

communities who are equally at the mercy of aggressive development; their profound sense of loss and lack of representation echoes the plight of the Rohingya boat people and other refugee communities suffering the effects of displacement on an international scale (Dean and Levi 2003). In addition to being a valuable resource to scholars of Southeast Asian studies, *Tamils and the Haunting of Justice* should be required reading for individuals seeking subaltern perspectives on nation-building driven by ethnic-majority nationalism.

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ANDREW ALAN JOHNSON. *Ghosts of the New City: Spirits, Urbanity, and the Ruins of Progress in Chiang Mai*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2014. 190 pp.

Cities express progress, prosperity, and power, and are the stuff of human imagination and endeavour. The allures of the city are hard to resist – the hubris of progress and ‘quality of life’ indicators of urban planning invoke utopian imaginations, while their excesses and failures elicit dystopias and fierce critiques. Corporate and government rhetoric encourage economic, intellectual, and moral investments such as Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s promise to build over one hundred ‘smart cities’ (Greenfield 2014). Cities are spaces of meanings that rest on conceptions of progress, abstractions of power, and the interoperability between progress, power, and prosperity.

Andrew Alan Johnson’s new book evokes the idea of the city as ‘haunted’ space in a sophisticated yet highly readable ethnography of urbanity that

weaves urban history with popular religion. It reveals how future hopes manifest in state rhetoric and urbanization discourses; and how urban planning practices are contested, converted and re-articulated through and from a Buddhist cosmological past. But more importantly, it invites critical reflection on the progress, power, and prosperity that cities promise by invoking Chiang Mai, the northern Thai capital of what was formerly the Lanna kingdom, as “the idea of the city as a space ... of magico-religious charismatic power” (p. 1).

Johnson’s approach questions the dialectics of the Western intellectual tradition that inform and reproduce the binaries of urban versus rural, past versus present, emotion versus intellect, and sentiment versus rationale, etc. This is not achieved by highlighting the contradictions, instead he treats the history of mainland Southeast Asian urbanity, characterized by the religio-political notion of ‘mandala’, as a lens through which contemporary ideas of culture, nation-state and popular media could be re-interpreted. More specifically, Johnson investigates how the legacy of Chiang Mai as a pre-modern city that articulates religious notions of charismatic power (*barami*) has come to express ‘secular’ notions of progress. By substituting the Cartesian dialectics for ethnographic evocativeness, Johnson highlights the dissonances of progress prescribed by Thai urbanization that purports to bring about modern economic development while preserving the cultural essence of ‘Thainess’ and/or of a pristine Lanna.

Ghosts are the anti-thesis of mobility and progress (*charoen*); all were referred to by his informants as ‘*phi tai hong*’ (spirits of bad deaths) associated with murders, suicides, and accidents. Many of the ghost stories concentrated around a rapidly developing section of Chiang Mai dotted with boutiques and cafes patronized by wealthy Bangkokians. However, for the toiling labourers, night-watch men, and local residents, the ghosts that haunted the area were a disturbance, inhabiting a cursed place filled with hidden dangers, violence, and the incomprehensibility of otherness. Here, misfortunes, malevolent spirits, and hauntings in high-rise buildings as well as in middle-class gated compounds, night clubs, and shopping streets signified a society depleted by the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s and the economic anxieties of local residents.

Johnson investigates what hauntings at these spaces of Chiang Mai’s progress mean. The hauntings rendered economic malaise – the failed quality of urban life and sense of lack – visible but not necessarily treatable. Whereas empty and abandoned concrete buildings signified misfortune and a fear of urbanization’s unknowability and its potential for failure. By framing Chiang Mai as a symbolic space, Johnson de-constructs Thai urbanity where the city is revealed as an exemplary centre of intellectual, material, and moral superiority in a cosmological ‘mandala’ whose waning eminence requires constant tending through discourses of progress, spirit possession, and cultural heritage.

The book works along the trope of conversion or translation; it operates on the inter-textuality between the pre-modern and modern; spiritual progress (*khwan charoen*) and material development (*phattana*); sacrality (*sak*) and cultural heritage (*watthanatham*). It illustrates how much depends on successfully converting the potentials of the past embodied in guardian spirits and sacred centres of the cosmic polity into a cultural heritage and urbanity that are

already modern, or inevitably modern. However, these conversions are almost always incomplete as demonstrated by the dissonance between ideals and reality, expressed as a mismatch between external development and internal spiritual progress. This is captured succinctly by one of Johnson's informants who said Chiang Mai has "*phattana, tae yang mai charoen* (it has developed, but not yet progressed)" (p. 29).

The analysis works at the level of textuality. The "invisible essences" and "inner essences of things" (p. 29) are revealed in multi-sited ghost stories, myths, chronicles, cosmology and ethnographic moments to be "magico-religious notions of charismatic power" (p. 1). Hence, conversions such as of the pre-modern to modern and of 'Lao' ethnicity to 'Thai' nationality are never complete.

Ghosts of the New City makes an important contribution to Thai studies, urban studies, and ethnography. Like many good works of anthropology (Fischer 2015) that sets new precedence by weaving together data from multiple sites and fields, and focusing on meaning and affect, Johnson renders the revitalization of Chiang Mai as strongly oppositional abstractions of 'progress' and 'development' (*charoen/phattana*). He does so by exploiting the inter-textuality and inter-operability of those meanings and by revealing the imperfect conversions of the "raw and violent power" of spirits into "cool air and clean water for the city"; and of backwardness into "civilized, quasi-European *watthanatham*" which produce cracks for ghosts to enter (p. 156). The book is a stellar example for scholars of Southeast Asian studies in particular, demonstrating an analytics that operates within the cracks between hegemonic frameworks and regimes of knowledge, and as such transforms "the human sciences into forms of knowing" (Dominguez 2015: 380).

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