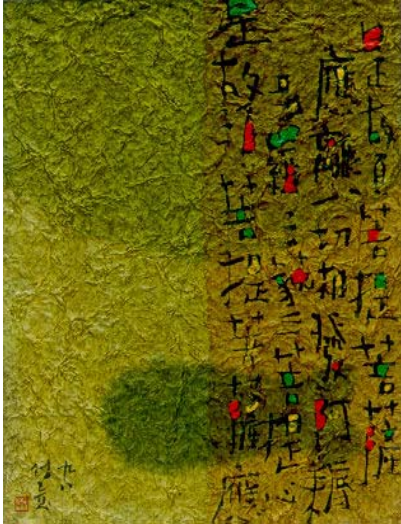


Book Review

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Reviewed by Charles Keyes
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and International Studies
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Buddhism and Postmodern Imaginings in Thailand: The Religiosity of Urban Space. By James Taylor. Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2008, vii + 244 pages, ISBN 978-0-7546-6247-1 (hardcover) £55.00.

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The key to the perspective that James Taylor adopts in analyzing "religiosity" in contemporary Thailand is remembering that, after having established himself as a student of Thai Buddhism, and especially the roles of "forest monks" (see his earlier *Forest Monks and the Nation-State* [Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993]), he himself ordained in a forest monastery. "Before the rains period (*vassa*) of 2007 I ordained as a *kammathaan* [meditation] monk... at Wat Paa [forest monastery] Naakamnoi,... Udonrthani Province" (p. 155). There is an ancient distinction in Theravaada Buddhism between monks who devote themselves to following the Buddha through the practice of meditation (*vipassananaa-dhura*) and those who take the study of and explication of the teachings of the Buddha as their primary obligation (*gantha-dhura*). While Taylor chose while a temporary monk to follow a mentor in the first tradition, he clearly situates himself in the second. This study, like his earlier publications, can be seen as "book-work" in being an exploration of how Buddhists in Thailand today have interpreted the *dhamma*, the Way of the Buddha, in differing forms of

practice.

Although he finds that "as a condition of late modernity the Thai metropolis extends continually outwards in its embracement of the countryside" (p. 9), to the extent that forests in Thailand where meditation monks once secluded themselves have all but disappeared (see especially chapter seven), Thai have responded to the forces of globalization not by becoming increasingly secular, but by finding new religious spaces even in urban environments. Taylor's book is about "the varieties of cultural forms and religious transgressions that constitute contemporary Thai Buddhism" (p. 20). The term "transgressions" is noteworthy because Taylor, apparently impelled by his own imagining of a "pure" Buddhism acquired while in a forest monastery (or, perhaps, to use a term that is often employed in the book, a "simulacra" of a forest monastery), clearly sees many of the varieties of contemporary Buddhism in Thailand as "transgressive."

His survey of contemporary Buddhism (or, more correctly, *Buddhisms*) in Thailand is, it should be noted, selective. He gives only passing mention to those who, following the late Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906-1993), arguably the most influential of *gantha-dhura* theologians in 20th century Thailand, see themselves as engaged in spreading *metta* (compassion) through rectification of injustices. For example, Taylor gives only a brief note (pp. 174-75) about Phra Prajak Khuttajitto about whom he had written much earlier. Phra Prajak is an erstwhile forest monk who became a compelling advocate for forest conservation. In this book, Taylor is far more interested in the transgressions than in the transformations of understanding of the *dhamma* as manifest in socially-engaged Buddhism.

Taylor first discusses the *Thammakaai* (Pali, *Dhammakaaya*) movement that has gained a very large following among Bangkok's middle class, although almost not at all among the rural population or the urban working class. The movement, centered on Wat Thammakaai in Pathumthani province, north of Bangkok, is led by Phra Thammachayo who "describes himself in his self-styled hagiography as the Buddha reincarnate and peace messenger sent to save the world from the calamities wrought by the evil forces of late modernity" (p. 42). Although Phra Thammachayo was attacked by the highly respected theologian, Phra Prayut Payutto, for what Payutto deemed were heretical deviations from Buddhist teachings—especially for Thammachayo's advocacy of attaining ultimate salvation through a shortcut centered on the practice of the technique of visualization of the "body" of the *dhamma* (the meaning of *Thammakaai*)—the powerful backers of Thammachayo ensured that the leadership of the establishment sangha did not pursue any heresy charge. Thammachayo was, however, found to have mismanaged the huge endowments of Thammakaai and had to (at least temporarily) step down as the abbot of the main temple-monastery.

Taylor sees Thammakaai as appealing to the Thai bourgeoisie through a "consumerist interpretation" of Buddhist doctrine. "The more money donated to the monastery the better the chances of accruing direct (spiritual) merit, which will in turn produce greater (material) benefits in the present and future lives" (59). The donations have made possible the creation of Wat Thammakaai, a "fantasy place", a "simulated mirrored reality, an imaginary world of tomorrow, situated here and now" (53).

To understand such simulation here and throughout the

book, Taylor draws extensively on the postmodernist theories of Baudrillard, Bhabba, deCerteau, Deleuze, Foucault, Lacan, Lefebvre, Soja, and others. Indeed, there are long passages in Taylor's book that are more about these theorists than about Thailand. It might have been preferable if he could have extracted these for a second book about theory, using Thai examples as illustrations. As it stands, some of the discussion of theory, especially when Taylor gets tangled up in the language of postmodernism, becomes an impediment to following the argument of the book.

In chapter three, Taylor turns to an examination of another fantasy "religio-scape" manifest at Wat Sanam Chan, a new temple monastery in Chachoengsao province about 100 kilometers from Bangkok. Taylor characterizes the "so-called '*Superman* Buddha-image'" (p. 74) erected at the wat as "hyper-modern" (78). In contrast to the simplification of display at Wat Thammakaai, the scene at Wat Sanam Chan is kitschy and chaotic. The "carnavalesque" atmosphere at this temple-monastery makes the place seem like a "temporary movie prop; a parody of consecrated humour displaying an array of cheap plastic art objects" (p. 81). The transgressions represented by Wat Sanam Chan and Thammakaai do share a common feature; both "generate marginality through difference and exclusion from the centre" (p. 87).

Although both Wat Sanam Chan and Thammakaai offer Thais new sanctified places, the internet (chapter four) seems to offer Thais a way for Buddhism to be liberated from place completely. Thai websites devoted to Buddhism appear to Taylor to constitute a "digital-religious space." Yet, although such a space seems especially appropriate for a world in which capital moves electronically (p. 92), Taylor sees it as limited "compared with face-to-face social (embodied)

arrangements" (p. 107). I would add that no representation of the Buddha or the Sangha on the web can be a "field of merit" as their prototypes in the flesh can. Perhaps the web can, however, advance the work of *gantha-dhura*, but this is not what Taylor discusses.

Having found the "fantasy" Buddhism of Thammakaaai, Wat Sanam Chan, and cyber-Buddhism too transgressive, Taylor turns to Buddhism which is recognized or which claims to represent the forest monastic tradition (chapters five, six, and seven). The third of these chapters really should have preceded the others since in it Taylor describes the traditional features of forest monasticism. What is worth noting here is that some characteristics that are taken as manifestations of modernity (or postmodernity) xxx mobility and marginality xxx had been adopted by forest monks well before the modern era. It was the forest monk's devotion to a strict discipline that included homelessness as well as asceticism and to single-minded pursuit of the Path through the practice of meditation that led others to see him as possessing extraordinary *baarami*, the Buddhist equivalent of charisma in the original, religious sense of the word.

This charisma has, however, proven to be an Achilles heel for such monks. Some are unable to maintain their separateness as laypersons xxx sometimes very powerful laypersons xxx seek them out in order to gain from their charismatic aura. This is very much the case for the monk that is the primary focus of Taylor's attention, namely, the renowned forest monk, Luang Taa ("Revered Grandfather") Maha Bua (*maha* is a title gained by a monk who is respected for his knowledge of the *dhamma*).

Luang Taa Maha Bua was born in 1913 in a village in the northeastern Thai province of Udorn (chapter five). He was ordained as a monk at age 20, following a practice

that almost all northeastern Thai village men adhered to at the time. Unlike most such young men, he remained a monk for life. He sought out and became a disciple of the Venerable Ajarn Man (1870-1949), without question the most revered of forest monks of the late 19th century and the first half of the 20th. Although Maha Bua continued to live in a remote forest for several years after Ajarn Man's death in 1949, he returned to his natal village in 1955 when his mother became ill. Here, he built up Wat Paa Baan Taad (forest monastery at Taad village) as a center for training others in the meditation tradition (*kammathaana* [Pali, *kammatthana*]) developed by Ajarn Man.

As his reputation for having great charisma spread, he began to be visited not only by local people but also by many from Bangkok, including the rich and powerful. Luang Taa Maha Bua became very well known for his sermons delivered orally, in writing, and then electronically (radio and cassettes). "Maha Bua consistently uses the body metaphor in his teaching..., as this conforms to a doctrinal contemplative discourse on 'mindfulness of the body' long used by forest monks" (p. 115). He extended this metaphor to Thai society and began to see himself as one who could contribute to the purification of the Thai social body. "In the case of Thailand's modernity it is the impersonal forces of globalization that have torn apart the collective social body" (p. 118). After a severe economic crisis began in Thailand in 1997, Maha Bua launched "the moralistic and nationalistic Thai-Help-Thai campaign" (ibid.). In order to free the country from the onerous monetary constraints instituted by the IMF, Maha Bua solicited donations of wealth in the form of cash, gold, silver and jewelry to boost the national reserves. Since gifts were made to Maha Bua who would pass them along to the government, they constituted *dana* and since Maha Bua had great

charisma, such *dana* was believed to generate much merit for the donors. As important as this merit would be for the future, it had a much more immediate effect: "The total amount of wealth accumulated in the national saving-nation campaign was in great part responsible for Thailand's post-crisis fiscal recovery in servicing its IMF repayments" (p. 120).

Having succeeded in a new role as savior of the nation, Maha Bua came to see himself and be seen by others as second only to the king in conferring legitimacy on Thai governments. Maha Bua's critique of the populist prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, contributed to his downfall in 2006. Subsequent prime ministers or aspirants to political leadership have made pilgrimages to his monastery. By assuming a significant role in Thailand's contemporary political economy, Maha Bua has contributed to a decline in the role of the forest monk who devotes himself entirely to the pursuit of "direct route to liberation" (165).

This decline was evident to Taylor when he spent the Buddhist lent of 2007 at a forest monastery associated with Maha Bua. He found that "forest monasteries are becoming increasingly laicized and more 'this-worldly'" (p. 158). Instead of a pure (or purified) Buddhism exemplified by forest monasticism, Taylor concludes that Buddhism is today manifest in Thailand primarily only in those movements that "have taken on a new sense of purpose in response to the contemporary urban experience" (p. 203).

Taylor's book raises important questions about the nature of Buddhism in contemporary Thailand, but I find his perspective limited by his idealization of a forest monastic meditative Buddhism that he finds no longer can be fully realized. Buddhists have always been

this-worldly-oriented because they must live, work, and suffer in this world. It is unquestionably true that in the modern period more Thais find more ways to accumulate wealth that can be used for more this-worldly ends. Nevertheless, many local monks as well as prominent socially-engaged monks and laypersons, still are able to offer moral guidance that has not been eclipsed by either the "fantasies" offered through spectacles and carnivals or seemingly lost because of the decline of the forest meditation tradition.