chinese corpse-gathering societies to non-Buddhist Sanskrit literary sources. Finally, chapter ten asks about the social roles of Buddhist “nuns”, beyond the monastic/lay divide.

For some, this pleasingly heterogenous collection of essays may seem something of a rag-bag. Some readers might protest, ‘What does it all add up to?’, or more simply, ‘What does it mean?’ But these questions themselves perhaps misconstrue the book’s purpose – and its central argument. It is the chapter on birds in Thai temple art that makes this most clear. In this chapter, McDaniel argues forcefully that, despite the hunger scholars often have for meaning, the birds in Thai temples are more often ‘seen as beautiful and normative ornamental art, not as something to be “sourced” or deciphered for symbolic meaning or textual origin’ (p. 102). The implications of this for how we ‘read’ religious art are significant. Temple paintings in Thailand may, broadly speaking, be Buddhist art, but as McDaniel points out, this Buddhist art isn’t necessarily there to teach Buddhist lessons. Why, then, all the birds? One compelling reason is that this ornithological profusion may create a certain mood – a particular feel or a sense of delight. Birds, after all, are pretty cute. We have an affinity for them, a kind of biophilia, perhaps. And if this is true, then the same goes for many of the other ornaments in Thai temples, and in religious art elsewhere. What could be more pleasing than to spend time in a space where painted birds perch on lush branches or flutter through the painted sky? Birds do not need to mean anything. But their presence may make us feel welcome. And perhaps this is enough. ‘We all share death,’ McDaniel writes wryly, ‘but we also all share birds’ (p. 120).

Taken together, these essays are fascinating windows into the complexity of Thai life, religion and society, and a testament to the value of renewed attentiveness that comes once we get over our hang-ups over the meaning of things. But does this leave meaning entirely out in the cold? After all, as human beings, we don’t just like birds: we also like meanings. McDaniel himself testifies to how, when confronted by painted birds, we are sometimes overwhelmed the temptation to take flight ourselves, and soar into the skies of theory – accompanied by all our textual and philosophical knowledge. The same obsession with meaning holds whether we are talking about corpse oil, the ordination of nuns, contemporary Buddhist art in urban galleries, the trade in amulets, or the virtues of married life. So this leaves the reader with a final, philosophical question. If we are to embrace a commitment to thin description, what space does this leave for meaning?

McDaniel doesn’t answer this question directly, but in his reflections on the temple birds, he gives some pointers that may help us find an answer. Perhaps it is possible, he suggests, to reconceive of meaning not as something fixed, but instead as something fuzzy and multi-vocal, something improvised like a jazz melody (p. 119). If so, then it might be possible to undo the hierarchy between things and their meanings, and to dismantle the dichotomy between thin description and Geertzian thick description. Where does this leave us? Perhaps in a place where meaning is neither the hidden root of things, nor is it entirely absent. Instead, meaning becomes just another aspect of our engagement with the world. Or, differently put: like a brilliantly painted bird on a temple wall, meaning itself is just one more shimmering surface that may invite our attention, wayward and distractible creatures that we are.

Reference

Van Roy E. (2017) *Siamese Melting Pot: Ethnic Minorities in the Making of Bangkok*. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.